

Desiree's Self-Actualization in *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett

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Abstract: This study is entitled *Desiree's Self-Actualization in The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett*. This study aims to understand self-actualization and self-actualization traits of Desiree as the central character in the novel, how the character fulfils self-actualization needs, and kinds of self-actualization traits in the novel. It used a descriptive qualitative method as the research design and Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the theory of this study. The results of this study showed that the protagonist successfully achieved self-actualization indicated through 15 self-actualization traits i.e., Desiree, the protagonist, shows self-respect, personal courage, truth, greater frustration tolerance, genuineness, honesty, self-acceptance, kindness, unselfishness, bigness, calmness and peace of mind. One of Maslow's indicators, describes that people who actualized themselves are living their authentic life, less fear and accept their true self. In short, this study highlights that self-actualisation can only be achieved once a person has met all their other needs. Furthermore, the resolution of conflict within the story is a key factor in the protagonist's attainment of self-actualisation.

Keywords: Self-Actualization, Self-Actualization Traits, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

INTRODUCTION

People try to develop and become better to find the meaning in life. Nikadambaeva et al., (2021) state that self-actualization is a fundamental aspect of personal development in nowadays society, characterized by rapid social economic changes and a lack of clear understanding of drivers and strategies for overcoming crises. It refers to an individual's ability to realize their fullest potential, pursue personal goals, and find meaning in life.

Literature can reflect self-actualization by showing how main characters fulfil their needs before achieving self-actualization (Errita et al., 2022). *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett explores the complexities of self-actualization through the lives of twin sisters Desiree and Stella Vignes. Born in a small town namely Mallard the sisters' paths diverge when Stella decides to pass for white to live a life of denial, reflecting her internal conflict between the life she has chosen and her true sense of self. Desiree decided to return to Mallard after her leaving. She marries a dark man, and keeps her identity as a black skinned woman.

This study aims to understand how Desiree fulfils self-actualization, and self-actualization traits in *The Vanishing Half*. Therefore, the objective of the study aims to analyse how Desiree struggles to fulfil self-actualization and kinds of self-actualization traits of the character. Meanwhile, the scope of this research is self-actualization in *The Vanishing*



Half by Brit Bennett. The study focuses on Desiree's self-actualization, and self-actualization traits. By analysing self-actualization, this study intends to investigate the challenges faced by Desiree in *The Vanishing Half* and the factors hinder her journey toward achieving self-actualization. This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of how Desiree strives to reach her fullest potential.

This study gives both theoretical and practical insight. Theoretically, this study provides references for future researchers who are interested in examining literary works using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Practically, this study gives insight on how individuals can achieve self-actualization because people who self-actualized themselves will lead to be the best version of their life, more courage, self-respect, less fear, peace of mind, and live their life authentically.

Essentially, no research starts purely from nothing. There is always research coming before or as a beginning which is used as a reference for further research. Furthermore, this study compares five previous studies that have been conducted by some researchers that used the same topic self-actualization as the focus of the study and similar method. Research conducted by Fadelana Raisa (2022) explores Harry Potter's journey of self-actualization in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, illustrating how Harry meets his fundamental needs despite challenges from his family by forming significant relationships and finding a sense of purpose. Similar research using Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been conducted by Salsabila and Litaay (2023), it examines Madeline's development in *Everything, Everything*, emphasizing how love, support, and individual resolve enable her to surpass physical and emotional barriers to achieve self-acceptance and autonomy. From Maslow's perspective, the research by Salsabila and Litaay that people will always meet their needs, even in the face of hardship and despair. The next research that has been conducted by Ahdiani and Maulana (2023) explores how self-actualization helps children from broken homes, focusing on the character Finley Hart in *Some Kind of Happiness* by Claire Legrand. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the study shows how meeting basic needs supports Finley's personal growth. The study finds that self-actualization plays an important role in helping children from troubled families become stronger and more fulfilled individuals. Through Finley's journey, the research highlights how emotional healing and self-discovery are possible despite a difficult background.

