

Student #1

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### ***“My Antonia”* Essay**

The book “My Antonia”, written by Willa Cather and published in 1915, is a narrative by Jim Burden who tells his childhood and adolescent memories in Nebraska. Jim, who is an orphan from Virginia, traveled all the way to Nebraska where he had to live with his grandparents. That is where he meets Antonia and her Bohemian immigrant family. Jim makes fast friends with the children, and they spend their childhood together. Their paths diverge when they get older, but Antonia has always had a special place in Jim’s heart.

I am going to take a closer look at the children of the Schimerdas, from the lens of the resilience perspective. First, it has to be clarified what the resilience perspective is before applying it to “My Antonia”. After that I will describe my understanding of one of the pioneer woman’s voices and talk about how my understanding of the narrative of place has been transformed. The main point of the resilience perspective is that we are able to recover from challenges and adapt in times of stress. These challenges may concern the individual, the family, or society. The three models that are essential for the resilience perspective are the compensatory model, the challenge model, and the protective model. The compensatory model means that resilience factors neutralize exposure to risk. The essence of the challenge model is that stress can be viewed as something positive since it is an enhancement of competence. The protective model follows the idea that resilience factors reduce the effect of exposure to stress. These models can be recognized in the female children of the Schimerdas family. The women in the story all lived in a dominant male culture. Antonia, who was

supposed to work for the Burden and Harling family, was exploited since her brother Ambrosch collected her salary. Moreover, the immigrant girls were not allowed to receive education in order to help the family with household chores and the farm. However, the above stated conditions neutralize exposure to risk. All the work she did when she was younger prepared her for the future, since she later took care of a house and eleven children. This can be seen from the challenge model as well. The bohemian women had to handle stressful situations in the past and that is why they gained confidence about handling difficult situations, such as having a big family. Further than that, the challenges that Lena Lingard, a Norwegian immigrant, experienced as a hired girl caused her to grow and gain experience so that she was confident enough to run her own business as a dressmaker in Lincoln. Finally, Antonia's story can be viewed from the perspective of the protective model. Being a bohemian immigrant represents a resilient factor. That is primarily because she had to deal with the conflicts between the immigrant's culture and the native people's culture in Nebraska. This helped Antonia to handle stress in her future life. When Jim visits her as an adult, she still seemed to be the same person from the inside after all these years that went by.

When taking a look at the pioneer's woman's journey and experiences, it gets clear that they have different ideas, hopes and dreams. Antonia and Lena both came to Nebraska as immigration girls. Their childhood and adolescence were marked by their relationships with other immigrants as well as Native American people and their experiences with nature. However, Antonia's and Lena's youth was also dominated by dependence and oppression since they needed to work for different families. Additionally, the immigration aspect has to be considered. Both of them left their hometown behind and came all the way to Nebraska, where they start a completely different life. There were conflicts between the culture they are used to and the culture in Nebraska. Moreover, they had to overcome the language barrier by learning a second language besides their first language. Even though both of them grew up in the same environment and had a similar life story when they were

younger, Antonia and Lena had contrasting ideas, hopes and dreams. Whereas Antonia valued family, Lena attached great importance to gaining money, being successful and being an independent woman. Antonia, on the one hand, followed the stereotypical role of a woman by being a housewife and taking care of the eleven children and the house. Lena, on the other hand, broke the pattern by focusing on her career and not wanting to have a husband.

Personally, I can both and point out similarities and differences between their and my personal experiences. First of all, the biggest difference is that I was never perceived as a foreigner or a person with an immigration background and that is why I had privileges which made my childhood uncomplicated and safe. I am part of the dominant culture in Germany, while on the contrary, Antonia and Lena were part of a subculture by being immigrants in the United States. They constantly had to adapt themselves to the norms, beliefs, and values in their new environment. This goes along with homesickness and loneliness due to the new situation and the fact that they had to leave their home behind. Both their families came to America with the idea of achieving the American Dream and its promised opportunities. However, everyone has to start from the beginning when coming to a new country as an immigrant. As a consequence, Antonia and Lena had to deal with the problem of poverty. Me, who has both sides of my family in the country I am was born and raised is a huge advantage, since you are mostly born into a particular social class and get support from the surrounding family. Furthermore, the immigrant girls in the book were the first generation to come to another country, which led to the consequence that they were not accepted and perceived as Americans. Both of their stories emphasize how hard an immigrant life is and to what extent resilience and the ability to be flexible and adjust to changing factors and conditions are necessary in order to adapt to a new country.

Besides, since the description of landscapes and nature represent an essential symbol in Jim Burden's narrative, I will talk about how my understanding of the narrative of

place has been transformed. As mentioned before, the natural landscape and weather in Nebraska played a huge role in the book “My Àntonia”. It gets described as very unique and special due to landscapes, rivers, the cold winter and the warm summer. First, it has to be mentioned that nature was essential for families back then because of the dependence on natural factors due to practicing farming. In general, they are greatly affected by any changes regarding weather. Natural elements did not only seem to affect their financial and nutritional situations, but they also had a huge influence on the lives and mood of the characters. That is because Jim mentioned how the long and cold winter months have a negative impact on his and other people’s mental stability. Second, an aspect which was mentioned early in the book is the number of trees in their environment. Nebraska is known for a grassland state. The region where Jim lived was almost considered a treeless area. Every tree that got planted had a special meaning and got treated with respect and gratitude.

My experience with nature and weather seems to be quite the opposite to what the characters in “My Àntonia” experienced. For example, I grew up spending a lot of time in the forest and trees were always considered as something normal. 33% of Germany’s land consists of forest and there are over 90 billion trees. I had a forest next to my kindergarten and we always used to go there and discover all different kinds of plants and animals once a week and that is why trees make up a big part of my childhood memories. What’s more, there is a big difference in the population density between Germany and Nebraska. In Germany, 623 people live per mile<sup>2</sup> whereas only 25 people live per mile<sup>2</sup> in Nebraska. That being said, Nebraska is way more based on landscapes. Even though being in the countryside is a huge part of my childhood, the majority of the surface area is densely populated.

Personally, I can say that my understanding of the narrative of place has changed through reading the book. Before the reading, I caught myself being entirely focused on the people around me, on myself and on the challenges in my daily life so that I stopped

being conscious of other surroundings, like landscapes and nature in general. Since we unconsciously perceive it every day, we stop being aware of it and therefore forget nature's beauty and purity. The landscape in Nebraska is a primary theme in the book, and for this reason, it made me reflect on and look back at my childhood memories that are connected to nature. Additionally, "My Àntonia " helped me to come to the realization that there is much more meaning behind landscapes than we originally assumed. For instance, it can be seen as a symbol of change. The landscape changed and developed just as Jim did within all these years. Landscapes do not only remind us of culture and the relationship with people, but it can also be viewed as a mirror of Jim's feelings. All in all, I relearned to be more mindful of my environment. Also, apart from realizing that there are countless ways to interpret nature and transfer it to your own individual story, I understand how essential the natural world is for people.

**Work cited**

Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. Dover Publications, 1994.