

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

My Ántonia

by Willa Cather



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Objectives

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

1. infer the thoughts, ideas, and actions of the characters when they are not expressly stated.
2. define the term “legend” and discuss how the legend of the sunflowers illustrates the idea that the West provides people with the freedom to begin a new life.
3. discuss the following metaphors in the story and point out how they contribute to the reader’s understanding of the characters:
 - the prairie dog community as a metaphor for the Shimerda family.
 - the Indian circle as a metaphor for the cycle of life.
4. cite incidents from the novel to support or refute the presence of the following themes and concepts in this novel:
 - the role of pioneer women in helping settle the West has been understated
 - the influence of childhood experiences cannot be appreciated until adulthood
 - the power of nature to shape lives and the natural cycle of life
 - the importance of the immigrants in settling the West
 - preoccupation with the acquisition of material possessions frequently has negative effects
 - there is an uneasy relationship between artists and society, in which artists are often misunderstood and unappreciated
5. comment on the following symbols in the story:
 - the land as a symbol for freedom
 - *Antonia* as the epitome of the hardworking female pioneer
 - the plow as a symbol of arduous work and the pioneers’ struggle to tame nature
 - the fruit cave standing for the pioneers’ success
6. point out how the author’s love of the land is shown in her imagery and is a motif that runs through this work.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does Willa Cather's love for the land come through in this novel?
2. Describe how the Shimerda family is different from the Burden family in the following areas: food, language, religion, values, wealth, common sense.
3. In what ways are the Burdens good guardians for young Jim? How are they a problem for him?
4. Why do you think Jim and *Antonia* are never romantically involved?
5. What reasons does Lena give for not wanting to get married? How is her life in Lincoln and San Francisco similar to Frances Harling's life in *Black Hawk*?
6. What qualities does *Antonia* possess that make her a good mother? Support or argue against the following statement: *Antonia's* strength and endurance are symbols for the strength and endurance of the pioneers who settled the West.
7. Support the following statement with evidence from the text: Jim's feelings are often reflected in Cather's descriptions of nature.
8. Discuss the significance of the word "My" before *Antonia* in the title of this book.
9. Find examples of personification and simile in Cather's descriptions of nature.
10. Discuss how the land is considered a symbol of freedom for Jim, Peter, Pavel, and the other immigrants.
11. Read the description of the plow at the end of Chapter 14, Book II. What does the image of the plow silhouetted against the setting sun symbolize?
12. Many critics believe Chapter 14, Book II is a turning point in the story and in Jim's life. What happens in this chapter to make it significant?
13. Support the following statement: *Antonia's* children, who emerge from the fruit cave, are proof that she has lived a successful life.
14. Support or refute the following statement by referring to the novel: Willa Cather believes that marriage is not always good or necessary for women.
15. One of Cather's favorite themes is the relationship between artists and society. Which characters in the story are artists? How does being an artist affect the chances of a happy life?

BOOK I - The Shimerdas**Chapter I**

Vocabulary

bantering – good-humored, playful talk
desperado – an outlaw, a dangerous man
encumbered – weighed down, overloaded
jurisdiction – control, rule
sinister – menacing, threatening
undulating – smoothly rolling or waving

1. Briefly describe Jake Marpole. Why is Jim traveling with him to Nebraska?

2. What does Jim know about Antonia before they even meet?

3. Why is Jim fascinated with Otto Fuchs?

4. Many critics believe Cather's descriptions of the land reflect the feelings of the characters. How does the following quotation describing the land also describe Jim's feelings about his new life in Nebraska?

“There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating...I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.”

BOOK II - The Hired Girls

Chapter I

Vocabulary

compensation – payment for
loath – to hate; strongly dislike

1. Many critics believe the countryside is a symbol of freedom for Jim. Find a quotation in this first chapter supporting this view.

2. How do Jim and his family receive news about Antonia after they move to town?

3. Why does Jim’s grandmother decide to find work for Antonia with their town neighbors, the Harlings?

BOOK III - Lena Lingard

Chapter I

Vocabulary

anecdotes – short, often amusing stories
commodious – roomy
elliptical – roundabout, not coming to a point
incongruous – inappropriate, out-of-place
infinitesimal – extremely small
parsimonious – stingy, miserly
penance – payment
platitudes – wise sayings

1. Briefly identify Gaston Cleric.

2. Why does Jim say, “Although I admired scholarship so much in Cleric, I was not deceived about myself; I knew that I should never be a scholar”?

BOOK IV - The Pioneer Woman's Story

Chapter I

Vocabulary

pertly – lively
scrubby – rough, unrefined
spruce – [slang] well-dressed

1. Why do many people from Black Hawk refer to Antonia as “Poor Antonia”?

2. How do both Tiny and Lena make successful careers for themselves away from the farms?

3. What indication is there that, while she is materially successful, Tiny has lost her zest for life?

BOOK V - Cuzak's Boys

Chapter I

Vocabulary

capote – a bird's covering of feathers
disdainful – sneering
hollyhocks – large plants with flowers of various colors
immemorial – limitless
impertinent – rude, disrespectful
imploringly – pleadingly
jaunty – self-confident
saucy – sassy, disrespectful
solicitude – attentiveness, care
stalwart – robust, rugged

1. Why does Jim put off going to see Antonia every time he passes through Nebraska?

2. What is his reaction when he sees her for the first time after twenty years?

3. What does Antonia do as soon as she realizes it is Jim who is visiting her?
