

My antonia: living forces

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My *Antonia*: Living forces Anne Bradstreet once wrote, — “ If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome. ” Have your emotions been affected by the changing seasons? Have you reacted according to the weather conditions? Sometimes, the surroundings have a stronger effect than what people may think. They affect human beings’ behaviors and actions in such a way that most of what people do and feel goes accordingly to them. This can be overwhelming, so imagine how it was like for pioneers who came to America during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Seasonal circumstances captivated Willa Cather’s imagination and motivated the creation of the master piece *My Antonia*. Almost overnight, pioneers populated the West after a long and strenuous journey overseas. People from Europe came to America and struggled with the unknown seasonal conditions; conditions that shaped the way they lived and experienced life as Cather witnessed it. Willa Cather's *My Antonia* conveys how the symbolic seasons of fall, winter, spring and summer create a variety of forcings throughout the dramatic action which progressively unfolds a character's traits, namely of Antonia, Jim, and Mr. & Mrs. Burden. During fall, the characters of *My Antonia* experience change and fulfillment. Fall is known as the season of changing leaves. Different alterations will occur in the characters’ life throughout this period. This is seen in *Antonia*'s life, when an autumn day, Lena comes to visit her while Tony was working for the Harlings. “ It was a crisp autumn evening . . . A plump, fair skinned girl was standing in the doorway . . . Lena Lingard . . . ” (103) . She introduces *Antonia* to a more liberal life which was about to start that fall. It was because of Lena that Tony starts going to the dances, which she fell in love

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with. Clearly, this is a change that fulfilled Antonia's life and that she was willing to fight for. In Jim's case, one of the biggest changes in his life occurred one fall day. He started a new life by moving to Nebraska after his parents' death. He left everything what he knew in Virginia to live with his grandparents. He had just lost both of his parents; so, he starts a new life in the unknown prairie. This also allows him to meet Antonia, " I first heard of Antonia on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland plains of North America . . . " (5). She becomes one of the most relevant friends in his life and fulfills him in many different ways. For Mr. and Mrs. Burden, the fact that Jim was coming to Nebraska that fall day represented a big change for them as well. Now they have the responsibility of raising a child. They have to start a new family. Having Jim with them is a fulfilling event for them too. He reminds them of their son. This is shown when Mrs. Burden sits at the foot of Jim's bed, " My, how you do look like your father" (9). Also, according to Jimmy, his father " had been her little boy . . . " (9), so having Jim with them clearly makes them happy. Therefore, the fall brings changes to the characters and with these changes come different experiences that fulfill their lives given the symbolic representation of fall. Throughout winter, however, death and isolation are forcings that the characters have to face. This season controls and transforms people's surroundings against their will. This is a time of the year that comes with extreme changes in weather such a freezing temperatures that can cause roads to ice over and make transportation difficult — not to mention communication during the 1800s. People from all walks of life had to adapt their life style to these extreme seasonal conditions. " Winter is presented mainly as a harsh, unaesthetic, threatening side to the frontier landscape,

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something to be overcome and to hide from—at least temporarily" (Dillman, 31). Antonia, for instance, has her most difficult times during this season. Her family did not have a decent place to live in; so the severe climate conditions were especially difficult for them. They were sleeping on the cold floor and eating frozen potatoes. This unforgiving season was about to become even worse for her when her father succumbed against depression and endless cold of winter by taking his own life. Mr. Burden's words illustrate the situation of her family after Mr. Shimerda's suicide: "Old Mr. Shimerda is dead, and his family are in great distress" (61). It was also during winter when Antonia delivered her baby. She was alone, and she was not helped by anybody. "There, without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child" (251). However, winter affected Jim as well as Mr. and Mrs. Burden. In Jim's case, he says, "Winter lies too long in country towns, hangs on until it is stable and shabby, old and sullen . . . in Black Hawk the scene of human life was spread out shrunken and pinched . . . I was tired of school, tired of winter clothes, of the rutted street, of the dirty drifts and the piles of cinders that had lain in the yards so long" (116). For Mr. and Mrs. Burden, they were isolated from other people during the harsh winters. This is best shown when they had to spend Christmas without buying anything from Black Hawk. Jim states that "we decided to have a country Christmas, without any help from town" (53). However, it is the weather that decides for them. Jake could not go downtown because there was too much snow. They stayed inside because they needed to protect themselves from the weather which kept them away from their neighbors. Winter transformed the characters surroundings, which usually ends up in death and/or isolation. After struggling with harsh winters,

