



An Analysis of Arvay's Strategies for Love and Self-Actualization in *Seraph on the Suwanee* Based on Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory

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Abstract

Seraph on the Suwanee, the last novel of Zora Neale Hurston, criticized for deviating from resolving oppression, class, race and gender, shapes a white woman protagonist instead of a black woman protagonist. But actually, it depicts the story of Arvay's attempts to reject both oppression and the mental submission to oppression just as the oppression and resistance of class and gender are greatly concerned in Hurston's previous works. Arvay Henson, an oppressed and repressed white woman, motivated by a tenacious belief in her own intrinsic worth and in her rights to individual freedom and social respect, attempts to preserve her integrity through withdrawal, resistance in order to seek her love and her independence as well as her self-discovery. This thesis applies Need Hierarchy Theory proposed by an American psychologist Abraham Maslow to study Arvay's strategies for meeting her deficiency needs and to analyze her persistent efforts for love as well as the satisfactions of her needs at different levels.

Keywords: *Seraph on the Suwanee*; Arvay Henson; Maslow's need hierarchy theory; self-actualization.

1. Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was an African American women writer, folklorist, and anthropologist in the Harlem Renaissance and was known as "the mother of black female literature". She devoted her life to preserving black cultural traditions, collecting and publishing black folk tales, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My House* (1938). Additionally, she wrote and published four long novels *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). Most of Hurston's works elaborate the life of black women from different perspectives, revealing the oppression of black women in terms of race, class and gender, which draw much attention among scholars and critics.

Miles said that in the novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, "through the development of John, Hurston emphasizes the relationship between slavery and sexual violence, class ideals and race relations" (Cheng, 2005). "The novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* re-expresses the issue of African-American identity by providing a language that transcends race, class and sexual identity. (Cheng, 2005)" "*Moses, Man of the Mountain* transplanted the story of the bible into the context of black culture including the story and language of the bible, African-American folklore, black dialect, sermons and humor, and Christianity and voodoo" (Cheng, 2005) and "If Hurston's previous novel, *Moses* was about independence and liberation, then *Seraph on the Suwanee* was about dependence and frustration (Boyd, 2003)".

Misread by some critics as a soap opera pandering to white readers, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is in fact a master piece worth of in-depth study, which continues Hurston's tradition of resolving oppression, class, race and gender. *Seraph on the Suwanee* depicts a white woman, Arvay Henson, born in the poor white family of the southern United States, an oppressed and repressed woman, who advances to the white middle class, pursuing her love, struggling for her needs and achieving her self-actualization. In this paper, the author tries to discuss the independence and self-actualization of the protagonist Arvay as well as her persistent striving for love in her own way based on Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Relevant Studies Abroad

Seraph on the Suwanee, the last novel of Hurston, making the white as protagonists instead of the black ones, drew little attention but mostly very negative comments. Washington (1979), criticizes *Seraph on the Suwanee* was a lame, made-up novel, as empty and insipid as a soap opera. Ikonné (1981), condemns it (*Seraph*) is contempt for the black race. Dubek Laura (Laura) assesses that Hurston apparently betrayed her esthetic of the black culture tradition.

Also, Plant (1995), rebuked that Hurston abandoned the idea of marriage equality, and that “the patriarchal system of male domination and female obedience as the ideal social structure was forgiven” (p. 169).

However, there are still critics who gave positive comments on this novel and held the viewpoint that Hurston she did not change the theme of the novel or the environment of the characters (Howard, 1980). Janet (1989), pointed out “It is the story of Arvay’s faltering efforts to reject both oppression and, more importantly, the mental submission to oppression” (p. 38). Boyd (2003), commented that “in some ways, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is more ambitious and experimental than any of Hurston’s previous novels... Like all her other works, it has bursts of exciting brilliance” (p. 394). Ayesha (2013), appraised “*Seraph on the Suwanee* engages similar themes concerning gender, sexuality, and race as Hurston’s other writings” (p. 219).

