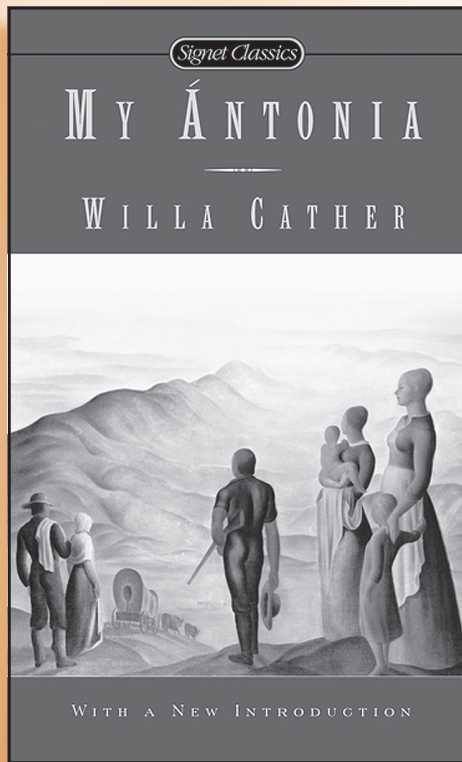


*Signet Classics*

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSICS EDITION OF

WILLA CATHER'S  
**MY ÁNTONIA**



BY JANE SHLENSKY

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
List of Main Characters.....	4
The Shimerda Family.....	4
The Burden Family.....	4
The Hired Girls.....	5
The Harlings.....	5
Synopsis of the Novel.....	5
Pre-Reading Activities.....	6
I. Building Background Knowledge: Historical Context.....	6
II. Cather's Use of Language.....	13
III. Initial Exploration of Themes.....	14
During Reading Activities.....	17
After Reading Activities.....	26
I. Rethinking Initial Impressions.....	26
II. Deepening Understanding.....	26
III. Group and Individual Projects.....	27
IV. Literary Theory Project.....	28
References.....	29
About the Author of this Guide.....	30
About the Editors of this Guide.....	30
Free Teacher's Guides.....	31

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1938, twenty years after the publication and critical acclaim for *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather called this novel “the best thing I’ve done.” The novel evokes nostalgia for America’s past, imparting from the epigraph onward two concepts that inform and enrich the story: “optima dies” or memories, and “fugit” or movement. Readers learn about the character and struggles of pioneers, and the importance of friendship, family, and freedom. Cather’s immigrant and migrant characters forge their lives in the Nebraska prairie, revealing not only the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century pioneering spirit, but also their American Dream and what it will take to achieve it. While focusing on the small town of Black Hawk and its surrounding farms, the novel is peopled by individuals from other regions of the world whose cultures and memories inform a wider world view that will inevitably be woven into the American tapestry.

Cather drew her story from her own childhood migration from Virginia to Nebraska, an event similar to Jim Burden’s; from her friendships with the Scandinavian, Russian, Bohemian, and Czech immigrants; and from her knowledge of their struggles to create home in that harshly beautiful environment. The memory of that prairie home—the loves of her youth, the struggles with nature and fortune, the friendships, the foundations of character and “American values,” the land itself as it became the “breadbasket of the world”—informs Cather’s work and gives voice to otherwise voiceless Eastern European immigrants to the American Midwest.

One learns that the story, based upon Jim’s memories, is fueled by movement; Jim writes his memories of Ántonia while on his many train trips across the country, but his memories of Ántonia are inextricably linked to the movements of all the characters from their childhood homes to Nebraska. Jim’s “road of Destiny” is indelibly bound with America’s Manifest Destiny and the collective American movement seen in the Progressive era that determined the exploration, conquest, and settlement of the United States from coast to coast and the assimilation and enculturation of the people who moved west. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave to any American citizen over twenty-one the title of “160 acres of land, if he lived on the land for five years and improved it,” causing “within a single decade, half a million people to migrate—Yankee settlers, sod-house pioneers out of the Lincoln Country, Danes, Norwegians, Bohemians, Poles” (Altieri). The continent itself seems to be moving and changing, from Jim’s first memory of the wind blowing on the prairie: “And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running” (42). This race for upward mobility is pitted against stillness, isolation. The lonesomeness often felt and expressed by the characters causes the characters either to embrace the new landscape and imprint themselves upon it, as Ántonia does, or to flee it, escaping into new identities and destinies, as Jim, Lena, and Tiny do.

That a migrant from Virginia should be the narrator is telling, for few first-generation immigrants have the language skills, the time, or the desire to write their stories. It is Jim who records these lives, successes, and losses; Jim who speaks English as his native language, who has grandparents who promote education and who envision a better life than farming for him; and Jim who becomes lost in a New York society that fails to understand his need to reconnect himself to the prairie people and landscapes that forged his character. Indeed, there is hardly a chapter that does not include romantic and

impressionistic descriptions of the landscape, the weather, the vegetation and animal life of Nebraska. In remembering the land and its people, both Cather and Jim become American Virgils who “bring the Muse into my country” (217), rendering the Nebraskan homeland fuel for poetry and the pioneer characters the architects.

This guide has three primary sections to aid the teaching of *My Ántonia*: **Pre-Reading**, **During the Reading**, and **After Reading the Novel**. **Pre-reading** activities are designed to engage students with ideas and themes they will encounter in the text as well as developing contexts for understanding the novel: historical, literary, musical, and artistic. **During Reading** information offers summaries, questions, and quotations for each block of chapters. **After-Reading** offers culminating activities to help students and teachers examine themes and larger questions presented by the novel as a whole.

## LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

### THE SHIMERDA FAMILY

**Ántonia Shimerda**, the eldest Shimerda daughter and closest friend of Jim Burden, is the focus of the story. Although she is intelligent, industrious, kind, optimistic, and fiercely loyal, circumstances force her to a difficult life. She eventually settles on the prairie with her husband and large family.

**Mr. Shimerda**, a scholarly and artistic man who does not want to immigrate, suffers from a deep depression resulting in suicide. His choice leads to the family's struggles and alters Ántonia's fate.

**Mrs. Shimerda**, opposite of her husband in many ways, lacks his kindness and gentle nature. She is determined, bossy, and grasping to further her family's interests. She serves as an unsympathetic foil for Mrs. Burden.

**Ambrosch**, the oldest son, for whose fortune the family has moved to Nebraska from Bohemia. Like his mother, he is suspicious, sly, and self-interested. He works his sisters like men to improve his own fortunes in the world.

**Yulka**, the youngest daughter, is described as fair, mild, and obedient.

**Marek**, the second Shimerda son, does a great deal of manual labor for the family, despite his handicaps.

**Anton Cuzak**, Ántonia's eventual husband and a fellow Bohemian immigrant, raises their large family with her with good humor and hard work.

### THE BURDEN FAMILY

**Jim Burden**, the story's author, recounts his early relationship with Ántonia Shimerda and his youth in Nebraska. Described as a romantic, Jim's introspection and intellect lend him a sensitivity to the land itself. At the time he composes the narrative, Jim is a childless legal counsel living in New York with his socialite wife and working for the railroad.

**Emmaline Burden**, Jim's grandmother, mothers Jim and shows compassion for the Shimerdas and concern for Ántonia's abuse by her brother and mother.

**Josiah Burden**, Jim's grandfather, mirrors for Jim the importance of strong religious faith, hard work, understanding the environment, and strength of character.

## THE HIRED GIRLS

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**Tiny Soderball**, a hired girl in Black Hawk for Mrs. Gardener in the Boys' Home, is Ántonia and Lena's friend. She heads west to make a fortune in the Alaska gold rush.