The other research has been conducted by Bungan et al., (2025) uses Carl Rogers' theory to examine the characters Agatha and Sophie in *The School for Good and Evil*, highlighting how the difference between nurturing and harmful atmospheres affects their

journey toward self-actualization. Agatha flourishes in a supportive environment, whereas Sophie battles with uncertainty and pessimism. Moreover, research has been conducted by Aslam et al., (2023) a comparative analysis of *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce emphasizes the lifelong quest for individuation and self-actualization. Applying Maslow's and Jung's theories, the paper illustrates that although the characters vary in their backgrounds and motivations, both Siddhartha and Stephen Dedalus pursue their authentic selves via internal change, indicating that self-actualization is a continuous, nonlinear journey influenced by personal and philosophical exploration.

Since this study focuses on examining self-actualization of Desiree, Maslow's hierarchy of needs will be used to answer the problem statement. Gitman et al., (2020) state that Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights five tiers of human needs, with physiological needs as the most basic need and the higher priorities for other needs. Maslow held that basic needs like food, safety, love, and esteem must be satisfied before an individual reaches their self-actualization.

Maslow (1971) called the starting basic point of motivation is physiological drives, such as food and shelter. Second, Maslow describes love after basic needs are satisfied there was a new set of needs that he calls safety needs. Maslow's needs theory includes security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom from fear, freedom. Third, the third layer of needs as Maslow (1971) describes Love and Belonging needs after physiological and safety needs are fulfilled. A person will begin to feel the need for a friend, sweetheart, wife, and children. They will hunger for affectionate relations with people around them, for examples, desire to marry, build a family, have children, have relations in a community. Fourth, esteem needs, Maslow classified into two, there are desires for strength, achievement, adequacy, mastery, competence, independence and freedom. Second, reputation, status, recognition, attention, importance, dignity, and appreciation. When these needs are met, it leads to confidence, and the value of being useful and notable in life. Fifth, self-actualization needs, Maslow describes self-actualization, in his work *human and motivation* as one's desire for self-fulfilment, called the tendency to become actualized in what an individual potential is.

To gain a deeper understanding of self-actualization of the character, the authors examine specific traits of self-actualized people as Maslow (1954, p.74) described in his work *Motivation and Personality*, he classifies that there are 15 traits of self-actualized people. These 15 traits identified by Maslow provide a framework for understanding what it means by people who reach self-actualization. He describes not just an achievement of one's potential, but also the presence of emotional balance, personal integrity, and positive

social values. In this study, these traits are used as indicators to evaluate Desiree moves toward self-actualization throughout the novel. This research serves as a comparison to five previous studies above that only discussed self-actualization through hierarchy of needs. This study aims to prove that people who have achieved self-actualization have the characteristics as Maslow describes through 15 traits in his work.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative method in order to presenting research findings. This is because the object of this research is novel. Consequently, the presentation of these research findings takes the form of an interpretation of a novel, presented as a narrative or textual description. This argument in line with Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009, p. 7-8), qualitative research is research that produces narrative or textual descriptions of the phenomenon under study.

This study used a novel written by Brit Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*, published in 2020. The researcher is the participant as the data instrument of this research. The authors arrange the research design, collect the data and analyse the data from the novel *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett. According to Robson (2002, p.195), The researchers acted as the primary instrument of the research. To ensure a thorough and systematic analysis, the writer gathered the data using steps, first, the researchers read the novel carefully. Second, the researchers gave marks on the relevant data needed. Third, the researchers classified the categorized data to the relevant problem statement.

After collecting the data that were relevant to the topic of this study, the writer analysed the data in several steps. Each phase of the analysis was aligned with the specific objective of the study. First, the researchers analysed the categorized data using characters, characterizations, and Maslow's theory. Second, the writer summarized the analysed data.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses how Desiree fulfils self-actualization, it is analysed through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and kinds of self-actualization traits are used to identify kinds of self-actualization traits.

DESIREE'S PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS

Desiree faced an abusive marriage; she decided to return to Mallard with her daughter Jude and get a job. As in the narration in the novel, "she was forced to take a job at Lou's House, where she continued to work despite the fact that she didn't earn enough...live anywhere

else.” (Bennett, 2020, p. 32). Desiree attempted to meet her physiological needs, the most basic level in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. She did not choose to accept the low paying position at Lou’s House, rather, it was forced upon her. Her financial situation was highlighted by her situation of being forced to take a job, which emphasized her vulnerable economic condition; it means that she must work simply to meet the basic needs, food and shelter.