In the middle and late 20th and the 21st century, foreign academic circles paid more and more attention to the novel and studied *Seraph* from different perspectives. There are some scholars who discussed the issue of race and sexual class in novels (Chuck Jackson, 2000; Czarniecki, 2004; Dubek, 1996; Konzett, 2002; Meisenhelder, 1999). Gunn (1996), Tate (1997) and Jarman (2010) analyzed the deep meaning behind the white man’s story from the perspective of narrative strategy and rhetoric.

2.2. Revelent Studies at Home

Through the comprehensive search of CNKI China journal full-text database, Wanfang resource database and Reading Show academic search database, it is found that the research results of the novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* by Hurston in domestic academic circle are very few and started relatively late.

Cheng (2005), analyzed the heroine of the novel and the theme in the novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* from the perspective of cultural criticism and feminist criticism, which revealed the discrimination and oppression of women in the patriarchal society in the southern United States and the trauma of domestic violence on women. Cai (2011), made a comparative analysis of the heroines in the two novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, revealing the reasons for their different endings in their journey to find themselves. Yang (2012), analyzed the female images in the novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* and concluded that Arvay was a broken-winged angel with the loss of subject consciousness under patriarchy. Ma (2012) and Hou (2015) applied cross-feminism and ecofeminism respectively to discuss the oppression suffered by women and the resistance of women. Teng (2012), analyzed the self-pursuit of the heroine of the novel, as well as the similarity between the novel *Seraph on the Suwanee*, and Hurston’s previous works, thus affirming that the author did not deviate from her female standpoint and African heritage.

Through the literature analysis, whether the domestic academic circle or the foreign academic circle mainly applies the feminist theory to study *Seraph on the Suwanee* by Hurston and still limits the discussion to race, sex and class, but lacks of systematic analysis and research on the work from the perspective of psychology or psychoanalysis. This paper will make up the deficiency in the previous research of this novel and will focus on studying the protagonist Arvay based on Maslow’s Need Hierarchy Theory.

3. Maslow’s Need Hierarchy Theory

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), a 20th century American psychologist and philosopher, as the main originator of humanistic psychology, is best known for his theory of self-actualization. In 1943, he published *A Theory of Human Motivation* in the *Psychological Review Journal*, putting forward his *hierarchy of needs* model. Maslow (1943) named human being’s motivations as needs and then divided these needs into five levels from low to high like a pyramid: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs.

Maslow (1943), called that the preceding four levels as deficiency needs (*D-needs*), while the last level as growth or being needs (*B-needs*). He initially stated when a low level of needs is satisfied, it will develop to the higher level, such as “food and clothing before knowing the honor and disgrace” (Maslow, 1943). And more importantly, he noted that “The specific form that these needs (self-actualization needs) will take will of course vary greatly from person to person” (Maslow, 1943). For example, in one individual, her desire is to be an ideal mother while in another one may desire to be an inventor.

Maslow (1943, 1954) believed that people have motivations to achieve certain needs and that these needs are prior to others. Additionally, Maslow (1987) proposed that the order in the hierarchy “is not nearly as rigid” (p. 68) as he may have implied in his earlier description, which indicated that, on one the one hand, the order of needs might be flexible based on external circumstances or individual differences and on the other, people may sometimes seek higher needs before the lower needs have been met. For example, if one suffered extreme insecurity and lack of love in his childhood because of the domestic violence or parents’ divorce or something like this, he would strive for meet these needs more than other needs and even he might “fixate” on these needs for the rest of your life. Of course, people like this may not necessarily follow the ladder of needs step by step. That means, the less one wants, the more he wants for the rest of his life.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory also points out that in every period, there is a dominant need, and other needs in a subordinate position, which means, on the one hand, with the most dominant functioning, the other layers of needs don’t disappear suddenly but keep functioning in the background, and on the other hand, different needs can work together as a whole.