**Lena Lingard**, a Norwegian immigrant and friend of Ántonia and Jim, is the subject of Book 3 of the novel. Although her blonde good looks attract men to her, she refuses to marry, opting to run her dress-making business and enjoy her freedom.

**Three Bohemian Marys** and **Anna Hansen**, also hired girls, are fixtures at dances and outings.

## THE HARLINGS

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**Mrs. Harling**, matriarch of the Harlings and neighbor of the Burdens in Black Hawk, hires Ántonia to help with her children and provides strong support and affection for Ántonia, her own children, and Jim.

**Mr. Harling**, a successful and keen businessman, forces Ántonia to choose between frequenting the dancing pavilion or her post as housekeeper in his home. She chooses her freedom of lifestyle and goes to work for Wick Cutter.

**Frances**, the Harlings' oldest child, has her father's business acumen and manages her father's accounts with a concern for others and philanthropy her father lacks.

**Charley**, the Harlings' only son and Jim's friend, opts for a successful military career after graduating from the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

**Julia** is Jim's age and the family's most successful musician.

**Sally** is Julia's youngest sister and the most sensitive of the family.

**Nina**, aged six, is sensitive and complex.

## SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL

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On a train crossing the Midwest, Jim Burden, a successful lawyer working for the railroad in New York City, and an unnamed acquaintance (presumably Cather) reminisce about their childhoods growing up in Nebraska and about a mutual friend, Ántonia Shimerda who they believe exemplifies life on the prairie. Jim is challenged to write his memories of Ántonia and his upbringing and shortly delivers his memoir—which is largely the novel itself—to the acquaintance, who publishes it much as he has written it.

Jim's story begins when, at the age of ten, he is orphaned in Virginia and goes west to join his grandparents. On the train, a conductor tells Jim that there is an immigrant family from Bohemia traveling with him with a daughter that is "bright as a new dollar." He learns at the Black Hawk station that the Shimerdas are now neighbors of his grandparents, and he and Ántonia become immediate friends, with him tutoring her in English and their roaming the countryside and exploring their new home. That winter, Ántonia's deeply depressed father commits suicide, making the family's hardships far

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worse and changing Ántonia's possibilities forever. While Jim begins school, Ántonia works in the fields like a man.

When the Burdens decide to move into Black Hawk, Mrs. Burden convinces her neighbors, the Harlings, to hire Ántonia as a housekeeper. Again, Jim and Ántonia spend time together, especially when the dancing pavilion comes to town and entrances the locals and the hired girls. Jim finishes high school and delivers a successful graduation speech, then continues to Lincoln for university and preparation for his career. Although he devotes himself almost completely to his studies in Lincoln, he discovers Lena Lingard, one of the hired girls of his youth, during his second year and abandons his studies for theater engagements and entertainments with her. When his tutor offers him a transfer to Harvard for his final two years of college, he decides that he needs to break free of his dalliances and renew his study.

During these years of study, Jim learns later that Ántonia has become a fiancé of a train conductor and has moved to Denver to be married. The day before her wedding, she is left heart-broken and pregnant and forced to return to Black Hawk to her disapproving family to deliver and take care of her baby, working again on the farm with her brother who practically enslaves her.

Before law school, Jim returns to Nebraska to see his grandparents and visits Ántonia on her farm to reminisce and renew their friendship with promises of subsequent visits. The next visit is twenty years later; Jim has become a lawyer married to a wealthy but cold socialite. While he is childless, Ántonia has married Anton Cuzak, a fellow Bohemian, and has almost a dozen children. On his visit to the Cuzak farm, Jim and Ántonia reestablish their ties and Jim promises to visit regularly and to befriend her children and spouse on hunting and fishing trips. Whatever his boyhood romantic hopes, Ántonia is now his sister and her children, nieces and nephews he can enjoy for years to come.

After his visit, Jim observes the overgrown road along the outskirts of town which brought him and Ántonia into Black Hawk from his childhood home. Calling this the "road of Destiny," Jim finds peace in this landscape, feeling his life has come full circle and he has come "home to myself" through this reconnection with his friend and his past.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

These activities are designed to strengthen students' knowledge of late 19th and early 20th century American history, literature, art, and music, while deepening their understandings of literary genres, elements of fiction, and tenets of Romanticism, Realism, and Regionalism, especially as they relate to *My Ántonia*. Teachers can choose activities that best suit their goals for student learning.

## I. BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This novel's landscape is geographically and psychologically the "heartland" of the United States. Readers should understand something of the history of westering, of pioneer spirit and homesteading, and of the foreign immigrants and native migrants who rendered this expanse "the bread basket of the world." Students of this novel will benefit from reading narratives and oral histories of pioneers and from further reading about the Homestead

Act of 1862 and the transcontinental railroad that opened the country to waves of unparalleled migration.

### MAPPING WESTWARD MOVEMENT

Because the Nebraskan prairie is a dynamic character, as well as a setting in this novel, students should be able to locate on a map and visualize where the events of the novel take place. Ask students to consult a map of the United States, preferably one of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, showing railroads, rivers, and roads across the U.S. and especially within Nebraska territories. This map study will help students to chart the movement of the characters in the novel.

1. Have students do a web search about life in Midwestern prairie towns and homesteads, including research about (a) the Homestead Act of 1862 and how it changed American culture; (b) the types and efficacy of conveyances used by settlers; (c) the types of jobs available to people in the prairie towns of the 19th century; (d) flora and fauna on the prairie and seasonal weather patterns.
2. Ask students to consult a world map from the late 19th century and chart immigrant movement from Russia, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Austria, and Bohemia to the U.S. Ask students to research what is happening in the larger world that pushes these immigrants to America. Teachers can find suitable maps, transcripts, and historical timelines at Biography of America on this site, Interactive Maps of the West: <http://www.learner.org/biographyofamerica/prog16/index.html>

### POLITICAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY

1. Links to works, writers, and reforms can be found on Brief Timelines of American Literature and Events. Ask students to review the timelines from 1890-1910 to see what is taking place in the United States beyond the Great Plains that also informs the events of the story: <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/1890.htm>
2. Ask students to use pioneer letters and narratives from the websites below, and their history texts to research these issues of American Westward Movement: (a) the effect of Manifest Destiny on native-born Americans and immigrants to the U.S.; (b) how immigrants from various nations sustained a sense of self and cultural identity within the U.S.; (c) how trains and the transcontinental railroad affected western settlement and urban growth along the rail lines; (d) how women's lives and rights changed from 1890-1920, especially in the West and in Nebraska; (e) what aspects and promises of pioneering were emphasized by popular novels and advertisements to encourage settlement of the West; and (f) how quickly changes in communications, road systems, and "civilization" came to western states. Encourage students to ask their own questions about this important period in American life and to answer those questions using textual evidence. Students can work in small groups, share findings, and report back to their classmates.

William Gilpin and What the West Needs: Narratives and letters of laborers and settlers and Oblinger letters in "How Do You Like Nebraska?"

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/five/nebraska.htm>

For further information, browse the following sources:

- See Western Expansion at <http://www.americanwest.com/pages/wexpansi.htm>
  - Immigration and American Expansion readings, photographs, and maps <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
  - History Matters, archives and narratives: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>;
3. Ask students to brainstorm a list of pioneer values, attributes that helped America to grow and prosper. Then ask students to compare their lists and see what traits or attributes are similar. As a whole class, develop a list of the most frequently recurring traits. Discuss with the students why they think they listed certain attributes. What do they think is the source of their ideas? Why do they think of certain stereotypes when they think of pioneers? The class may begin to reflect on the impact of media and popular culture on our conceptions of historical periods.

