



## ***My Ántonia*** **by Willa Cather**

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. This is Jim Burden's story, emphasized by his title "MY Ántonia." We know from this that this will be Jim's version of events, making him an unreliable narrator. Do we see evidence of this elsewhere in the story?
2. Cather discusses Virgil and the founding of Rome as we follow Jim to the University and his studies with Gaston Cleric. "*Primus ego in patriam mecum—deducam Musas*"; for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country." Gaston Cleric explains to Jim "that 'patria' here meant, not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born." Why is this important to Jim? Why is it important to Cather?
3. There is a great deal of symbolism at work in this novel. What are Cather's aims with these (and other) devices?
  - the snake at the dog town
  - the plow in the sunset
  - Coronado and the Seven Cities of Gold
  - the fruit cave
4. How is marriage portrayed in the novel? What do these portrayals suggest?
5. Some call Ántonia a heroic character; do you feel that she is? In what ways does she demonstrate that she is or is not a heroic figure in literature?
6. An entire book (of the novels five books) is named for Lena Lingard. Why? What is her importance to this story? In what ways can you compare Lena and Ántonia?
7. The novel gives readers an opportunity to reflect on values that cannot be easily measured, yet are essential to a life well-lived. "Universal assessments" are expressions by a character or the author that reflect their views of the world, such as when Mr. Ordinsky says, "... kindness of heart... is not understood in a place like this. The noblest qualities are ridiculed." Are there other examples of universal assessments in the novel? How does a character's outlook on the world affect their life?

8. The novel shows an unusual display of feminine strength through its characters Mrs. Harling, Grandmother Burden, *Ántonia*, Lena, Tiny, Frances Harling. What similarities and differences do you see among these figures?

9. *Ántonia* is representative of a great deal of the immigrant experience in Homestead-era Nebraska, but hers is not the only immigrant story in the novel. Which other characters show another side of the experience?

10. When Jim moves to town, he struggles with the social environment of Black Hawk. Why? What is disturbing to Jim? Where does Jim go against the grain of the social fabric of the town, and in what scenes does Jim reveal himself to be very much like the townspeople?

11. Why would Cather choose the epigraph “*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*” for the novel? Where does it appear in the novel?

12. In a 1915 interview, Cather commented, “No one without a good ear can write good fiction.” What particular passages in the novel show Cather’s “good ear” for language? How does capturing language change the mood and theme of the novel?

13. In 1995, Kathleen Norris wrote a new foreword for the book, saying “In many ways the world of *My Ántonia* is still with us, a neglected but significant part of America.” What relevance does the novel have today? What does it reveal to us about our collective past?

14. Jim states that “Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again.” How does this related to the novel as a whole?

15. The narrator of the introduction in *My Ántonia* is an unnamed speaker who knew Jim Burden in youth and meets him years later on the train. How do the details revealed in this prologue foreshadow the events of the rest of the novel? Cather rewrote the prologue in 1926; what did this accomplish? Does it change your reading of the novel?

16. Why would Cather choose a character like Jim, a corporate lawyer who left Nebraska and didn’t return for twenty years, to tell this frontier story? Is it a frontier story?

17. Just as the Nebraska landscape initially seems formless to Jim, his narrative begins in a seemingly unstructured way. Many early critics of the novel complained about its lack of structure and didn’t consider it a proper novel. The book has little in the way of a conventional plot, but it still forms a cohesive whole. What unifies the narrative? How does Cather bring the novel full circle, mirroring Jim’s observation, “What a little circle man’s experience is”?

18. Lee Isaac Chung’s 2021 film *Minari* is, he’s said in interviews, was inspired by *My Ántonia*. If you’ve watched that film, what are the similarities? Important differences?