4. Arvay's Strategies for Seeking Love and Self-Actualization

Maslow (1987), also stated that most behaviours of human beings are multi-motivated and that "any behaviour tends to be determined by several or all of the basic needs simultaneously rather than by only one of them" (p. 71). Maslow believes that human beings are social animals, who need the relationship between partners, colleagues between harmonious or maintain friendship and loyalty and want to be loved, to love others, and to receive others' love. Meanwhile, according to Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory, the less one has in the childhood, the more one wants to have in the rest of his life. When Arvay was in her childhood, she was lack of safety and love, especially love so that she would struggle for what she wanted extremely for the rest of her life whether other needs were met or not.

4.1. For Physiological Needs and Love: Being Tolerant

Maslow (1943), noted that physiological needs as biological requirements are vital to human survival such as air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, sex, sleep, etc. Whether one has other needs or not, he/she would try to make these needs satisfied, which may ensure the human body can function optimally to achieve other needs. The protagonist, Arvay, was born in in Sawley, the town in Florida and "there was ignorance and poverty and the ever-present hookworm" (Hurstun, 1948). The people were mostly occupied in the production of turpentine and lumber. Brock Henson, Arvay's father had never made as much as a hundred dollars in any month in his life. Life for the Henson family was not that easy.

Arvay's parents all the time shew the general preference for Lorraine Henson, her older sister, more robust and aggressive and her father discounted her and all the time supported and assisted her older sister. What's worse, her sister always bullied and oppressed her, and took the best for herself and left Arvay persuaded "she was born to take other people's leavings" (Tate, 1997). So, Arvay, the slight and eccentric little blue-eyed blonde, grew up and lived in the shadow of her older sister Lorraine.

However, Arvay, to such an extent, thought that happiness and love were not meant for her so that she "announced that she was through with the world" (Hurstun, 1948) and that she had given her whole heart and her life to the work of God. As a matter of fact, Arvay had her own strategies in her mind that she tolerated the prejudice and discrimination from the town people and the discount from parents to survive and to seek love. Meanwhile, whether success or failure, she made her own efforts and tried to change her situation in the town as well as in the family so as to meet her deficiency needs. On the one hand, she played the organ for the Sunday School, where the town people and she took an active part in church work; and on the other hand, she spent a summer with her mother's sister practicing the organ in order to surprise the family on her return to Sawley in the fall.

4.2. For Safety Needs and Love: Being Passive

According to Maslow (1943), the safety need is higher than the physiological need, which refers to the need to protect oneself from physical and emotional harm. Everyone who lives in reality has a desire for security, a desire for freedom, a desire for strength in defense. For individuals, the whole organism is a mechanism for pursuing security. Obviously, in the novel, Arvay felt no safety and love from the people in the town and her parents as well as her old sister because the Sawley people were eager to be amused at Arvay and her parents always shew the preference for her old sister, supported her sister and discounted her.

Nothing like her sister 'Raine at all, who was robust, not to say a trifle lusty and pretty in the ways that the rural community favored. 'Raine had a full head of curly reddish hair, big legs and a busty chest.' Raine was lively and full of chat. 'Raine took after her father's side of the family, while Arvay looked like her mother's folks, and even had her mother's ways to an extent (Hurstun, 1948).

Besides, even though Arvay, young and pretty, and teasing to the fancy of many men, made "many a man felt that given a chance, he could put plenty of meat on Arvay's bones" (Hurstun, 1948), she, lack of confidence, thought that it seemed that there was no possibility to be loved. Consequently, "Increasingly, Arvay protects herself by assuming the role of martyr and outcast resigning her threatened self to injured isolation and altruistic immolation. (Janet, 1989)"

One day, a man, Jim Meserve, came to the town and within a week of his arrival in Sawley, he had talked himself into a job as woodsman on a turpentine camp. Jim was very handsome too, and had stirred the hearts of practically every single girl in town. However, Jim admitted the fact that he really fell in love with Arvay. He said that Arvay just suited him and that it "was worth the trouble of breaking in" (Hurstun, 1948) Jim Meserve had rushed up to the Henson home and had escorted Arvay to and from church and people nearly split their sides at Jim walking along the road holding Arvay's arm with every kind of politeness in spite of all she could do and say. (Hurstun, 1948), When she heard that her father greeting Jim out on the porch, she became so nervous that she was useless to herself. "She stepped out on the porch with a long fast step, made the briefest manners of her life time without halting, was almost loping by the time her feet hit the ground." (Hurstun, 1948) She was more or less moved by the boldness and gentleness of Jim and began to believe a little in Jim's sincerity.