Post the list generated by the class so students can reflect on their list as they encounter characters and discover their main traits. After reading the novel, students can make another list of values expressed by Cather's characters, and then compare the two lists for similarities and differences.

## LITERARY CONTEXTS AND AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

1. Students can better understand what makes *My Ántonia* an American classic and contributes to its relevance to modern readers, by reading another poem, short story, or novel dealing with the subject of western settlement.

**Philip Freneau's poem, "On the Emigration to America and Peopling the Western Country"** reminds students that pioneering west began shortly after colonization of America and continued well into the 20th century.

Discuss with students: What expectations does Freneau have of the men and women who will people the new territories? How will their experiences be different than in their original homelands? What is man's relationship to Nature, according to the poet?

**Bret Harte's short story "Outcasts of Poker Flats"** introduces a number of themes similar to those in Cather's novel. Discuss with students: How can fictional writing arouse sympathies toward political and social action? Ask students to name short stories, novels, or films that have brought about or contributed to social changes. To assist with this, students can consult the Best Timeline of American Literature and Events (1880-1889): [www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/1880.htm](http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/1880.htm).

During reading, students can connect the plight of the outcasts in Harte's short story to that of the Russians, Mr. Shimerda, Lena Lingard, or Ántonia after her pregnancy.

**Mark Twain's semi-autobiographical *Roughing It*** suggests that many of those who headed west to make their fortunes were ill suited for the terrain, the hardships, the weather, and the isolation. Ask students to select scenes from this work that describe the experiences of individuals trying to make fortunes in the West. What hardships do they encounter? How do they overcome obstacles? What sense do you get about their character? Making a chart of these ideas will enable students to make connections to similar scenes in *My Ántonia*.



2. The political, scientific, literary, and social reforms of the 19th century resulted in changes in the vision with which writers created literature and art. In the shift from Romanticism to Realism and Regionalism, writers examined life as it was actually lived and recorded what they saw around them. Ask students to use the following websites to chart the tenets of each literary movement. During their reading of *My Ántonia*, ask them to use these charts to distinguish elements of each movement within the novel.

Romanticism in American Literature: "Gothic, Novel, and Romance"

<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbell/amlit/novel.htm>

Realism in American Literature

<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbell/amlit/realism.htm>

Regionalism and Local Color Fiction 1865-1895

<http://www.wsu.edu/~campbell/amlit/lcolor.html>

3. A quick overview of Willa Cather's life makes apparent that many of her novels, including *My Ántonia*, fictionalize her experiences and memories of her youth in rural Nebraska. Though clearly fictionalized, the life of Jim Burden is similar to Cather's and makes an interesting study. Ask students to outline the main events in Cather's life on a timeline which they post around the classroom. Later when reading the novel, they can add parallel events from Burden's life, leading to a discussion about how a novelist uses and refines her experiences to lead to truths about human experience.

Willa Cather was born in Virginia on December 7, 1873, moving at the age of nine to Red Cloud, Nebraska with her family. She spent the remainder of her childhood there and graduated from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln in 1895. Her writing career began in journalism, first in Pittsburgh for five years working for *Home Monthly* and the *Pittsburgh Leader*. Still, it was during her tenure as a high school English and Latin teacher that she began to publish her first short stories, between 1901 and 1906. Her early published works led to her position as investigative journalist with New York City's *McClure's* magazine, where she remained as an editor for six years.

Her early successes in story-telling led to novels beginning with *Alexander's Bridge* in 1912 and *O Pioneers!* in 1913, the latter of which received a more complimentary reception. The exploration of western frontier life led her to her roots in Nebraska and to her rank among the finest American novelists with *My Ántonia* in 1918. The momentum of *My Ántonia's* acceptance propelled Cather into her most prolific period during the 1920s, with *One of Ours* in 1922 for which she received the Pulitzer Prize, *The Professor's House* in 1925, *My Mortal Enemy* in 1926, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1926. Each of these works were popular successes, bringing critical attention to her and leading to her winning the Howells Medal for Fiction in 1930 and the gold medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1944. In her final years, Cather penned mostly short stories and novels, but with less frequency and refinement.

On April 24, 1947, Cather died in New York City where she had lived for thirty-nine years with her companion, Edith Lewis.

For more about Cather's life and work, consult the Willa Cather Archive at: <http://cather.unl.edu/>, especially these sections: <http://cather.unl.edu/geochron/> and <http://cather.unl.edu/0003.html#histEssay>

## CREATING CONTEXT THROUGH WORKS OF ART

Consider using art that represents westward expansion, landscapes of the American Dream, and the pioneering spirit and that attaches to broader themes of immigration, pioneer values, women's rights, and suffrage. Since some of these works suggest the sacrifices of settlers and play to our stereotypes of pioneers, first ask students to list words or images that come to mind when you say, "Westering," then "Pioneers," then "Nebraska." The art listed below will play to a number of stereotypes as well as landscapes, from cowboys and cabins in the woods to prairies, Native Americans, and gold and silver mining.

1. Make a power point slide show of these art prints for your students to analyze before reading the novel. Play one or more of the westering songs below while you view the slides, and discuss the importance of the western landscape in the paintings and songs. Several of these paintings depict railroads or trains. Ask students to consider the importance of trains in the concepts of progress and manifest destiny and in ecological enrichment or decline of those landscapes where they progressed.

William Ranney, *Advice on the Prairie* and *Halt on the Prairie*, 1853 from "Forging an American Identity: The Art of William Ranney"  
<http://www.tfoi.com/aa/6aa/6aa299.htm>

Ranney's art is often narrative, depicting unnamed characters who suggest the power of the individual to contribute to American character. Ask: What do the characters in these paintings suggest about westering for experienced and inexperienced pioneers?

Thomas Cole, *Home in the Woods*, 1847 and *Course of Empire—Pastoral State*, 1836 [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cole\\_Thomas\\_Home\\_in\\_the\\_Woods\\_1847.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cole_Thomas_Home_in_the_Woods_1847.jpg) and <http://www.artunframed.com/cole.htm>

Ask: What features and details of pioneer life are obvious in *Home in the Woods*? Where do you think this homestead is located in the U.S.? Show students the complete *Course of Empire* series to discuss Manifest Destiny and the connections between empire and ideas of civilization. [http://pasleybrothers.com/jefferson/course\\_of\\_empire.htm](http://pasleybrothers.com/jefferson/course_of_empire.htm)

Frederick Remington, *Argument with the Town Marshall*, 1907  
<http://www.museumsyndicate.com/item.php?item=9949>  
or any of Remington's Western series <http://www.sidrmuseum.org/fredr.html>

While Remington's work uses the West for its landscape, much of his subject matter is fantasy and stereotype. Ask: What life experiences has Remington used for his paintings? Are his depictions realistic or show stereotypes?

Albert Bierstadt, *Sierra Nevada* and *The Last of the Buffalo*, 1871-1873  
<http://www.xmission.com/~emailbox/glenda/bierstadt/bierstadt.html>

Known for his huge unsettled Western landscapes, Bierstadt is himself a German immigrant to the United States. Discuss why migrants going West might have difficulty finding these exact scenes. How do such landscapes appeal to their viewers and what hopes do they inspire?

Jasper Cropsey, *Starrucca Viaduct*, 1865  
[http://www.dnr.cornell.edu/courses/nr220/img/cropsey\\_starrucca.jpg](http://www.dnr.cornell.edu/courses/nr220/img/cropsey_starrucca.jpg)

Cropsey's landscape, itself vast and naturally beautiful, is altered by man's dominion over nature in the forms of the viaduct and the train. The man and his dog stand looking at the scene. Discuss whether they are intrigued by nature's beauty or by man's ingenuity. Have students write a short monologue from the man's point of view describing which of these he finds most intriguing.

