

The Representation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Emoni in *With the Fire on High* (2019)

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Abstract

*This study analyzes the fulfillment of human needs experienced by the main character, Emoni Santiago, in the novel *With the Fire on High* (2019) by applying Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. Literary works often portray human motivation and personal growth that can be examined through psychological approaches. Therefore, this study aims to identify how each level of the hierarchy of needs is fulfilled throughout the story. This study employed a descriptive qualitative method. The data were taken from dialogues, monologues, and narrative in the novel and were supported by relevant secondary sources such as books and journals. The data were collected through several steps, including reading the novel repeatedly, identifying relevant data, classifying the data, and reducing the data based on the study objectives. The results indicate that Emoni Santiago progresses through the five levels of needs, beginning with physiological and safety needs, followed by love and belongingness and esteem needs, and ultimately achieving self-actualization. This finding demonstrates that Emoni Santiago experiences Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs sequentially and reaches self-actualization after the fulfillment of lower-level needs, highlighting the relevance of Maslow's theory in literary analysis.*

Keywords: hierarchy of needs; Abraham Maslow; with the fire on high

INTRODUCTION

Literature represents human experiences, emotions, and perspectives through written narratives. According to Bennett and Royle, literary texts engage deeply with thought and feeling, allowing readers to explore complex aspects of life and human experience (35). Through characters and their conflicts, literature often reflects the inner workings of the human mind, making it closely connected to psychological studies.

Literature can also serve as an important medium for reflecting social realities and human experiences. Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, individuals seek not only to fulfill basic physiological and safety needs but also to satisfy psychological needs, particularly the need for belonging and social recognition. Literary works often explore these dimensions of human motivation by portraying characters who navigate relationships, acceptance, and social status. Among various literary forms, film is particularly effective in representing such cultural and social dynamics. As a visual narrative medium, film functions not merely as entertainment but also as a social reference that shapes audience perceptions and attitudes toward interpersonal relationships and social values. Research based on film screening experiences conducted by Muna et al. (2023) further demonstrates that associative mental images formed through film narratives, especially when connected to viewers' sociohistorical experiences, can influence audience perceptions of social issues. This process is particularly relevant in understanding adolescent experiences, such as the pursuit of popularity, which closely relates to the human needs for belonging and esteem as described in Maslow's theoretical framework.

As a reflection of human behavior and mental processes, literature intersects significantly with psychology. Although the two disciplines use different approaches, both seek to understand human nature. Psychology studies behavior and motivation through systematic observation and scientific

methods, whereas literature presents them through imaginative stories and fictional situations. Yimer explains that literature and psychology share a common focus on human behavior and therefore provide mutual benefits in analysis (159). This close relationship enables psychological theories to be applied in literary studies in order to examine characters' motivations, emotions, and personal struggles more deeply.

One of the psychological theories frequently used in literary analysis is the hierarchy of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow. Maslow describes his theory as holistic and dynamic, emphasizing that individuals are continuously motivated by various needs and possess the potential to grow toward psychological health, namely self-actualization (Feist and Feist 281). These needs are arranged hierarchically, beginning with physiological and safety needs, followed by love and belongingness, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization. Self-actualization refers to the desire to realize one's full potential and become what one is capable of becoming (Maslow 46). According to this theory, higher-level needs become motivating only after lower-level needs have been sufficiently fulfilled.

This pattern of motivation can also be observed in literary characters. The novel *With the Fire on High* by Elizabeth Acevedo portrays the life of Emoni Santiago, a teenage mother who struggles to balance school, family responsibilities, work, and her passion for cooking. Throughout the story, Emoni faces various challenges that relate to the fulfillment of her basic needs while striving to pursue her dreams. Her experiences reflect the gradual progression described in Maslow's hierarchy, making the novel relevant to be analyzed through this theoretical framework.

Several previous studies have applied Maslow's hierarchy of needs to analyze characters' motivations and decisions in films such as *The Greatest Showman* (2017), *Soul* (2020), and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), showing how protagonists fulfill basic needs before reaching higher psychological fulfillment. However, discussions that clearly trace the fulfillment of each hierarchical level in Emoni Santiago's experiences remain limited. Therefore, this study analyzes how the stages of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are experienced by Emoni in *With the Fire on High* (2019) and explains how these stages lead her toward self-actualization.