When Jim, later, raped her, she didn't resist, but she, in fact, felt flattered. "Arvay took a long, tremulous breath. Her heart was leading her into the arms of Jim Meserve...she changed into a fresh dress, pinched her cheeks to make them pink and slowly went out to join Jim..." (Hurstun, 1948) She didn't actively go after Jim Meserve although he was the one who stirred the hearts of every single girl in town. At that time, she didn't dare to believe that Jim really fell in love with her. Actually, Arvay could feel that Jim fell in love with her. "Jim looked at her with admiration and came and stood in front and looked down earnestly into her face. (Hurstun, 1948) "

Jim asked whether Arvay considered to get herself a husband directly and to accompany her for the rest of her days. Jim was brave enough to say and to do because he didn't miss the lady he loved. Jim tried to show his gentleness and politeness to the girl who he loved. In the whole process, Arvay, full of passive, never shew any sign of taking a fancy for him but she acquiesced what Jim said and did just because Arvay had no one to whom she could open her feelings and she never shew her feelings to words. Most importantly, it was Jim's braveness that made Arvay kind of sense of safety, and at the same time, Jim shew his love to Arvay, which was something she wanted most. Actually, Arvay, timid, in the eyes of people in the town and her parents, acquiesced what Jim said and did which was viewed by Arvay as a strategy to meet her needs of safety and love.

4.3. For Belonging and Love: Being Precautious

According to Maslow, people have a feeling of belonging to a group, want to become a member of the group, and care for each other. Emotional needs are more delicate than physical needs, and are related to a person's physical characteristics, experience, education, and religious beliefs. Therefore, people need to have social communication, good interpersonal relationship, interpersonal affection and love, and be accepted and trusted by others in the organization. The need for belonging and love refers to the individual's desire for the care and understanding from family, group, friends and colleagues, and the need for friendship, trust, warmth and love. To some degree, this need is hard to discern and hard to measure.

At the beginning days of their marriage, life moved on smoothly and happily for Arvay. When Jim carried Arvay to the turpentine shacks, and he said to Arvay, "Well, honey, you're home, for two months anyhow" (Hurstun, 1948). The house with its four crude rooms looked very beautiful and the rooms immaculately clean. It was not how long they would live here mattered but that it was her own home really did. More or less, what Jim said and what she saw surprised Arvay as she went about touching furniture and walls. Arvay knew that it seemed that she was an outsider in the Henson family and the town, Sawley because her parents all the time shew his preference to her older sister Lorraine and no one would like to protect her and because the Sawley people put her down as a queer and they were always eager to be amused at her. For Arvay, she had no sense of safety and belongings. Now, however, she got kind of comfort because she had her own home and she had a man to protect her.

At the same time, Arvay was not sure that Jim definitely loved her. When she heard an old ballad in the end of a concert, Arvay was all but moved to tears.

Love, Oh, love, Oh careless love
Goes right to the head like wine
Broken the heart of many a poor girl
But you'll never break this heart of mine.
Love, Oh, love, Oh careless love
Love, Oh, love, Oh careless love
You cause me to weep, you cause me to moan
You cause me to leave my happy home. (Hurstun, 1948)

Arvay maybe didn't know what love is clearly. She took this old ballad to imply to Jim that she, on one hand, yearned to love and to be loved, and on the other hand that she desired to be really accepted by Jim as a whole. Lorraine came to her two or three times every week but Arvay wished so much that she would't because Arvay got worried that Jim would know her secret passion of the past that she had loved her brother in-law. Anyhow, Arvay searched Jim's face for signs after every session though she didn't say more but felt with your heart and observed with your eyes and struggled to hold her own home and to save her complete happiness.