George Innes, *The Lackawanna Valley*, 1855  
[www.artunframed.com/inness.htm](http://www.artunframed.com/inness.htm)

Discuss: What does the painting suggest about the relationship between deforestation and the transcontinental railroad? Look at the village and discuss what and who are on the "wrong" side of the tracks and how American towns changed when railroads came through them? What facets of "civilized" society are located in the town opposite the rail station? Why does the boy in the foreground watch the train's progress?

Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, 1861  
<http://f00.middlebury.edu/FS001A/gallery/leutze.html>

Divide this narrative painting into scenes and assign groups of students to interpret a scene, showing the reasons for pioneering, the hardships, and the triumphs.

Andrew Melrose, *Westward, the Star of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1867  
<http://www.csub.edu/~gsantos/cat16.html>, along with other paintings of Manifest Destiny.

Have students interpret this scene in light of the deforested land and cabin. Discuss the appeals of transcontinental train travel and empire vs. the ecological losses.

William S. Jewett, *The Promised Land, the Grayson Family*, 1850  
<http://www.csub.edu/~gsantos/img0073.html>

Jewett's portrayal of the Grayson family and their promised land suggests that the vista before them could be their promised land. Ask: What changes are they willing to make to inhabit this land? Discuss the dress of the husband vs. that of his wife and daughter. What "civilized" gender traits are laid upon each of these family members?

Currier and Ives, *Prairie Fires of the Great West*, 1871

<http://cpr.org/Museum/Engravings/Currier%20&%20Ives.html>

Known for their lithographs and pictures depicting Americana, Currier and Ives commented on the disasters of the day as well. The website shows other pieces from their *Westward the Empire* series, each representing trains within the American landscape. Ask students what is being conveyed about cross-country train travel in this series. Why would these prints be popular?

John Gast, *American Progress or Manifest Destiny*, 1872

[http://cpr.org/Museum/Ephemera/American\\_Progress.html](http://cpr.org/Museum/Ephemera/American_Progress.html)

One mark of civilization is social, political, and cultural advancement. Discuss: In this painting, what or who represents progress? Who is not progressing in the work? What is the plight of those who are deemed uncivilized?

- For the novel, Cather commissioned a series of woodcuts by W.T. Benda. Ask students to explore what these woodcuts add to the story. Read more about Benda's work in Janis P. Stout's *Picturing a Different West* or Susan Rosowski's *The Issue of Authority in Editing Cather*.

## CREATING CONTEXT THROUGH MUSIC

- Ask students to explore one or more of the songs below, looking at the themes conveyed in the lyrics. Have students choose, from a hat, cards with jobs on them: the Mule Drivers, the Rail Layers, the Gold Miners, the Sod Busters, the Cowpokes, and the Wild Cards. Each group is assigned a matching song, except the Wild Cards—they are free to find other songs about pioneering characters (Home on the Range, Clementine, Don't Fence Me In, Little Ah Fu, Streets of Laredo, Housewife's Lament/Life is a Toil, Buffalo Skinners, and so forth). In your classroom, post a map of the territories of the United States where western expansion and settlement were encouraged, so that students can clearly see the features of landscape. Since these songs represent different types of pioneers and motivations for moving West, discuss how the music may have influenced stereotypes about pioneers and the West.

“Erie Canal” (the Mule Drivers)

“John Henry” (the Rail Layers)

“Sweet Betsy From Pike” (the Gold Miners)

“Little Old Sod Shanty” (the Sod Busters)

“Whoopi Ti Yi Yo” (the Cowpokes)

If you use these songs as short research topics, consider these guidelines and questions for student groups.

### GUIDELINES:

- History:** At what time in history was this song written and most popular? What can you find out about the composer or originators of the song?
- Text:** Read the text of the song and paraphrase what the song's words are saying and to whom? What is the point of the words? Do these words shift over time? If so, tell the class about shifts and changes in the song.

3. Musicality: Notice the tempo and tone set by the song and how these affect the message of the song. What emotions do they create?
4. Performances: Originally, who performed the song? If you have a recording of the song, tell the class about the performers and its main audience.
5. Purpose: If it is true that every song has a purpose and an agenda, what purpose and agenda does your song have in its time period?
6. Genre: What does this song say about life during the time it was first performed and sung? What is the genre of your song?
7. Relevance: Consider the characters within the songs. Are any gender issues presented? What emotions or feelings the songs appeal to in its singers or listeners?

“Brave” and talented students may wish to perform these songs for classmates. Try a sing-along in class for fun and to increase your students’ musical literacy.

The following sites have collections of music and historical information: From the American Collection: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/smhtml/smessay1.html> and songs listed in alphabetical order: <http://ingeb.org/catus.html>

## 2. Modern Musical Connections

Teachers may prefer to play one or more songs while students enter and exit classes to set the mood for discussion of the novel and its contexts. Ask students to consider the importance of landscape in these modern pieces with which students may be familiar:

Woody Guthrie, “This Land is Your Land”  
Ray Charles, “America, the Beautiful”  
Irving Berlin, “Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor”  
Lee Greenwood, “God Bless the USA”

## II. CATHER'S USE OF LANGUAGE

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### ISSUES OF STEREOTYPING

Engage students in discussion of stereotyping and the use of language to dominate and degrade people. The narrator in the novel groups and often stereotypes characters as farmers, hired girls, townies, or Russians, Norwegians, Bohemians, Indians, and so forth. Frequently in the text, as well as in the modern world, characters judge (or misjudge) one another based upon native language and culture—“Americans” vs. “foreigners.”

Ask students to explain the meaning of stereotype and then to list some common stereotypes that are used to describe teens/young adults like themselves. Put this list on the board and then ask students to sort the list into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative labels. Discuss as a group: What do you notice about these labels? In what situations are they used? What impact do these labels have on the students? Why do they like or dislike these labels?

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## USE OF DIALECT

Cather develops the character of Ántonia and others in the novel by using dialect (local, regional, ethnic). This use of accents, regional dialect, and local color contributes to the novel's categorization as Realistic, rather than Romantic. Narrated by Jim Burden, Cather reproduces not only Jim's speech patterns as a native-born American, but also, through Jim, the speech of other migrants and immigrants to Nebraska, each with his or her own dialect due to national origin and native language, intellectual and educational level, sophistication and socio-economic level, race, and gender. These factors can be analyzed by examining grammar, vocabulary, and speech patterns.

To better understand the dialect used in the novel, small groups should examine and chart speech patterns under these three headings: Grammar, Vocabulary, and Speech Patterns/Idioms. Discuss: How does the dialect differ from Standard English? Does dialect suggest different levels of intelligence or education? What would be the effect on the reader if all the characters in the novel spoke Standard English?

Discuss with students: How many different American dialects can you name? Where did these dialects come from? Do people judge one another based on language habits? Do you have a dialect? Do you change your speech patterns at times? When is it important for you to use Standard English and when is it appropriate for you to use dialect? Is one dialect better than another? Why or why not?

The PBS television series, *Do You Speak American?* (2005), and its companion text by Robert MacNeil and William Cran offer a great deal of insight into American dialects and how regional linguistic shifts reflect changes in American life. For information about this resource, go to this web site: <http://www.pbs.org/speak/>.

## III. INITIAL EXPLORATION OF THEMES

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Exploring key themes before reading the novel can prepare students to read at a deeper level and will create an atmosphere of inquiry, of open response, and discussion.