Hierarchy of Human Needs Theory

Hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory introduced by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*. The theory proposes that human behavior is driven by a structured sequence of needs in which more basic needs must be sufficiently fulfilled before higher-level needs become dominant sources of motivation. Maslow categorizes these as fundamental or conative needs because they stimulate individuals to act and strive for fulfillment, arranging them in a hierarchical order from the most essential for survival to the most advanced form of personal growth (Feist and Feist 286). The five levels consist of physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization, with the highest level representing the realization of one's potential and the pursuit of personal fulfillment.

Physiological Needs

Physiological needs form the most basic level in Maslow's hierarchy because they are essential for survival. These needs include food, water, air, rest, shelter, and other bodily requirements that must be fulfilled before individuals can focus on higher-level motivations (Trivedi and Mehta 39). Maslow explains that physiological needs differ from other needs because they can be completely satisfied but will repeatedly return, such as hunger and thirst, and they only motivate behavior when they are unmet (Feist and Feist 281). After these basic requirements are sufficiently fulfilled, individuals begin to seek safety and security needs.

Safety Needs

Safety needs represent the second level in Maslow's hierarchy and emerge after basic physiological needs are reasonably fulfilled. At this stage, individuals seek protection, stability, and freedom from danger, including physical harm, uncertainty, and anxiety (Feist and Feist 281). These needs are

commonly expressed through the desire for secure employment, financial assurance, legal protection, and predictable living conditions (Trivedi and Mehta 39). Unlike physiological needs, safety needs cannot be completely guaranteed because potential threats may always exist, yet they remain important in creating a sense of security and peace of mind.

Love and Belongingness Needs

Love and belongingness needs constitute the third level in Maslow's hierarchy. After physiological and safety needs are reasonably fulfilled, individuals begin to seek affection, acceptance, and meaningful relationships with others. Maslow explains that these needs are expressed through close bonds with family members, friends, partners, and through participation in social groups such as communities or organizations (Schultz and Schultz 253). This level also includes the desire to give and receive love, as well as the need for emotional connection and a sense of belonging (Feist and Feist 281). Once earlier needs are relatively satisfied, individuals naturally turn their attention toward building and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Esteem Needs

Esteem needs emerge after physiological, safety, and love and belongingness needs are relatively fulfilled. At this level, individuals seek recognition, respect, and a sense of personal value. Trivedi explains that esteem includes the desire for appreciation, authority, and a respected position in society (40). Maslow divides esteem into two aspects: self-esteem and the esteem received from others. Self-esteem involves confidence, competence, independence, and a sense of achievement, while esteem from others relates to reputation, status, recognition, and appreciation (Maslow 45). The satisfaction of these needs strengthens personal confidence and encourages individuals to develop their abilities, supporting movement toward self-actualization.

Self-Actualization

The highest stage in Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization, which appears after the fulfillment of physiological, safety, social, and esteem needs. At this level, individuals are no longer primarily driven by deficiency but by the desire for growth and self-fulfillment. Maslow explains that self-actualization involves becoming fully developed according to one's own abilities and potential (Maslow, 1943). He further illustrates that genuine satisfaction comes from expressing one's true nature, suggesting that individuals must pursue what they are inherently capable of doing in order to feel complete (Maslow, 1943). Because it occupies the top of the hierarchy, self-actualization is often considered abstract and difficult to define. It is described as the tendency to actualize one's unique capacities and to become increasingly aligned with one's authentic self (Taormina & Gao, 2013). This stage motivates individuals to explore their talents, pursue meaningful goals, and strive toward personal growth that reflects their true identity.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive method to examine the psychological development of the main character in the novel *With the Fire on High* (2019) based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. Qualitative methods were chosen because they help understand meanings, experiences, and psychological aspects in the novel through dialogue, narration, and monologues. As Ahmad et al. explain, qualitative methods aim to gain a deep understanding of how people think, feel, and respond to experiences through observation and interpretation (2829). The data in this study were presented in the form of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narrative passages rather than numbers. The novel itself served as the main source of data, which was used to identify the characters' needs and the traits of those who reach self-actualization.