DESIREE’S SAFETY NEEDS

When Desiree returned to Mallard, as in this passage, “Desiree dressed Jude in bright colors, believing that it would further differentiate her from the other students, as Jude was already noticeably darker-skinned than the other student.” (Bennett, 2020, p. 87). Desiree tried to give her daughter safety from the people in Mallard because the townspeople valued lighter skin, while Jude was a dark child and the skin color was not the same as the people in the town which made her different. By dressing her daughter in light colors, Desiree bravely chose to highlight Jude’s difference rather than try to hide it. Desiree’s realization that safety in Mallard came from self-acceptance, confidence, and visibility rather than invisibility was reflected in her choices.

DESIREE’S LOVE AND BELONGING NEEDS

Desiree had left her hometown for fourteen years, but she returned with her daughter to her mother’s house, as in the narration in the novel, “the morning after one of her lost daughters returned, Adele Vignes woke early to make coffee. She had barely slept the night before. Fourteen years living alone and anything besides silence sounded foreign.” (Bennett, 2020: 38). It reflected the emotional significance of Desiree’s reunion with her mother, a moment deeply rooted in the fulfilment of love and belonging needs. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, after basic and safety needs are satisfied, people’s needs for love and belongingness emerge. These include the need for love, ties to one’s family, trust, and a feeling of belonging.

DESIREE’S ESTEEM NEEDS

Desiree tried to get her esteem needs by determining her life as in the novel, Desiree had always been stubborn, and now, “... she was determined to make a life for herself that was hers alone, without the shadows of her past hanging over it.” (Bennett, 2020,p.23) This captured Desiree’s journey toward fulfilling her esteem needs as conceptualized in Maslow’s hierarchy. Esteem needs encompass an individual’s desire for self-respect,

achievement, autonomy, and recognition from others, all of which Desiree actively pursued in the passage above.

The statement determined to make a life for herself that was hers alone signalled the element of esteem needs. This implied the capacity to act independently and make choices that reflect one's values and desires. By emphasizing that her life would be hers alone, Desiree claimed ownership over her life, rejecting the imposed identities and limitations that might have come from her family history, community expectations, or her past experiences.

DESIREE'S SELF-ACTUALIZATION NEEDS

Desiree had been living in poverty in Mallard with her family. It made her think that moving to another city and finding a better life might help her financially better. To achieve what she wanted, firstly she discussed with Stella, her sister, to leave Mallard as the first step journey to achieve a better life. *"Where?"* Stella said (Bennett, 2020, p.14). *"You know where. I'm tired of talkin' about it, let's just go."* (Bennett, 2020, p.14) The dialogue between the sisters revealed Desiree's commitment to become the fullest version of herself, no longer constrained by fear, hesitation, or external expectations.

She would never know for sure what did it. Maybe Stella was also bored. Maybe, practical as she was, Stella recognized that they could earn more money in New Orleans, sent it home and helped Mama better that way. Or maybe she'd seen that escape door vanishing too and realized that everything she wanted existed outside of Mallard. Who cared why she changed her mind? All that mattered was that Stella finally said "okay." (Bennett, 2020, p. 15)

The narrative above suggests Desiree's mature acceptance of ambiguity. This is an essential characteristic of self-actualized individuals who recognize and embrace the complexity of life. The idea that everything she wanted existed outside of Mallard symbolizes a yearning for self-actualization. This line illustrates the recognition that true fulfilment requires stepping outside of her current life, limiting environments to pursue personal growth. It implies Desiree's own struggles towards self-actualization, suggesting that both sisters, in their separate ways, are seeking self-realization beyond the boundaries imposed by Mallard.

After she left with her sister for years and then she returned back to Mallard with her daughter Jude, she tried to bond with her mother Adele Vignes in Mallard.

Now she was back, Lord knows why. Homesick, maybe. Missing her mother after all those years or wanting to flaunt that dark daughter of hers. In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far. (Bennett, 2020, p. 5)

Returning to Mallard Lord knows why suggests an internal conflict Desiree's motivations are ambiguous, indicating a struggle between her past and present identity. The speculation that she might be homesick or missing her mother shows Desiree's lingering emotional ties, which humanizes her quest for belonging beyond mere physical relocation. This reflects a deep need for emotional connection, a crucial aspect of self-actualization where fulfilment involves reconciliation with one's roots and relationships.