### COMING OF AGE IN A NEW LAND: FORGING A NEW IDENTITY

This theme focuses on the transition from carefree childhood to responsible adulthood which is complicated in the novel by Jim and Ántonia's being transplanted to a new landscape and culture. They search for identity, freedom and independence, and connections that will help them discover themselves and their capabilities. While young adults' search for identity can lead to isolation, confusion, and rebellion, this theme emphasizes psychological growth or maturity.

Select a novel or film most of your students know in which the main adolescent character changes in the course of the story (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Star Wars*, a Harry Potter novel, or recent teen movie). As a group, list the traits of the protagonist at the beginning and end of the story and discuss how he/she changes. When does the character begin to change and why? As the character matures and grows up, how does his or her identity change? What stages does the character pass through on the way to a new, or more mature identity? Ask students if they believe all young people go through similar stages in the maturation process. List these phases on a class chart so

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students can identify similar stages in the growth and maturation of Jim and Ántonia while reading the novel.

## MEMORY

1. The novel, framed as memory from its “Introduction,” covers some thirty years of Jim’s and Ántonia’s friendship, but also contextualizes the memories of other characters. Readers learn that each character brings with him or her webs of memories of other loves and lives.

Ask students to journal about a significant memory in their past or the past of their family. A way to begin is to ask students to create a timeline of their lives, starting with the day of their birth. They can list key memories on the timeline, including the date, place, and a drawing that represents the event. Then students can choose one of the events to describe more fully in their journals. Discuss with students the power of memories: Why are certain events more memorable than others? Why are certain stories told “again and again” in a family?

During reading, divide students into groups to explore the memories of each of the following characters and how memories inform their American story: Otto Fuchs, Mr. Shimerda, Anton Cuzak, The Russians Peter and Pavel, Lena Lingard.

2. Inextricably tied to memory is a sense of loss or homesickness. In Marilyn Sides’ Introduction to the Signet Classic edition of the novel, she explores the importance of home as well as the pain associated with leaving home. The migrants and immigrants within the story cope in different ways with their memories while trying to establish a new home. The theme of home and belonging allows Sides to explore the plight of women, the struggles of transformation of the self and land, and the quality of memory that keeps the concept of “home” alive. Discuss with students: Is home the ground on which we stand, the place of our parents and forebears, the people we know, the culture and background that informs our lives, or something more? What is required to re-envision one’s concept of home? Ask students to read Sides’ Introduction and write down three points that seem true or interesting to them. Next, write down one assertion by Sides that is difficult to understand. Use students’ responses to explore the ideas of home, memory, and loss.

## FREEDOM

Freedom is linked with friendship, movement, labor, education, and gender in *My Ántonia*. Freedom of movement brings the characters from their previous homes to the opportunities offered by Nebraska. Friendships are a result of choice; the right to choose the kind and quality of work one does leads to economic freedom. The freedom to learn and improve one’s mind provides personal progress for characters. The social and economic mobility of both men and women leads to freedom in the market-place and choice of life style. All these freedoms are present in the novel, pitted against enslavements—attitudes and hardships—that inhibit these freedoms.

Ask students to define freedom with examples of what each type of freedom will do in their lives (for example, having one’s own car means not depending on others for a ride). Discuss: Are there occasions when freedoms involve limitations, (for example, having a

car/freedom means paying for gas, insurance, tires and having to work)?

Ask students to make a chart with two columns, My Freedoms and My Limitations. In each column, they should write ways in which they are free and ways in which they consider themselves limited. Do they feel limited by others, by bigger social issues, or by their own traits and choices? Suggest that they clarify this on the charts. Ask that they fold their papers down the middle to reveal only one of these columns. In small groups, trade papers and discuss ways in which group members can free themselves from their limitations. (Running away or drug use are not to be considered as options).

In order to trace this theme while reading the novel, ask students to list ways in which Jim and Ántonia exert their freedoms in the novel by creating two columns, the first for Freedoms, the second for Limits, and the third for Outcomes. Ask students to note the page numbers of references. For example, Jim is given a pony on his arrival on the farm which gives him freedom of movement while Ántonia can only go where she can walk. On the other hand, the pony leads to more chores for Jim. When each student has listed several items in each category, have small groups compare their lists and discuss how the concept of freedom is expressed in the novel.

### CHANGE AND MOVEMENT

From its epigraph, a quote from Virgil, “Optima dies...prima fugit—the best days are the first to flee, and throughout the novel, the idea of memory and movement are inextricably linked. Not only do the characters change their cultures, homes, languages, and destinies, but new inventions, laws and policies, and social attitudes change American culture.

Ask students to list the means of transportation mentioned throughout the novel and connect that conveyance with the event that precipitated it (for example, dog sleds and snow shoes with Alaskan gold rush; trains and horses with silver mining, farming, the Homestead Act; battleships with Spanish American War). How does each conveyance change America?

Later, during reading, students in small groups can follow a specific character, noting the changes they make in their lives and what movement is required for that change: Ántonia Shimerda, Jim Burden, Tiny Soderball, Frances Harling, Anton Jelinek, Lena Lingard.

### MORAL DILEMMAS: PROBLEM SITUATIONS

To help students relate to dilemmas involving Ántonia's pioneer challenges, choose one or more of these situations for student response. A short free-writing may help students to articulate ideas before sharing with a partner or discussing as a class.

1. You have immigrated to a country whose language you barely speak, trusting that you will have countrymen who will help you once you arrive to settle into a home and get work. You find out quickly that your countrymen are cheating you and taking advantage of your inexperience. What do you do?
  2. Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher learn that a new immigrant family is moving into their neighborhood. The new family speaks English poorly and will need time to get adjusted to their new environment. The Fletchers would like to hire the family to do their domestic chores at a low wage. Do you see any problems that may develop from this arrangement? How will such employment within the neighborhood affect the
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children of the immigrant family and of the family native to the U.S.? Do you think that stereotyping will occur in both families? What would you advise them to do?

3. Your best friend's father has died, leaving her family economically challenged, if not destitute. She tells you that she will quit school to get a job and help her family. Do you agree that she needs to make this sacrifice? Would you do the same for your family? What are the challenges to your friendship if your education is better than hers and your circumstances in life easier than hers?

### TRUE-FALSE DISCUSSION STARTERS

As a Pre-reading Exercise, ask students to mark the statements below as either True or False for them before reading *My Ántonia*. Survey the class to see how students answered and why. After completing the novel, ask students to indicate how they believe the author and her narrator, Jim Burden would answer the questions, and mark again their post-reading answers. (You may also have students select their favorite character from the novel). Did students change their answers to any of the questions? Why?

Pre	Narr	Ántonia	Post	
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- |                          |                          |                          |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Relationships with family members are the most important in life.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. "Real" Americans are those who have been in this country for at least three generations and who speak English.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Stereotyping is based on observations of actual events or habits and is therefore not disrespectful of a group. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. Growing up requires one to separate from home, friends, and family.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. Most people immigrate to the U.S. to make money.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Women who do men's jobs deserve to be looked down on.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. Home really is where the heart is.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. A good education makes a good person.   |

### DURING READING ACTIVITIES

The following discussion questions will encourage deeper analysis of themes and ideas already considered in pre-reading. Quotations may be used for short writings or discussions, but also to offer students passages that may lead to understanding of characters and themes.

## CATHER'S EPIGRAPH, DEDICATION

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The Latin epigraph from the farmer poet Virgil's *Georgics*, "Optima dies...prima fugit," sets the tone for the novel and for Cather's invocation of memories from her youth that inform the story. Literally, "The best days are the first to flee," the phrase speaks to memory of past days and will be used directly in Book Three, chapter two of the work.