4.4. For Esteem and Love: Making a Compromise

Maslow noted all of people have a need for the respect of others and for self-respect. The former one is a lower level of esteem including a need to receive applause, accolades or awards from other people while the latter is a higher level such as gaining confidence, competence, achievement, mastery, independence and freedom.

According to the details in the novel, it seemed that happiness was short for Arvay. Gradually, Jim's chauvinism was laid bare and he treated Arvay rudely. For Arvay, she loved and respected Jim so much that she thought it was lucky for her to marry him; she could bear a lot of injustice to her but she still tried to hold herself and to be respected. Arvay was unable to stand Jim's philandering outside without proof, she managed to follow him around all day. When she saw Jim dancing with other women, she came out and persuaded him to leave but she was refused. Instead of backing down, she insisted that Jim respect her feelings.

Arvay, as a mother of three children, without any doubt, loved all her children and also, she hoped that she could be respected by her beloved children. Their first child, Earl, mostly needed to be taken care of and to be loved by Arvay and she never wished he do something for her because Earl was born mentally and physically ill. When their second child, Angeline, fell in love with a Yankee boy, Hatton Howland, Arvay differed from Jim on this. She expressed her own complete disagreement on her daughter being with this guy while Jim completely stood by his daughter. Arvay, on one hand, worried her daughter; on the other, she hoped that Angeline could follow her advice and could more or less show her respect to her mother. Then about Kenny, their youngest child among these three, Arvay insisted that Kenny not scout the Gator band and that he not take music as a career but Jim supported Kenny very much to follow his dream. Arvay sobbed and cried and leaned her head against the wall and shook because she lost another beloved child and also, he still didn't listen to her. Helplessly, Arvay, although excluded and hurt by Jim and children, adjusted graciously to all of the news and all of those that they had done. Most important of all, Arvay did what she did in order to express her very heart that she hoped to be listened, to be loved and to be respected.

For Arvay, “wholesome defiance and resentment operate beneath the shame and insecurity to protect her integrity until she is strong enough to overcome her own self-imposed enslavement” (Janet, 1989). In the marriage life, Arvay had been under the oppression of Jim, she thought of suicide several times, but eventually she gave up; When it comes to their children, children didn't listen to her. No matter in what matter, Jim was never on her side, and she quarreled with Jim several times until Jim could not bear to leave her and finally left their home. However, Arvay did not leave because in her heart, she loved Jim, loved the children and loved their home, she chose to stick to. In fact, Arvay “ferociously conceals and protects an embryonic sense of self until she gains the space and safety to nurture it and bring it to light and life” (Janet, 1989). At the same time, she knew that her accommodations of his fragility did not compromise what she would do.

4.5. For Self-Actualization and Love: Being Active

Higher-level needs are not necessarily satisfied from the lowest level first, and sometimes lower-level needs are sacrificed to meet higher-level needs, though the lower-level needs may not be satisfied completely. Besides, Maslow suggested that the path to self-actualization needs varies from person to person. The need for self-fulfillment is to strive to realize one's potential and become more and more the person one desires to be. Arvay struggled for her deficiency needs although some of her lower needs, to some extent, were not completely met, which didn't affect her striving for love and her self-actualization.

Arvay, alienated not only from herself and her husband, knew that she must fight for love and her identity in total isolation. That Jim and their children left Arvay really did her a genuine service, which made Arvay freed at last from the potentially lethal constriction of Jim's kind of love. Then she would have the freedom and space to think independently of her, which made her know only that and that she must find the key by herself to re-open the door of her happiness. “She would follow her pride and go back home to her mother. (Hurstun, 1948)” Just at that time, she received a letter: “MAMA SICK IN BED. LARRAINE MIDDLETON” (Hurstun, 1948). She was determined to return home to look after her dying mother. Before she left, she prepared a generous gift. She went back to Sawley, where great changes took place, while her mother and her older sister still lived in the shabby house and led a poor life. She recalled if she had married Carl Middleton, she would live a life as Lorraine did. She felt lucky that she married Jim but not Carl and suddenly her confidence rose.

