My Antonia
Concept Analysis

Literary Text: *My Antonia* by Willa Cather (Penguin Classics)

Summary
After becoming orphaned, Jim is sent from Virginia to live with his country grandparents out west. Jim knows nothing of country life and is thrown into the foreign world of Nebraska. On the train ride out there Jim meets the Shimerdas family – immigrants from Bohemia. The Shimerdas family is moving to a neighboring farm to the one where Jim’s grandparents live. Jim is intrigued by the daughter of the Bohemian foreigners, and the two strike-up a friendship full of adventure and maturation. After a terrible suicide, Jim and Antonia begin to distance themselves from each other. Jim begins High School in the town; Antonia begins work in the town. Can Jim and Antonia go back to how life was before the accident?

Organization Patterns
- My Antonia is broken up into books and chapters. The First Book “The Shimerdas” contains 108 pages divided into 19 chapters. Each chapter has about 4 pages. This First Book introduces us to the characters, especially focusing on the relationship between Jim and the Shimerdas. Book One ends with the death of Mr. Shimerdas.
- The Second Book, “The Hired Girls”, is comprised of 15 chapters – 76 pages. This section of the novel follows Jim and his grandparents’ move into the town. Antonia begins working in the town and Book Two shows Jim and Antonia as they work towards restoring their relationship.
- “Lena Lingard”, the Third Book, has 4 chapters and 24 pages. We follow Jim to college at the University of Lincoln. After a year in Lincoln, Jim runs into Lena, a girl from growing up in the town. The book focuses on Jim’s evolving relationship with Lena. At the end of the book, he leaves Lincoln to study at Harvard after a visit home first.
- Book Four is called “The Pioneer Woman’s Story”. The 18 pages are broken up into four chapters. Jim returns to Black Hawk before he continues his study at Harvard. In this section of the novel Jim is caught up to date with Antonia’s life up to this point – pregnant and deserted at the altar.
- Book Five is the final book in the novel, “Cuzak’s Boys.” The last 3 chapters use 28 pages to tell of Jim’s return to Black Hawk after 20 years to visit Antonia. He stays with Antonia and her family for a few days on their farm. As he leaves the town, he is saddened by the unfamiliarity of it all.

Central Question
How are we affected by the past? The entire novel is a nostalgic remembrance from the eyes of Jim Burden. Jim recounts his past, he idealizes Antonia, and for what? His experiences with Antonia have influenced decisions that he has made all throughout his life. We watch Jim as he remembers Antonia during every moment of his life: from childhood, through adolescents, and into his adult years. We cannot recover the past... no matter how affected we are by it.

What does it mean to be an outsider? Antonia has immigrated to America with her family. On the farm, they are treated one way because hard work is valued there. Yet, in the city, the immigrants are treated an entirely different way. This dichotomy is jarring, yet true even today. The prejudices surfaced in the novel against the immigrants ones issues that we see during our present time against immigrants, people of religion, etc.

What is homesickness? One of the issues the novel deals with is the idea of homesickness. The immigrants of Bohemia, Russia, and Norway all feel nostalgia for their homeland. Is a home or a country the only thing we can feel homesick for? What about relationships? Jim seems to be homesick for his relationship with Antonia. The book explores the many facets of homesickness.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

THEMES

Nostalgia – Nostalgia is a major theme in My Antonia. We see the many faces of nostalgia – nostalgia for one’s past, for one’s country, for the land. The longing that we see within the novel helps shape the characters, the plot, the interactions, everything. We see it come up again and again in each character as they long for their home, their friends, their past, their work, their loves, their families.

Frontier Values – Living in the country, on a farm, requires a lot of work. Hard work is valued on a farm, it is respected and necessary. Yet once into the town, these hard working farmers are looked down upon. They are considered dirty, trashy. Antonia has to deal with this as she goes into town to work. Jim deals with this as he sees what is valued in both the town and the country and has to decide where to stand. If to stand on a certain side at all. Even though the town has the weaknesses, there are still values that the town and country folk share. Among them are the importance of family, community, and religion.

Race and Gender Inequality – Not only is there prejudice against the immigrant families, but My Antonia sheds light on the prejudice that are carried against women. Women are seen to have a certain role in the novel. When this role is questioned, or ignored, problems ensue. Another theme to coincide with this one is the theme of womanhood. Cather’s Jim has used Antonia as the type for strong women. Her physical strength and mental control, her innate talents and insight have such an effect on Jim that he holds all other women up to Antonia.
**Immigration and Newness** – Black Hawk is a small Nebraska town scattered with people from all over the world. We have the Shimerdas from Bohemia, the workers from Russia, the Lingards from Norway. The novel plays with how these immigrants fit into society both on the farms and in the towns. Through prejudices and other issues they face, we learn about the difficulties that newness can bring. From difficulties with the language, to difficulties working, immigrants face challenges we take for granite each day. People have preconceived notions of the immigrants and judge them based on their limited knowledge. We get to watch as Antonia and others like her rise above these judgments.