Ask students to respond to this epigraph as well as the dedication to Carrie and Irene Miner, "in memory of affections old and true." What sense do they get of the author's intention? How do these brief phrases begin to set the tone for the novel? What themes do these lines suggest?

## BOOK 1: INTRODUCTION AND THE SHIMERDAS CHAPTERS 1-7: RE-ENVISIONING HOME

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The first seven chapters introduce the main characters and the prairie landscape. Jim travels from his home in Virginia, following the death of both his parents, to Nebraska where he meets his grandparents and the Shimerdas. As Jim explores his new home, he introduces the Russians, Krajiek, and Otto Fuchs, and learns common attitudes towards foreigners. The final chapter recounts Jim killing a huge rattlesnake, which changes Ántonia's regard for him.

1. What information does the Introduction's narrator give about Jim's present life and marriage? Is the narrator male or female? What evidence could you produce to suggest that the speaker is Cather?
2. What does Jim's funding entrepreneurs and "big Western Dreams" mean about his character? What does it mean for the "development" of the country?
3. How is his wife characterized and why does the narrator dislike her? What do her "causes" say about social changes taking place in the United States?
4. Given Jim's personal life, what have Ántonia's family come to mean to him?
5. Define "home". Is the presence of family necessary to home?
6. When Jim first arrives in Nebraska, what kinds of adjustment does he make? How does he let go of his past and discover happiness in his new environment?
7. Select one of the animals that Jim observes and connects to human behavior and explain how his metaphors reflect the interconnectedness of nature with people.

## QUOTATIONS

1. "I am never able to believe that she has much feeling for the causes to which she lends her name and her fleeting interest...she seems unimpressionable and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm." (28)
  2. "He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development." (28)
  3. "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." (29)
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4. "There was nothing but land: not country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." (36)
5. "I had left even their spirits behind me...I don't think I was homesick...I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night; here, I felt, what would be would be." (37)
6. "[More] than anything else I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping..." (42)
7. "I was entirely happy...that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." (44)
8. "'Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my An-tonia!'" (50)

## CHAPTERS 8-19: LOSS AND DESTINY

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These twelve chapters recount hardships that arrive with winter, from the Russians' struggles to the depression and suicide of Mr. Shimerda, an action that changes Ántonia's fate and possibilities. Memories haunt the Russians and Mr. Shimerda, but seem to comfort Jake and Otto. The question of whether a person is his brother's keeper stays with the Burden family during the Christmas season and they consider how poverty affects individuals. After Mr. Shimerda's suicide, neighbors help the family build a house and henhouse so they can start farming. Now, Ántonia competes in the fields with the men and can no longer hope for education. While Ántonia prefers outdoor work and "to be like a man," Mrs. Burden hopes to get her into the kitchen and out of the field.

1. Why does Jim say he (and the neighborhood) looks forward to crisis with delight?
2. Are the neighbors responsible for Mr. Shimerda's suicide? Why or why not? Are there limits to the amount and quality of help people are willing to offer one another? How does helping others affect their freedoms?
3. Why did the Shimerdas come to America? Why haven't they prepared for winter in Nebraska?
4. What religious and cultural differences are revealed with Mr. Shimerda's death?
5. How does Mr. Shimerda's death affect Ántonia's future? In what ways do the Shimerdas benefit from Mr. Shimerda's death?

## QUOTATIONS

1. "It was a matter of pride with them not to spare themselves. Yet they were the sort of men who never get on, somehow, or do anything but work hard for a dollar or two a day." (78)
  2. "All the way home grandmother and Jake talked about how easily good Christian people could forget they were their brothers' keepers." (87)
  3. "He made the sign of the cross over me, put on his cap and went off in the dark... grandfather looked at me searchingly. 'The prayers of all good people are good,' he said." (94)
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4. "All the time she say: 'America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.'" (96)
5. "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country." (103)
6. "School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm." (118)
7. "It took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather's to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts...." (128)

## BOOK 2: THE HIRED GIRLS

### CHAPTERS 1-10: BLACK HAWK AND ANOTHER KIND OF FREEDOM

The Burdens move from the farm to Black Hawk. *Ántonia* also turns from field labor to housekeeping, by taking a job in the town with the Harlings. Lena, Tiny, and *Ántonia* become fast friends, enjoying their freedom while helping their families with the money they earn. The dancing pavilion prompts Jim to explain the social order of Black Hawk and the differences in cultures of the native born and foreign born residents in regard to respectability and family solidarity. When Mr. Harling demands that *Ántonia* give up the dances, she goes to work for Wick Cutter rather than lose her freedom to choose for herself.

1. What advantages are available to the Burdens, especially Jim, in moving to Black Hawk? Are these same advantages available to *Ántonia*? What is Jim's place within Black Hawk's social structure?
2. What does *Ántonia* learn from the Harlings and the Burdens about family and parenting that she does not learn at home?
3. How does Tony's association with other hired girls affect her?
4. Consider the demographics of the county. What social and work ethic differences exist between native and foreign-born residents? How do these differences influence the gossip and the social order in Black Hawk?
5. Is Lena Lingard responsible for Ole and Mary Benson's behaviors? Explain.
6. What racial attitudes of Jim are revealed when d'Arnault comes to play piano?
7. Argue for either Mr. Harling or for *Ántonia* about whether she can continue to dance at the socials. What does *Ántonia*'s choice show about her idea of freedom?

### QUOTATIONS

1. "When she first came to this country...and had that genteel old man to watch over her, she was as pretty a girl as ever I saw....Things would have been very different with poor *Ántonia* if her father had lived." (141-42)
2. "I used to imagine that the 'nobles' of whom *Ántonia* was always talking probably looked very much like Christian Harling..." (145)
3. "'My God!' he says, 'so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was Americy.'" (159)

4. "But no matter in what straits the Pennsylvanian or Virginian found himself, he would not let his daughters go out into service. Unless his girls could teach a country school, they sat at home in poverty." (173)
5. "One result of this family solidarity was that the foreign farmers in our county were the first to become prosperous." (173)
6. "The country girls were considered a menace to the social order." (174)
7. "A girl like me has got to take her good times when she can." (179)

## CHAPTERS 11-15: THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

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Ántonia works for Wick Cutter, an unscrupulous money-lender and notorious lecher. She begins to sew fashionable clothes for herself and joins the hired girls at the Fireman's Hall. Meanwhile Jim, a senior in high school, rejects the company of the town girls for the hired girls and sneaks out to the dances. When he is caught, he promises his grandmother to give over his social life for an academic one, studying Latin and college material at home. Jim goes on a picnic with the hired girls where they reflect on homesickness and their future plans, as they watch the sun magnify a plow on the landscape. Trying to protect Ántonia, Jim ends up getting beaten by Cutter.

1. How does Tony's reputation potentially suffer from working for Wick Cutter?
2. In what ways does Jim's restlessness and discontent with Black Hawk foreshadow his leaving it behind?
3. When Frances Harling calls Jim a romantic, what predilection of Jim's is she referring to? Is he romantic only about the country girls?
4. What short-comings does Jim see in town girls as opposed to the hired girls?
5. Although readers hear about Jim's commencement speech, we do not hear it. List some of the things you think Jim would put in his speech and tell why.
6. What value do the hired girls place on education and on using language to express the best in us? What dreams do they nurture for their futures and what unfulfilled wishes do they express?
7. Why does Jim hate Ántonia and Cutter, when she was Cutter's potential victim?
8. List the avenues to homesickness revealed by Jim and the country girls. How do they cope with these feelings?
9. Discuss the importance of the plow as symbol as it is magnified by the sun.

