

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**My Ántonia**

by Willa Cather

Written by Leah Rodriguez

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## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss Cather's vivid imagery and descriptive language.
2. analyze how individual components of an episodic novel build a cohesive story.
3. examine the social and literary implications of a female author's using a male character as the narrator of this story.
4. analyze the ways in which setting—especially geographical features like landscape—helps to shape characters and plot.
5. discuss the various moral, societal, and elemental components of pioneer life during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
6. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
7. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. offer a close reading of *My Antonia* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What are some advantages and disadvantages of this story's episodic structure?
2. How do the immigrant girls who work in Black Hawk defy societal expectations? What effect does the immigrant girls' defiance have on Jim Burden's development as a character and his relationship with others?
3. How does Chapter XIV in Book II mark the beginning of a transition in the novel?
4. Why does Cather use Jim Burden as a narrator rather than a female character or *Antonia* herself?
5. In what ways does Willa Cather use Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball to suggest that marriage is not always beneficial or necessary for a woman?
6. To what extent does Cather intend the reader to agree that *Antonia* has lived a successful and fulfilling life?

# My *Antonia*

## Introduction

1. Cather prefaces the novel's Introduction with a line from Virgil's *Georgics*: "*Optima dies...prima fugit.*" What is the English translation of this line? What might Cather have intended by prefacing the novel with this epigraph?

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2. What do readers learn about Jim in the Introduction?

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3. What does *Antonia* represent to Jim and the narrator?

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4. What does Cather intend to achieve by beginning her novel this way? What can readers expect from the rest of the novel based on information given in the Introduction?

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5. What is the significance of Jim's adding "My" to the title "*Antonia*"?

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### Chapter 3

1. What do the changes in the landscape that Jim notices as he approaches the Shimerdas' homestead suggest about the family's chances of success?

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2. What is the nature of the Shimerdas' relationship with Krajiek?

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3. What is Mr. Shimerda's background? What might Jim's initial impression of him foreshadow about his success as a homesteader?

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4. Assess Jim's interaction with *Antonia* in this chapter. Using evidence from the text, what can the reader predict about their relationship?

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5. What does Mr. Shimerda's request at the end of the chapter reveal about him, *Antonia*, and Jim?

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### Chapter 13

1. What is the significance of grandmother's observation about poverty after Mrs. Shimerda's visit? Why does Cather place Mrs. Shimerda's visit immediately after Mr. Shimerda's?

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2. What does the tension between Jim and *Antonia* in this chapter reveal about Jim and his growth as a character?

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3. What two contrasting values does *Antonia*'s explanation of her family's decision to immigrate to the United States highlight? How has this novel already begun to explore their relative importance to success and happiness?

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4. Given the structure of this chapter, what might the snowstorm foreshadow?

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**Chapter 18**

1. What is the significance of the way Jim refers to the Shimerdas in the first sentence of this chapter?

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2. Describe the source of tension between the Burdens and the Shimerdas at the beginning of the chapter.

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3. How does the fight between Jake and Ambrosch expose Jim's latent prejudice? What else does Jim's reaction to the fight reveal about him?

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4. How does grandfather embody the Christian piety he preaches in this chapter?

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