**Starting Anew** – Both Jim and Antonia have been displaced from their homes, Antonia at age 14 and Jim at age 10. They are brought to a new land, full of differences and questions, and full of the opportunity to begin again. Jim has to learn an entire new lifestyle. He has been thrown out of his city life by the death of his parents, and tossed into a country life with relatives he does not know. Antonia has been ripped from a land and a culture she knows, to a new place with a language and culture she does not understand. Both have to learn how to create a life in the place where they now find themselves. This is what leads to such a strong bond between the two: Antonia wants to learn English to become proficient in communication, Jim was to learn more about life in the country so he can survive and find joy. Jim and Antonia have found each other right at a crux in both their lives; together they start anew.

**Setting**

Setting plays an incredible part in this novel. *My Antonia* takes place in Black Hawk, Nebraska – the frontier. Black Hawk is a city that is made up of synthesis between the town and the farming. Because of its fertile land, planting is a major occupation for the citizens. People come from all over the world to work the land here. Yet, the setting is more than a backdrop for gathering; it plays a role that leads us into the lives of all the characters. The land is always a reflection of the characters themselves. It is changing, developing, becoming – it is as if the land is a character itself, a character to be studied alongside the development of the other characters in the book. We travel from the farms into the town, and then follow Jim as he goes to the University of Lincoln and then returns. No matter where he is, Jim is always recounting the beautiful land of Nebraska’s country. Willa Cather too had fallen in love with the personality of the country, and expresses it in detail throughout her book.

**Conflict**

The introduction contains the first conflict that we see, and one that sticks with us throughout the whole novel, causing us to question its validity Willa Cather is telling us that this novel is almost entirely the work of an old friend, Jim Burden. Do we believe her, how real is Jim? How real is Antonia? Cather and Jim discuss how no one can understand their story who
hasn’t lived in the country, yet here she is release this sentimental monument out to the world. We are left to question authorial intent, and reliability. This is more of an external conflict. There are internal ones as well.

Within the novel, we are faced with Jim’s love for Antonia. It goes against everything that the small country city knows – a regular mixing with a foreigner. Jim knows that he should not love Antonia, but he cannot help himself. Even long after he has left the town, Jim is still in love with her. Jim has to deal with his feelings as well as move on with his life, yet he can never fully let go of Black Hawk and Antonia.

**Point of View**

The story is told from the remembrances of Jim Burden. The introduction to the story gives us the background to how Cather received the story. In a moment of nostalgia, Jim writes down everything he remembers about Antonia. However, to fully understand Antonia, we must see her through the eyes of Jim, for he has established a lens which nearly deifies Antonia as the perfect essence of womanhood. We are seeing everything not just how Jim saw it, but how he sees it years later. The first-person narrative places us within the text, right there with Jim.

Jim is very connected to the land. He uses vivid imagery to describe the landscape. By doing so, he is letting us know the emotions that are really being felt. He keeps the land consistent with the people who live there. By listening to Jim’s story, we see his nostalgia for his home in the East move to nostalgia for his home in Nebraska. Jim is connecting with the land and the people, his stories pull us in to watch this progression.

**Literary Terms**

*My Antonia* recollects the people that affected a young boys growing up. In order to tell his story, we need to know about all the people he interacted with. The character development is this novel is one of its most important features - the development not only Jim, but all of those people around him. When an event occurs, we get to watch everyone change, if only through Jim’s eyes. Jim also spends a great deal of time describing where they live, the nature of it all. Through figurative language, imagery, and personification we come to appreciate the land as we would a character we love. These terms will be necessary to participate in the conversation of the book. The terms will bring to our mind more clearly the picture that Cather is presenting before us.

**Affective Issues**
Will Cather wrote *My Antonia* to pull out people’s emotions of the west. Cather herself is filled with love for this part of our country and brings others into this love. While she doesn’t paint the perfect picture of a perfect society, the flaws of Black Hawk and its citizens are character flaws we can connect to today.

Racism is an issue everyone in America is familiar with. While too often we connect it to a few races, *My Antonia* introduces us to cultures and races that we might not be familiar with. These people share our land too; these people feel the pressure of their immigrantcy through the prejudices of others. We have all felt ostracized at some point in our lives, now we can read about people who may have felt the same. Not only that, but sometimes we don’t know how to treat people who are different than us. This book explores all the issues within racism.

Jim is constantly kneading in his mind his feelings for Antonia. All of my students will have had, at some time in their lives if not now, confusion over their feelings for someone. Jim loves Antonia, but he never tells her. Instead he goes over it again and again and again in his mind, never being able to truly let go of her – enough so that he even comes back years and years later to write a book about her.

Loneliness is a symptom of nostalgia. Everyone feels it at some time or another in the book, and I am sure all of my student’s will have felt it at some time in their lives. A few more affective issues relate to economic status, connection to the land, and the issues we face of growing up. Jim decides to go to college, an opportunity not very many of his friends get to face.