## QUOTATIONS

1. "Wick Cutter was different from any other rascal I have ever known, but I have found Mrs. Cutters all over the world; sometimes founding new religions, sometimes being forcibly fed—easily recognizable, even when superficially tamed." (183)
  2. "I thought my oration very good. It stated with fervor a great many things I had lately discovered." (194)
  3. "It must make you happy, Jim, to have fine thoughts like that in your mind all the
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time, and to have words to put them in. I always wanted to go to school, you know.” (194)

4. “I have had no other success that pulled at my heartstrings like that one.” (195)
5. “...if I was put down there in the middle of the night, I could find my way all over that little town....I ain't never forgot my own country.” (200)
6. “But she was born smart—and look at how her father's trained her! He was something high up in the old country.” (202)
7. “On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun....There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.” (204)

### BOOK 3: LENA LINGARD

#### CHAPTERS 1-4 LEAVING HOME IN SEARCH OF SELF

While these chapters focus primarily on Jim's college years in Lincoln and on his time with Lena there, Jim's romantic leanings, entertainments, and studies of Virgil's poetry help him to define himself even though he is far away from home. Gaston Cleric teaches Jim Virgil's *Georgics* which enable Jim to understand his own past, people, and home place. Lena reports that Tony works at the Black Hawk hotel and dates Larry Donovan, whom Jim dislikes heartily. Lena and Jim lose themselves in theater and are transformed by the power of art. Lena explains why she will never marry when one of the men she knows proposes. Shortly thereafter, Jim accompanies Cleric to Harvard.

1. What happens to Jim when he begins his studies in Lincoln? How does he change?
2. Explain Cather's epigraph to the novel, given the further information about the *Georgics* in Chapter 2. How does Jim connect at once the plough of his former life and the pen of his present one?
3. Why does Cather/Jim choose to relay in detail the performances Lena and Jim attend in Lincoln? Why are these particular plays important, memorable, or effective in relation to *Ántonia* and to the wealthy gaiety of Jim's wife? What do the memories of these shows reveal about Jim?
4. Lena has been the subject of considerable gossip in Black Hawk because of Ole Benson and his wife. What does Lena's version of this story reveal about her and about the Benson's life as immigrants?
5. Earlier, Lena jokes that if she cannot go into business, she'll marry a rich gambler. Why now will she never marry? What does family mean to her?

#### QUOTATIONS

1. “While I was in the very act of yearning toward the new forms that Cleric brought up before me, my mind plunged away from me, and I suddenly found myself thinking of the places and people of my own infinitesimal past. They stood out strengthened and simplified now, like the image of the plough against the sun.” (216)

2. "It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry." (221)
3. "I don't want a husband....They begin to tell you what's sensible and what's foolish, and want you to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it, and be accountable to nobody." (234)

## ACTIVITIES

1. Research the types of dresses Lena might be designing for fashionable Lincoln ladies in the late 19th century. Show sketches, pictures, or models of some of these fashions.
2. Research the plays Jim tells about in these chapters and act out one scene from one of them. Why is Jim so impressed with these performances?

## BOOK 4: THE PIONEER WOMAN'S STORY CHAPTERS 1-4 WOMAN'S PLIGHT AND HOPE

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Jim reconnects with Ántonia, after forgiving her for her failed relationship with Donovan. Although much of the information about Ántonia is recalled from local gossips and friends, her plight is also compared with that of other hired girls, especially Tiny Soderball, who has become successful in a Seattle sailor's lodge, the Alaskan gold rush, and in San Francisco. Widow Steavens explains that Tony's marriage fell through and that she has a daughter. Tony looks "worked down," but strong. Jim promises to return but she reminds him that he'll always be with her in memory.

1. The story of Tiny Soderball's success is also the story of expansion West and the means by which people sought and earned their fortunes. List the methods of transportation Tiny uses to achieve her monetary success. How does her relationship with men and their needs for home comforts provide for her future? Is Tiny an entrepreneur or a conventional woman in providing "home" for sailors and miners? Is Tiny happy?
  2. Explain how Larry Donovan plans to scam the railroad to make money. What does this suggest about occupations available in the West?
  3. What does the photograph of Tony's baby suggest about her feelings for the child?
  4. What war is taking place that Charley Harling is on a battleship in the Caribbean?
  5. Explain the nature of Jim's affection for Ántonia and whether she reciprocates it. How does Jim's desire to have Ántonia be a part of his life relate to his own lack of a mother or sister growing up? Do you believe that this confession could foreshadow a romantic outcome for Jim and Ántonia?
  6. Whose story is "the pioneer woman's story"—Lena's, Tiny's, Ántonia's, the Harlings', or Widow Steavens'—all of whom have a part in the chapter? Select one person and defend that person as the primary reference for the title.
  7. How is the memory of Ántonia tied for Jim to friendship, love, home, and the earth/land itself?
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## QUOTATIONS

1. “Tiny Soderball was to lead the most adventurous life and to achieve the most solid worldly success.” (240)
2. “The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing....It was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea.” (245)
3. “I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind.... You really are a part of me.” (255)
4. “You’ll always remember me when you think about old times, won’t you? And I guess everybody thinks about old times, even the happiest people.” (255)

## ACTIVITIES

1. Research the Alaskan gold rush and compare it with other mining endeavors described in the book, including silver mining of Jake and Otto. How has mining affected the Westward movement in the United States?
2. Although *Ántonia*’s betrayal is nothing new, a number of women in this novel do achieve success beyond the role of wife and mother. List those women and chart how they earn their way in the world. How do their choices vary from *Ántonia*’s?

## BOOK 5: CUZAK’S BOYS

### CHAPTERS 1-3: RETURNING TO HOME AND SELF

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In this culminating book, Jim reclaims his roots in Nebraska and his friendship with *Ántonia*, adopting her family as his own. Jim notes the changes in both the land and his friend while simultaneously acknowledging what has remained very much intact and unchanged. In meeting *Ántonia*’s many children and her husband Cuzak, he acknowledges that she is suited to the land as he is to the world beyond it. She is his family and he plans future trips with her sons and husband. Although twenty years have passed, Jim finds that place and people reside within. Jim stumbles upon a piece of the first road from the farm to Black Hawk—now calling it the “road of Destiny” that connected him again with the past, with home, and with himself.

1. Why does Jim wait twenty years to visit *Ántonia*? What does he fear most? If Jim loves Nebraska, why does he choose to live in New York?
  2. Knowing from her childhood the difficulty of being unable to speak English, why doesn’t *Ántonia* teach her children English from an early age?
  3. While Jim is shocked to see *Ántonia* aged and battered, she also does not recognize him. Describe him as you think he must look, using the introduction to the book to ground you in his present life in New York.
  4. In what ways does the Cuzak farm reflect *Ántonia*’s love of Bohemia, as well as Nebraska? How has she imprinted her will on this soil? How does her family reflect what she has learned from her own loves and life?
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5. What lesson does the Cutter murder have for the Cuzaks and Jim?
6. Briefly summarize Cuzak's immigration story, both his hoped-for life and the one he leads. What does his story suggest about the lives of first-generation immigrants to America?
7. When Jim considers the differences in Ántonia and Anton's visions of the happy life and wonders if the "life that was right for one was ever right for two," how does his own marriage reflect this idea?
8. Why does Jim make plans to play with Ántonia's husband and children for years to come? What does the family provide him, and he them?
9. Who is the protagonist of the novel, Ántonia or Jim?
10. Read the final paragraph of the novel closely. List the themes that appear here and discuss whether this paragraph offers sufficient resolution to the novel. Since the novel's mission is to communicate the past, why does Jim say it is "incommunicable"? Does this paragraph suggest a belief in determinism? Is this an optimistic ending? Why or why not?