The data were collected by reading the novel carefully several times to understand the story, plot, characters, and quotations relevant to the study. Important dialogues, monologues, and narrative passages that reflected the characters' psychological development and their fulfillment of Maslow's hierarchy of needs were identified and documented. The data were then classified according to the five levels of Maslow's hierarchy including physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-

actualization, and organized in tables included in the appendix. Irrelevant information was removed to ensure the analysis focused on passages that clearly demonstrated how the characters meet the levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The analysis was conducted in three steps, which included selecting the relevant passages, organizing them into tables to identify patterns and categorize themes, and drawing conclusions based on Maslow's theory and the context of the novel. Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. Primary data were obtained directly from the novel including dialogues, narration, and monologues, while secondary data were collected from books, articles, journals, and online sources that provided theoretical support for Maslow's hierarchy of needs and qualitative methods. The findings and interpretations of this study are presented in the following chapter, while the complete data set is provided in the appendix for transparency and reference

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Hierarchy of Needs Reflected in the Character of Emoni Santiago

Humans are driven by different needs that influence their behavior. Maslow suggests that basic needs must be met before people can focus on higher-level needs. This idea is called Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which consists of five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. In *With the Fire on High* (2019), Emoni Santiago goes through these different levels of needs as she grows and faces challenges. Below is a discussion of how Maslow's hierarchy is reflected in Emoni's life.

Physiological Needs

Physiological needs form the most basic level in Maslow's hierarchy. These needs are essential for human survival and include things like food, water, air, clothing, shelter, sleep, rest, and sexual fulfillment. Because they are fundamental, physiological needs take priority over all other needs. People are usually unable to focus on higher-level needs until these basic needs are adequately met (Trivedi and Mehta 39). In *With the Fire on High*, Emoni Santiago's fulfillment of physiological needs is illustrated in the following passages:

I would **sit at the kitchen table eating bootleg Cheerios or rice** or something I could pick up with my fingers and shove into my mouth while she played El Gran Combo or Celia Cruz or La Lupe loud on her old-school radio, shimmying her hips while stirring a pot (12).

The passage above shows that Emoni's basic physical needs, especially her need for food, were consistently met. She recalls having simple meals like cereal or rice during her childhood, which shows that she always had access to nourishment at home. She mentions these meals casually, suggesting that eating was a reliable and secure part of her everyday life. This shows that her fundamental physiological needs such as hunger and proper nutrition were adequately satisfied, giving her a stable foundation to focus on other areas of growth.

Furthermore, another example of how Emoni Santiago's physiological needs are reflected in *With the Fire on High* can be seen in the narrative below, showing how having access to basic necessities such as food, rest, and daily care helps support her growth and everyday life:

Ms. Mariana, Pretty Leslie, and **I eat a dinner of oily rice and steak** in absolute silence, the dwindling daylight finally giving all of us an excuse **to go to bed early** (237).

As depicted in the narrative, Emoni's basic physiological needs are consistently fulfilled. She has reliable access to food and a safe, comfortable place to rest, which is shown in moments like the quiet dinner she shares with Ms. Mariana and Pretty Leslie, followed by an early bedtime as the daylight fades. These small but significant details illustrate that her basic survival needs are being met, providing her with a sense of security and stability. With her physiological needs satisfied, Emoni is

able to shift her focus to higher-level needs. This shows how having a solid foundation of basic needs enables her to move gradually up Maslow's hierarchy.

Safety Needs

Safety needs occupy the second level in Maslow's hierarchy. Before a person can focus on these needs, their physiological needs must first be met. Once basic survival needs are fulfilled, individuals start seeking safety, which includes physical security, stability, protection, and freedom from threats such as illness, danger, fear, anxiety, violence, or natural disasters. Safety also involves having order, rules, and structure in daily life (Feist and Feist 281). These needs reflect the importance of stability and security in a person's life. Emoni's safety needs are illustrated in the dialogue below:

She stops messing with the windows and walks closer to my desk. She says softly, "How's Emma? Where'd you get a job?"

"She's real good, Ms. Fuentes. And **the job is at the Burger Joint.**" Which, although it's spelled all official, I still pronounce "jawn." They think just because the Temple area has changed some that they gotta be fancy, but a burger jawn is a burger jawn regardless of how you spell it. "You know the spot near the university? **I work there after school two days during the week and four hours every weekend**" (16).