Watching her weary mother die in inarticulate self-denigration and regret, Arvay felt the necessity to speak for her and she should depend on me for a voice. She, handling her mother's funeral with the community's condolences and assistance, sensed her own inherent worth and recoiled from the narrowness and insecurity that had blinded her to it through the years. After her mother died, the sister's family tried to ask her for money and ransacked the house that her mother, Maria, left to Arvay. As a result, she burned everything her mother had left her except for the mulberry tree that was a sacred symbol. She gave gifts to her neighbors and donated her land to the government. This time, no one could stop Arvay to do so; it was Arvay herself who made her choice to do so. Her ego was completely liberated and she began to enter a new stage to choose and act independently. “She knew her way now and could see things as they were. (Hurstun, 1948)” She finally refused passively to allow people to take from her and instead decided freely to give, she claimed the confidence, power, and self-respect which nourish her determination and ability to shape her own place, locate her own authority, and direct her own way.

As Arvay's capacity to find and define herself grows, so does her ability to lay claim to her inherent unifying might. She has always dimly understood the sublime power of love, but she must abandon the shoddy security of withdrawal and the crippling restraints of fear and suspicion before unselfish love can become her guiding principle (Janet, 1989)

Therefore, she decided to go back to Jim not only because she expected to find her happiness, realized her potential, seek her fulfillment and change herself there but also because she always loved Jim, her family, and married life. She looked everything with pleasure: She began to treat Jim and life and people around with a tolerant attitude, which surprised Jim too much. Arvay asked to go out on the trip with Jim and then fixed her up with a pair of blue jeans that fishermen wore, two blue shirts, and the tall rubber sea-boots, all of which symbolized Jim was beginning to see his wife as an equal. When they talked about everything going out, Arvay joined in with them. Together they sailed out to sea on the Arvay Henson, crossing the safety zone and heading into the deep ocean. “Arvay's arms went up in a languorous curve and clasped tightly around Jim' neck, and without being urged, she kissed him fondly time and again. Hurstun (1948)” Arvay was not the previous Arvay having depended on her husband but a new Arvay crossing the dangerous sea with her husband together and even she could give him comfort, help and protection in the dark just like a mother of a little boy. “Arvay struggles to reclaim control of her life from Jim and the seemingly invincible social forces that support him. (Janet, 1989)”

Radically and exactly, Arvay, in the end, realized and knew who she was. She thought: “Her father and Lorraine had taken from her because they felt that she had something to take from and to give out of her fullness. Her mother had looked to her for dependence. Her children, and Jim and all” (Hurstun, 1948). Arvay was not a weak, timid, dependent and obedient woman any longer, and on the contrary, she struggles to reclaim control of her life from Jim and the seemingly invincible social forces that support him. Finally, she became great in all that lived on so as to echo the title of the novel *Seraph on the Suwanee*.

5. Conclusion

The creation of literary works originates from life, in which the shaping process of characters is the process of exploring and discussing human nature. Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory is a summary of the needs of human nature. Based on Maslow's Need Hierarchy Theory, it is found that Arvay tried to take a variety of strategies to meet

her needs and levels, to save her complete love and to seek her self-liberty because Arvay as an individual, is so unique that the path of her self-actualization was different from others. Furthermore, this study not only helped to reveal *Seraph on the Suwanee* is the story of “a woman who resists victimization, throws off oppression, chooses the burden that she will carry, and takes it up with courage, dignity, and delight” (Janet, 1989) but also to turn perception around that Arvay was a timid, passive, submissive, unselfish and dedicated woman. Last but not the least, the study broadens the theme and vision of psychological analysis and plays a certain role in the further study of this work.

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