**Vocabulary Issues**

The vocabulary in *My Antonia* is somewhat basic. There are a few terms each chapter that student will have to look up. A few major terms that we encounter over and over again will need to be discussed at the beginning of the chapter. For example, Bohemia is a country that we will learn about before we face it in the novel. Another example is the word *nostalgia*. Nostalgia is such a major factor of Jim’s memory. Knowing this word will help students to understand what he is feeling and why. I plan on having a vocab quiz after each reading assignment with the unfamiliar words we faced during our reading. This will encourage the students to get in the habit of looking up words they don’t mean, or focusing on context to decipher meaning. We will find a lot of country slang as we read this story – words that my students most likely will not be familiar with. This is a type of colloquialism that really adds a certain regionalism to the book and colors it strong with the times. The language in the story works with the plot to develop the relationships and the characters within the story.

**Background Knowledge**

One very important area of knowledge that my students should be familiar with before we start the novel involves the life of our real author, Willa Cather. In *My Antonia* Cather is
writing about a setting and a time that has affected her entire life. At age nine, Cather went through a culture shock similar to that of Jim Burdens. She too was moved from her Virginia home out to the vast country of Nebraska. As we understand what this experience did for Cather, and what it meant to her, we can begin to see her project herself into Jim.

With her move, Cather would have encountered immigration just as Jim does. Understanding the immigration that was happening in America during this time will help us understand the Shimerdas family, and families like them, and what their experience would have been like. Since we see the family through Jim’s eyes, maybe another set of eyes - historical eyes - can help us see more clearly into their actions and their struggles.

One step away from the book, there is more knowledge important for the understanding of the novel. A working and mature understanding of the influence of themes, setting, and character development is necessary for the interpretation of the story. The book is a collection of scattered memories, with no obvious plot line that tie them all together. The strong foundation of this story is in its themes, setting, and character development. Students will need to know how to uncover these as they read, and how to add their own knowledge for a deeper understanding of the text. Students will also need to know how to participate in classroom discussion and how to learn from their peers. These skills are important not just for uncovering the text, but they are learning about relationships in the book and can practice what they are learning in the classroom.

**Implications for Student Diversity**

Diversity is an issue we see in the book. There are characters from all over the country and all over the world that gather in this story. There is a spectrum of economic status and we closely interact with people all along that spectrum. If we have immigrants in the class, it would be helpful to hear about their immigration experience – what it is like for them, for their families. If we have ELL students, we could hear about their experiences. Then, as we read about similar situations in the book, the situations will be real. We will connect to their experience because we will closely know someone who has dealt with and shared these similar circumstances.

**Gender Issues**

Within the novel, we see that certain gender roles have been established. Jim sees Antonia as the perfect girl, the perfect woman, the perfect wife, the perfect mother. She becomes to Jim what all women should be, like a prototype. Class discussion can interpret these issues in the book and in society today. Are there specific gender roles? Are they interchangeable? What experiences do we have with them today as well as in the book?

**Research Issues/Project Ideas**
**Character Map** – Students will make a diagram that connects all the characters in the book and how they relate to another. Character relationship is so important in the story. As we do this early on in the novel, we can start right off and learning about who the characters are and how the interact with each other.

**Context Presentations** – Each student can pick something we see in the book and do a short 5-7 minute presentation of their topic and how it relate to the book. For example, a student can pick a certain farming tool and study its history and how by knowing it we can better understand the role it plays in the novel.

**Painting** – Since the imagery is so vivid in the story, we can read a section where Jim is describing the scenery and paint it out. This will help us to be able to visualize the setting and understand what it is telling us about the characters.

**Collage** – students can use pictures from magazines, personal photographs, books, the computer, etc. to create a collage about themselves. However, here is the catch – they can only use pictures of scenery. Just as Jim describes the people in terms of the land, we can try to describe ourselves the same way.

**Figurative Language Exercises** – this can be different activities that teach students to use more lyrical language. We will have exercises on using sensory language, metaphors, and allegories. Personification and tone can also help mature our own writing as well as understand the deeper things Jim is really saying. The exercises can vary from us creating our own descriptions and then guessing others, or giving clues and having the students come up with what the object at hand is. By looking at an object in more than one way, it reveals a deeper context and creates connections that can unveil hidden meaning.

**Enrichment Resources**

“Neighbor Rosicky” is a short story by Willa Cather about an immigrant family. I will have students read this short story after we have finished *My Antonia* and make connections to the textual features, as well as the thematic ones. As we take the novel and reach outward we will be able to find new insight from within.

A TV movie came out in 1995, a cinematic adaption to *My Antonia*. By analyzing the book through another medium we can better understand the decisions authors and directors make. This would be a great opportunity to talk about autorial decisions and intent and the importance of adaptation for interpretation.