As illustrated in the dialogue above, Emoni tells her teacher that she works at the Burger Joint to support both herself and her daughter. Having a steady part-time job gives her a reliable source of income, providing financial security and a sense of stability that fulfills her safety needs. This stability reduces her worries and anxieties about her personal and economic situation, creating a foundation of security in her daily life. With these safety needs met, Emoni can focus her attention and energy on higher-level needs, showing how having a secure and stable environment allows her to gradually move up Maslow's hierarchy.

Furthermore, another example of how Emoni Santiago's safety needs are reflected in *With the Fire on High* can be seen in the narrative below, which shows how having a stable home provides her with security and a sense of protection in her daily life:

The smile he put on my face is still clingin onto my lips when **i walk through the house door. "Bluela! I'm home"** (95).

Emoni's safety needs are clearly met through the stable and secure home she can return to at the end of the day. The way she greets Buela with a smile as she walks through the door shows that she feels both physically protected and emotionally at ease in her surroundings. Her comfort and sense of security within her own home emphasize that her fundamental need for safety and stability is being fulfilled, providing her with a reliable and secure environment in which she can live her daily life.

Love and Belongingness Needs

Once physiological and safety needs are met, people naturally seek love, affection, and a sense of belonging. This drives them to form close relationships and feel accepted within their social circles. According to Maslow, after basic survival and safety needs are partly satisfied, individuals become motivated by love and belongingness needs. These include the desire for friendship, finding a partner and raising children, feeling part of a family, community, or larger social group, and experiencing both giving and receiving love, including aspects of intimacy (Feist and Feist 281). Such needs are typically fulfilled through close connections with family, friends, or a significant other, as well as through participation in social groups. Emoni's need for love and belonging is illustrated in the dialogue below:

"Dinner at home will be romantic if it's catered by you!" We find a place to stand and hold on to the straps above us as the bus begins the jerky ten-minute ride.

"Now I'm a caterer? **You're lucky I love you.**"

"No. I'm lucky you love to cook, and you never turn down an opportunity to practice on **your friends**. Chef Emoni Santiago, next Chopped champion!"

I laugh and pull my phone out to take notes for Gelly's dinner (11).

Emoni shares a playful moment with her best friend Angelica on the bus while they plan dinner. Their lighthearted interaction, with Angelica complimenting Emoni's cooking and Emoni responding with humor, highlights the strong emotional bond between them. This caring and supportive friendship helps Emoni feel valued, accepted, and connected, meeting her need for love and belonging.

Another example of Emoni Santiago's love and belonging needs in *With the Fire on High* is shown in the monologue below, which reflects the support and care she receives from both her partner and her friends:

I grab my suitcase from the conveyor belt and **give Malachi a quick kiss. He pulls me back for a longer one, and I blush down to my toes as my classmates whoop and holler** at seeing so much PDA. I'm almost out of the terminal when I glance behind me because I hear someone cursing up a storm (291).

The narrative shows that Emoni's love and belonging needs are met through her romantic relationship with Malachi as well as the encouragement she receives from her classmates. Their kiss highlights their emotional intimacy and mutual care, while the classmates' cheering demonstrates a supportive social environment in which Emoni feels included. These experiences fulfill her need for love, connection, and a sense of belonging, in line with Maslow's theory.

Esteem Needs

The need for esteem becomes important once physiological, safety, and love and belonging needs have been fulfilled. Esteem needs can be divided into self-esteem and the esteem given by others. Maslow described self-esteem as the need for confidence, competence, achievement, independence, strength, and freedom to express oneself. On the other hand, esteem from others involves the desire for respect, recognition, status, reputation, dignity, appreciation, and prestige (Maslow 45). Emoni's esteem needs are illustrated in the dialogue below:

She smiles at me again. **"You have the taste buds, and married with the technique and work ethic you're learning in class, you'll acquire the holy trinity to make it in this industry.** I need to get back to my kitchen, but don't worry about today's bill." She waves at the server to bring the bill back. "It's on me. Let Ayden know it was a pleasure to meet one of his students."

I hear her chuckling under her breath as she walks away (150).