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hope and rebirth of the spirit comes to the characters of My *Antonia* during spring. According to Martin (Terrence Martin), spring comes with the reawakening of the prairie and pervasive lightness. This season brings a new light into the characters' traits. Jim, for example, enjoys his studies and intellectual growth in Lincoln when a knock on his door one spring day would show him a different life period. "When I turned back to my room the place seemed much pleasanter than before. Lena had left something warm and friendly in the lamplight" (173). Spring brought a new beginning for Lena and Jimmy's friendship and love. From the theater nights to the morning breakfasts, Jim and Lena cultivated their relationship during this warm season. Lena was not only a pretty and lovely girl to Jim, but also a good friend that brought him memories of spring for a lifetime. For Mr. and Mrs. Burden, spring seemed to be the right season for a new start. By leaving the farm, they decided to move to Black Hawk. Jimmy says, "We came to Black Hawk in March, and by the end of April we felt like town people. Grandfather was a deacon in the new Baptist Church, grandmother was busy with church suppers and missionary societies" (94). Therefore, Mr. and Mrs. Burden changed the heavy work of the fields to become towns people which they successfully achieved during this season. *Antonia* exemplifies another character that was also influenced by the spring. She ". . . married . . . a young Bohemian" (211) which gave her hope to raise her new baby girl and was for sure the rebirth of a new life in marriage and family. Throughout Cather's novel, spring changes the setting for the characters and consequently symbolizes hope and rebirth in their lives. Throughout summer, an overall joy and desire to live life to the fullest became the characters' principal moving force. The warm weather vitalizes the character's heart to

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go out at enjoy life. The environment surrounding them was also a very jolly one thanks to the dancing pavilion that arrived to the town and that went along during the summer. " That vacant lot soon became the most cheerful place in town" (125) and " dancing became popular . . . " (126). Jim started attending the dances constantly and even though he was younger than the hired girls, he mingled with them. In Jim's words " the dance . . . was the one thing I looked forward to all the week" (141). " I never missed a Saturday night dance . . . I was not the only boy who found these dances gayer than the others" (126). With relish, Antonia also had a part in the summer dances in company of her friends, the other hired girls. " Antonia talked and thought about nothing but the tent. She hummed the dance tunes all day. When supper was late, she hurried her dishes, dropped and smashed them in her excitement" (131). She never had the opportunity to do an activity like dancing before. This first summer gave life and excitement to town and also to Tony's life. Mr. and Mrs. Burden are other characters that had a very happy and jovial time during the summer. During this season, Mr. Burden brought reconciliation with the Shimerdas, as Jim narrates the story " our neighbours seemed glad to make peace with us . . . Mrs. Shimerda . . . brought Jake a pair of socks she had knitted. She presented them with an air of great magnanimity" (87). Mrs. Burden is presented as being in " high spirits" (89) which is also a sign of joy. This is clearly seen during the season. Summer clearly molds the behavior of these three characters by symbolizing enjoyment and bringing them vivacity. To sum up, the different seasons brought forcings that changed the surroundings in one way or another throughout Cather's novel. These changes influenced the characters' traits. They had a big affect on them because the characters were forced to adapt

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their life style to the changing seasonal conditions. The seasons symbolize different emotions and / or stages in the life of Antonia, Jimmy, and Mr. and Mrs. Burden since it goes from isolation to enjoyment. As Bloom & Bloom state, " The warm, pleasant summers lull . . . into a false sense of security. But in winter the land is another matter . . . Man is but a tiny element in a supreme irony, struggling like an animal" (Bloom & Bloom 85-86). People are no more than another component of the landscape, a landscape which is modified by seasons and that they are unable to predict and even control by the 1800s. Therefore, the seasons act as living forces symbolizing change, death, rebirth and joy in the character's life. Work cited Bloom Edward and Lillian Bloom. " Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier: A Study in Thematic Symbolism". JSTOR. March 1949. Duke University Press. 28 October 2010. Bradstreet, Anne. " The Quotations Page." <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/1809.html>. N. p., n. d. Web. 9 Nov 2010. Cather, Willa. My Antonia. United States of America: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995 Martin, Terrence. " The Drama of Memory in " My Antonia"". JSTOR. March 1969. Modern Language Association. 28 October 2010 < <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1261287>> Dillman, Richard. " Imagining the land: Five versions of the landscape in Willa Cather's My Antonia." Heritage: The Great Plains. 22. 3 (1989): 30-35. Print.