

Naturalist literary
elements in 'my
antonia': viewing
human essence
through exper...



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The idea of developing from your experiences is an idea applied to the methods of writing as well as everyday life in the present day. Such a method is mostly applied to Naturalist works. The goal of Naturalist literature was solely to develop and eventually reveal the attributes of the novel's characters' personality. This effective method can be used to identify various personalities due to the wide variety of events and feelings that could be experienced. This type of writing is applied to Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. Overall, there are three prevalent experiences that broadly shape and identify the nature of the characters and their personalities. The elements of the social position, inevitable tragedy, and determination, all visible in the lives of the characters in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, are Naturalist elements that help develop insight into the human nature of the characters.

The element of social position is prevalently present in the nature of the immigrant characters in ways that show both the ethical and unethical reactions to their acknowledgment of their social position. In the case of Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda, their low social position makes them cherish factors like self-respect, pride, and social reputation even more for this is what is left with them after relocating and not having a good social and monetary status. This also relates to the Naturalist themes of despair and struggle although these are concealed from their peers. This attitude is first witnessed during their first winter; this is when they realize that their monetary and social status is not favorable. However, they maintain their pride, respect, reputation, and even are over generous in attempt to conceal their struggle. Mr. Shimerda wanted his family to " know that they were not beggars in the old country; he made good wages, and his family was respected there"

(Cather 53). Here, Mr. Shimerda indirectly tells his family that although they do not have everything that they expected from their move to the United States, they had enough and should be proud of what they have attained.

This mindset is also seen through Mrs. Shimerda's actions. She repeatedly gives her family's belongings as gifts to others and suffers the loss with a smile; although she knows that neither her social or financial status are distinguished, she continues to maintain her self-respect. Contrastingly, another immigrant character's acknowledgment of their social status brings out the worst in them as a person. Peter Krajiek has a higher social position and takes advantage of this which brings out his greedy mindset. Cather writes: "... had paid him [Peter Krajiek] more than it [Shimerda's home] was worth.... Krajiek was their [Shimerdas'] only interpreter and could tell them anything he chose. They could not speak English to ask for advice or even make their most pressing wants known" (Cather 19). The affirmation of his high social position causes him to treat others unethically. In this quote, he has cheated the Shimerdas into paying him more for the house they bought from him. In that district, he is known for committing such cheating deeds. He, being of a higher social status within the immigrant community, takes advantage of this; he is corrupt, cunning, and cheating. In contrast with the Shimerdas, Krajiek's acknowledgment of his significance within his community gives the reader insight into his greedy mind. But, not only do the characters' social significance give the reader insight into their personality.

The inevitable natural tragedies that occur in the lives of the characters reveal the personalities of the characters in multiple ways; this is seen in the <https://assignbuster.com/naturalist-literary-elements-in-my-antonia-viewing-human-essence-through-experiences/>

some of the characters' reaction to a natural occurrence like a change in season. As winter approaches the small town in Nebraska, the residents react to the anticipated and drastic change which reveals their human mentality. When winter comes to the Burden household, the residents make the best of the harsh winter; Jim describes the scenery as beautiful and absorbs the hidden beauty of winter which others may comprehend as bitter. Antonia, specifically, does not appreciate the cold change as much; Jim says "the sky was brilliantly blue, and the sunlight on the glittering white stretches of prairie was almost blinding. As Antonia said, the whole world was changing" (Cather 46). Antonia is still confused as to how to react to this change but Jim is enjoying it wholeheartedly. This displays the Burdens' optimistic attitude in such situations. On the other end of the spectrum, the Shimerdas, once again, are silently suffering from the cold winter. This is similar to their reaction to their social status where they keep their suffering inconspicuous as an effort to maintain their self-respect. But, their pride and self-respect go to a certain extent; when Jim and his family witness their hardships first-hand and provide assistance, Mrs. Shimerda breaks down crying out of gratitude. Cather writes: "...until Jim arrived with the hamper, as if in direct answer to Mrs. Shimerda's reproaches. Then the poor woman broke down. She dropped on the floor beside her crazy son, hid her face on her knees, and sat crying" (Cather 52). The Shimerda's persistent masking of their struggles stops at this point; this shows the tender and sentimental core of the Shimerdas' hearts that was kept hidden for some time. Although such events display the fragile and sentimental aspects of the characters, others show the ambitious and hard-working side of the characters.

After being faced with a practical and no-nonsense situation, the characters' choice as to whether or not to accept a persevering task reveals the determination in them. This is most prevalently seen in Antonia and the reason behind her most significant transformation in the novel. After the tragic death of Antonia's father, Antonia has the option of either taking up the male role in the house or depending on her stiff brother to take up this role. Her determination surfaces when she accepts this masculine role despite being a typical female in her household; she defeats the social stereotype of females and becomes what society never expected: a strong, independent, and determined female with a quiet inner strength. Jim sees her new identity after Antonia's father dies observes the noticeable change: "When the sun was dropping low, Antonia came up the big south draw with her team. How much older she had grown in eight months! She had come to us a child, and now she was a tall, strong young girl, although her fifteenth birthday had just slipped by ... She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap" (Cather 83). This choice of determination changes her life forever and exposes the ambitious side of her personality.

Another female role in the novel that displays her previously-submerged determination is Lena Lingard. In her teenage years, Lena is an immigrant girl who, in her teenage years, was a "hired girl"; this slur implies that she was a social outcast and was not allowed to associate with the "decent" folks in their small town. She longed for adventure and self-govern with the security of having a decent financial income and successful career. Although her goals are quite contrasting to that of Antonia's, her ambition and

determination to defy the stereotyped capability of the “ hired girls” win her a successful career as a business owner. When she visits Jim while in he is college, she tells him “ I [Lena] live in Lincoln now, too, Jim. I’m in business for myself. I have a dressmaking shop in the Raleigh Block, out on O Street. I’ve made a real good start” (Cather 172). She is proud and appreciative of her success. Through her success, her underlying ambition that was somewhat submerged as a teen is visible. She also defies the restricting social laws of the town and embraces her strong femininity. Like the other elements visible in the characters’ lives, this also gives us insight into the characters’ human nature.

Factors like determination, natural tragedies, and social status all apparent in the lives of Willa Cather’s My Antonia make the human nature of the characters more evident to the reader. The three factors might be simple ideas which can be experienced by many but not always to develop or reveal the human personalities of people. This is what many naturalist works’ are made to accomplish within the text: to develop or showcase the human nature of characters using natural elements whether those elements are making ethical or unethical attributes of the characters’ nature visible. In this novel, there are varieties of contrasting characteristics revealed to the reader through the naturalist method of writing. From this observation, it can be said that the human natures of characters in novels such as Cather’s My Antonia can be perfectly identified by the naturalist method of changing through experiences.