This dialogue demonstrates that Emoni's esteem needs are being met. She receives acknowledgment and praise from a professional in the culinary field, who recognizes her talent, dedication, and potential. The encouragement and supportive words from this professional show that Emoni is respected and valued, reinforcing her sense of competence and self-worth. Such recognition not only boosts her confidence but also motivates her to continue pursuing her goals, highlighting how external validation plays an important role in fulfilling her esteem needs according to Maslow's theory.

Another example of Emoni Santiago's esteem needs being met in *With the Fire on High* can be seen in the dialogue below, which highlights how recognition and praise from others reinforce her sense of confidence, competence, and self-worth:

"You have good instincts. You will make a fine chef one day. Maybe when you finish school, you'd like to come back to Spain? I would love to take you on as my apprentice."

I look up quickly and forget what I'm doing (287).

This moment clearly illustrates that Emoni's esteem needs are being met, particularly through the respect and recognition she receives from others. When a professional chef acknowledges her culinary instincts and offers her an apprenticeship, it shows that her abilities are recognized and valued. This acknowledgment reinforces her confidence and sense of competence, highlighting that she is appreciated not only as a student but also as a person with genuine potential in the culinary world. Such recognition plays a crucial role in fulfilling her esteem needs, motivating her to continue developing her skills and pursuing her passion.

Self-Actualization

Self-actualization is the highest level in Maslow's hierarchy, emerging only after an individual's physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs have been met. Maslow describes self-actualization as the process of realizing and fully utilizing one's potential, abilities, and talents. This stage can only be achieved once all the lower-level needs in the hierarchy are satisfied (46). Emoni Santiago's journey toward self-actualization is illustrated in the dialogue below:

She takes her hand from mine and crosses her arms and she seems to be fighting a smile. "This is a pretty demanding job, regardless of what position you start in. I don't usually hire someone so young for the kitchen staff."

"I understand. And although **I'll be attending Drexel's Culinary Arts program on a part-time basis**, it's not too far from here, so I can go to classes in the morning and be here by the lunchtime rush. My family is helping me out to make sure I can commit to the long hours." I give her a soft shrug. **"I want to stay in Philly and work in Philly and learn from a restaurant in Philly. Because I think I have a lot to offer my hometown and the places I'm from."**

She looks me slowly up and down. "How soon can you start?"

I let go of her hand and tug on the book bag I have around my shoulders, the one that holds my chef's jacket and clogs.

"Today. Today seems like a great day to begin" (323).

This moment vividly demonstrates Emoni's achievement of self-actualization, representing the peak of her personal growth. After overcoming numerous challenges and obstacles in her life, she approaches her future with confidence, pursuing both higher education and a culinary career that truly reflects her passion. Her dedication to learning, eagerness to start her journey, and determination to contribute back to her community all show that she is actively using her abilities and talents to their fullest. Emoni has moved beyond dreaming or merely preparing for the future. She is fully stepping into her purpose and living out her potential, embodying the very essence of what it means to reach self-actualization according to Maslow's hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Emoni Santiago's personal development in *With the Fire on High* through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, focusing on how she fulfills each level from basic physiological needs to self-actualization. Through the analysis of selected dialogues and key narrative moments, the study shows that Emoni's character demonstrates a clear progression in meeting her needs step by step. Her physiological needs are consistently met through regular meals and adequate rest, providing her with the energy and stability required to navigate daily life. In addition, her safety needs are fulfilled through a stable job and a secure home, which offer protection, shelter, and a sense of stability that

allows her to feel comfortable and confident in her environment. These foundational needs give her the freedom to focus on her social and emotional growth. Emoni's love and belonging needs are satisfied through her close friendships, her supportive romantic relationship, and a positive classroom environment where she feels accepted and valued. These relationships give her emotional support, a sense of connection, and the feeling that she truly belongs. Her esteem needs are met when others recognize and appreciate her cooking skills and dedication, reinforcing her confidence and sense of self-worth. Finally, Emoni achieves self-actualization when she decides to pursue culinary school and begins her career as a professional chef, actively following her passion and using her talents to their fullest. By gradually fulfilling each level of her needs, Emoni demonstrates how meeting basic, emotional, and psychological requirements allows a person to grow, build meaningful relationships, gain confidence, and ultimately reach their full potential. Her journey clearly illustrates how a strong foundation of needs enables personal growth, self-realization, and the pursuit of one's dreams, showing that step-by-step progress is essential in achieving fulfillment in life.

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