## QUOTATIONS

1. "In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again." (259)
2. "It was a shock, of course....As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished...." (261-262)
3. "If it hadn't been for what Mrs. Harling taught me, I expect I'd have brought them up like wild rabbits. No, I'm glad I had a chance to learn; but I'm thankful none of my daughters will ever have to work out. The trouble with me was, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved." (269)
4. "Ántonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time....to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last." (274)
5. "At first I near go crazy with lonesomeness,' he said frankly, 'but my woman is got such a warm heart. She always make it as good for me as she could. Now it ain't so bad; I can begin to have some fun with my boys, already!'" (283)
6. "As I wandered over those rough pastures, I had the good luck to stumble upon a bit of the first road that went from Black Hawk out to the north country.... Everywhere else it had been ploughed under...." (285)
7. "I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past." (286)

## AFTER READING ACTIVITIES

After reading the novel, students are ready to discuss the novel's themes in greater depth and to engage in activities which deepen their understanding. Ask students to refer to their journals, discussion notes, and lists from Pre-Reading and During Reading activities to create meaningful writings and research projects.

### I. RETHINKING INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

Return to the True/False Anticipation Guide and complete with students the after-reading portion of this exercise. Ask students to fold over their pre-reading answers. Then ask them to compare their later answers to note changes in attitude. As a class or in small groups, discuss those statements that shifted for Jim Burden during the novel and the factors that precipitated the changes. Which statements changed for students themselves? Ask students to select one statement which changed for them and free write about their change in attitude.

### II. DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

Use these questions for discussion, reader response, or short essay. Ask students to support their theories from the novel's text. Many of the During-Reading questions also make good prompts for writing.

1. Cather uses a man's point of view to tell a story about a woman. Why does Cather choose to frame the novel with an introduction by an unnamed narrator and to tell the story from Jim's point of view? Argue whether the narrator is male or female. What would be the effect of letting the narrator or Ántonia herself tell the whole story?
2. Are there villains in this novel? List them and why they are villains. There are accounts of dishonesty in the novel, of some people taking advantage of those new to the land. From Krajiek to Wick Cutter to Larry Donovan, what is the purpose of these characters in the novel? Are they the same kind of villain?
3. Who are the heroes of this novel? What makes them heroic?
4. Note that Virgil's *Georgics* is used both in the epigraph and within the novel as Jim embraces classical studies. How does the use of this poet and work inform the reader and Jim of the importance of both education/poetry and the people and land of home?

Discuss the importance of Lena Lingard's arrival and of Jim's decision to go far from home to complete his education in the light of Virgil's *Georgics* and the events of Book Three, Chapter One, in which the work appears in *My Ántonia*.

5. Agree or disagree that *My Ántonia* is the story of America. In what ways is it "The Pioneer Woman's Story" throughout? What pioneer values within the story are still prevalent in America?
6. From the outset of the novel, characters describe occupations and pursuits which will lead to upward mobility. List the jobs mentioned in the novel in a hierarchy based on which has the most to offer in terms of upward mobility. What businesses in Black Hawk mirror small town America at that time? Is social order determined by the amount of money a person has?

7. Within the farming community, the Burdens are more settled and successful than new immigrants, who are often dissatisfied when comparing their situation with their neighbors. Have students discuss these questions in small groups: By what criteria do the farmers and townspeople determine social order? Where do the Burdens and the immigrant farm girls fit into Black Hawk society? How do Ántonia and Jim define wealth as young people and as adults? List the characters and events that are shaped by economics (include Wick Cutter and Larry Donovan as well as Cuzak and immigrants). What does their journey teach them about valuing themselves and others? How does family solidarity affect immigrant prosperity? How does it affect social order in Black Hawk? If Ántonia has benefited from this principal, why doesn't she want her own daughters to work "out"? How has economic security affected gender issues in the novel?
8. Return to the quotations in the During Reading section. Ask students to select for response their favorite quotation, one that they feel is most pivotal to understanding the novel, and to discuss the theme this quotation helps to explain.

### III. GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS

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1. Post the themes, identified during Pre-reading discussion, on card stock or news print around the classroom where they are readable from any point. Then ask students to quietly select one of these themes to answer the question: What is this novel about? After selecting, they should be given 10 minutes to list reasons they feel their theme is the primary one. No talking during this time. At the end of the free writing time, ask students to stand next to the theme they are willing to defend. Give those students who are grouped beneath each theme ten more minutes to collaborate on their argument to the class as to the most compelling theme in the novel, then open the discussion so each group can defend its theme. Now is also a good time to ask students if there are other themes they would defend. The question of what a text is really "about" compels students to think in terms of themes. This same question can lead to excellent theses for papers.
  2. Write an introduction for the novel in Jim's voice instead of the unnamed narrator. What information would be lacking from the novel? Try to write the introduction as if it were written by Jim's wife? What meaning might she make of his memories? Have students read their opening paragraphs in small groups to one another. Select the best paragraphs to be performed by their writers or other students.
  3. Remind students of the artistic contexts discussed before their reading and ask them to create their own artistic representations of their most compelling scenes from *My Ántonia*. They should title their work, attach the inspiring quotation/ scene from the novel, and write a short explanation of their art. Have a class contest to determine which work becomes cover art.
  4. Jim uses his considerable powers of description to paint for readers the harshness and beauty of the prairie. Have students select one of the scenes and represent it visually, musically, or poetically.
  5. Ask students to select characters whose stories they find compelling and important to Jim's coming of age. Write a one-page monologue from this character's point of
-

view and prepare to perform this “story” for the class. They should introduce their scene with the reasons for their selection and how this person affects Jim’s story.

6. Cast a film version of the novel. Imagine the director/producer wants you to make recommendations on the actors and actresses. Include photos and descriptions of the stars and tell why each is “perfect” for the part. Write a letter convincing the producers of your selections.
7. Create a commercial for a film of the novel. Include no more than three scenes and craft the ad to make audiences want to see the film and to read the novel. The commercial should be no longer than 30 seconds.

#### IV. LITERARY THEORY PROJECT

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This project is designed to teach students to read literature using more than one critical approach. Most students will be aware of Reader Response theory, having been asked to write reader responses in the past; nevertheless, as a whole class, discuss this theory and its expectations before researching alternative critical approaches. In small groups, ask students to research one of the following literary theories: New Historicism, Feminism, Psychoanalytic Theory, and Postcolonial Studies. They should be able to explain this critical approach to classmates in easy-to-understand language. Then they should apply it to three or four key scenes in *My Antonia*, considering why Cather reveals the story as she does, what she wants readers to grasp of the complexities of her plot and characters, and what figurative means she employs to achieve this effect. Ask students to be guided by three questions: What important lesson is Cather teaching? What strategy does Cather use to make her point in this scene? What is the effect of what she does?

#### HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR CRITICAL THEORY STUDY:

Introduction to Modern Literary Theory <http://www.kristisiegel.com/theory.htm>  
(Excellent overview of multiple theories)

Postcolonial Studies. [www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/](http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/)

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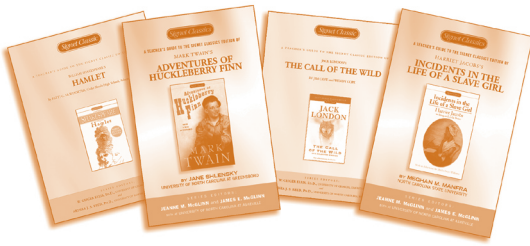
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