Moreover, Desiree's decision to marry a dark-skinned man and openly live with her blueblack child represents a profound act of authenticity and defiance. In Mallard, where nobody married dark and nobody left, Desiree breaks social norms, illustrating Maslow's concept of self-actualization as embracing truth and individuality despite external pressures. This boldness reflects her courage and genuineness key self-actualization showing she values her family's identity over societal acceptance.

Desiree's refusal to be defined or restrained by her past also reflects a strong will and a proactive approach to life, embodying the self-actualized person's drive for growth and self-improvement. She is not passively accepting her circumstances but actively reshaping her identity and future on her own terms. As in this passage, "Desiree had always been stubborn, and now, she was determined to make a life for herself that was hers alone, without the shadows of her past hanging over it." (Bennett, 2020, p.17). The statement without the shadows of her past hanging over it, suggests Desiree's conscious effort to break free from the limiting influences of her history whether those be societal expectations, family pressures, or racial prejudices. This shows her pursuit of psychological freedom and peace of mind, which Maslow identifies as essential for achieving true fulfilment. From the analysis, Desiree's hierarchy of needs are fulfilled. She met her physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness need and after these are needs are met, she met her self-actualization. The point of each need is formulated in five tiers of hierarchy of needs in Figure 1.

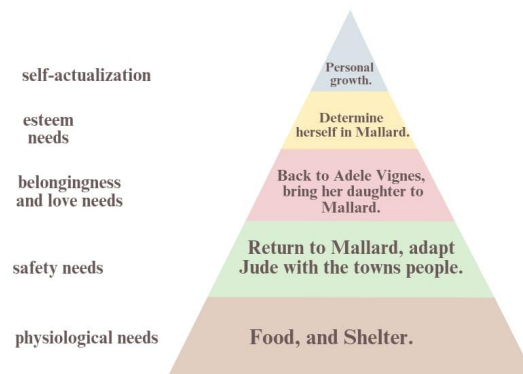


Figure 1. Desiree's Hierarchy of Needs
Source: Research Result.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasises that achieving self-actualisation requires the fulfilment of all levels of the hierarchy, as experienced by Desiree. This suggests that humans cannot achieve self-actualisation without first fulfilling their other needs. In this study, the conflicts in Desiree's life also influenced the fulfilment of needs as represented in Maslow's hierarchy. Desiree showed many traits associated with Maslow's highest level of needs, such as being genuine and honest with herself, having confidence and self-reliance, and showing courage by accepting her past and living authentically despite challenges. The point of her hierarchy of needs was that she can afford food and shelter to fulfil her physiological needs. Her safety needs were met when she returned to Mallard with her daughter Jude and tried to adapt her daughter with the environment in Mallard. Her love and belonging were met when Desiree returned back to Mallard bringing her daughter, because Desiree felt she was loved by her mother in Mallard. Then, her esteem needs were met when Desiree found respect for herself and finally after these needs were met, it led to her self-actualization. She became more mature, peaceful and accepting of her past and current life.

Desiree showed self-actualization traits such as that she lived her life authentically, she showed self-respect, personal courage, truth, greater frustration tolerance, genuineness, honesty, self-acceptance, kindness, unselfishness, bigness, calmness and peace of mind. These traits were based on Maslow's 15 traits indicator to measure people that self-actualized themselves. Desiree showed 10 kinds of self-actualization traits since she achieved self-actualization.

It is important to note that this study is limited to the analysis of Desiree as the central character in *The Vanishing Half* and applies only Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the 15 traits of self-actualized individuals. The findings are based on qualitative interpretation of a single literary text. Therefore, the results are specific to this novel and may not be applicable to other characters, novels, or theoretical perspectives.

Based on the findings and results, this study contributes to literary studies by applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the 15 characteristics of self-actualized individuals to analyze Desiree's character in *The Vanishing Half*. Unlike previous studies that focused mainly on the fulfillment of hierarchical needs, this study provides a more comprehensive analysis by identifying specific self-actualization traits, thereby offering a deeper understanding of character development and personal growth in literary works. Future researchers are recommended to examine other characters in *The Vanishing Half* or other literary works using different psychological theories and comparative approaches. Such studies may provide a broader understanding of self-actualization, identity, and character development in literature.

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