My Antonia
Based on the novel by Willa Cather
Adapted by Allison Moore
Commissioned and Produced at Illusion Theater
Michael Robins, Bonnie Morris Producing Directors
Study Guide
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Illusion Theater’s Mission
Illusion Theater’s mission is to illuminate the illusions, myths, and realities of our times and to use the power of theater to catalyze personal and social change.

Illusion was founded in 1974 and presents its theatrical performances in the 8th floor Theater of the Hennepin Center for the Arts on the corner of 6th Street and Hennepin Avenue in the heart of downtown Minneapolis. Illusion has also created groundbreaking educational theater, which has been performed in every state of the country.
Since the beginning, Producing Directors Bonnie Morris and Michael Robins have created over 500 plays, developed thousands of artists, and generated several educational plays which work for social justice. Plays developed at Illusion have been produced in theaters throughout the world. Illusion’s work has catalyzed conversations in living rooms, kitchens, places of worship, coffee houses and boardrooms. The theater’s work has led to transformations in policy, in organizations, in students, in teachers, and in individuals.
For more information, visit www.illusiontheater.org

Allison Moore, the Playwright
Allison Moore is a producer, television writer, and playwright now based in Los Angeles. Her plays have been produced and performed all over the country, including at the Humana Festival, the O’Neill Playwrights Conference. She is the recipient of two Jerome Fellowships, two McKnight Advancement Grants and the Bush Artist Fellowship. She holds a BFA from Southern Methodist University and an MFA from the Iowa Playwrights Workshop. She has contributed her skills as a writer and producer for the show Incorporated on the SyFy Channel, and most recently has written and produced for Falling Water on USA Channel, and God Friended Me on CBS. The National Endowment funded the original script for My Antonia for the Arts.

Note from the Playwright:
I first read My Antonia in January 2014. I picked it up at the library and like Jim Burden and Cather herself I fell in love.
Cather’s novel is an American masterpiece, and adapting My Antonia for the stage is challenging. Novels and plays are fundamentally different. Plays require more streamlined action. There’s not a lot of room for reflection. And the time constraints of live performance also pose challenges. Many wonderful events from the novel had to conflate with other events or be left out all together.
The choices about what to include and what to leave out have been difficult. At times I’ve wished I were adapting a terrible book, because then I could make all the necessary changes without worrying that I was desecrating something beautiful. What an honor to have this amazing Company to embody Cather’s world. And what a gift it has been to immerse myself in the world of Cather's complex and utterly human characters.
What People Are Saying about Illusion Theater’s *My Antonia*

*There was nothing but land, not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.*” - Willa Cather

“My Antonia is the bold story of 1880’s European immigrants who came to the prairies of Nebraska in an attempt to make their American dreams come true. The story is told through the memories of narrator Jim Burden, who, after twenty years of living in the East, returns to his small prairie town to see Antonia, the Czech immigrant girl who shaped his understanding of life.”

“The story is wrapped up in an environment of the changing prairie created by the actors, set, and sound.”

“Cather's characters seem to leap off the page and into the reader's heart. Jim Burden, the narrator of the story, and Antonia Shimerda, the child of Bohemian immigrants become friends, and struggle to eke out a living and make their American dreams come true on Nebraska’s hardscrabble prairie.

“Playwright Allison Moore's stage adaptation of *My Antonia* drives this amazing journey. The script is abetted by Michael Robins’ direction, Roberta Carlson’s compositions, and a cast and crew that have somehow achieved the impossible -- compressing an episodic novel, never intended for the stage, into a one-and-a-half-hour drama whose very simplicity communicates the wide open spaces of Cather's beloved Nebraska and the deep human feeling of her characters.”

“Illusion's production "touched me to the core."

"You could hear a pin drop."

"Superb!"

"I love this book, and frankly, I couldn't imagine that anyone could translate Cather's novel into successful theater. Much to my surprise, I not only liked Illusion's *My Antonia*, I loved it."

"There are at least 25 characters in the book. I didn't think you could pull it off. At the curtain call, I saw that seven people brought this story to life. It's remarkable."

"I wept the entire 90 minutes."

"I felt every emotion - excitement, wonder, loneliness, loss, joy, regret, happiness. It was not only Antonia's story or Jim's story, it was my story."
My Antonia

Synopsis

The play begins as Jim Burden a 40-year-old successful railroad lawyer, travels west on a train from the Eastern Seaboard towards the Great Plains. As he heads west, he remembers his childhood friend, the young Bohemian immigrant girl Antonia, and as the train rumbles along, scenes from his childhood rush over him. The novel is the story of Jim and Antonia growing up together on the prairie. It is also the story of the people who influenced them, the people who settled the Nebraska Prairie, and the story of the land itself.

“Antonia...seemed to mean to us, the country, the conditions, and the whole adventure of our childhood.” (1)

The lawyer's first memory is when he is young Jim Burden, 10-years-old traveling on the train from Virginia towards Nebraska. Jim’s parents have died, so Jim is sent to live with his grandparents on their Homestead settlement. On the train to Nebraska, Jim meets Antonia. Antonia's family, her father Mr. Shimerda, her mother Mrs. Shimerda and her brother Ambrosch are coming from Eastern Europe to America to make a new life on the Great Plains. They were told in their home country that Nebraska was full of fertile soil and the land was inexpensive to purchase.

Antonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, was a refined man in the Old Country. He played violin, often playing at the weddings and celebrations of the aristocracy. He was a weaver of tapestries, he talked philosophy. Mr. Shimerda asks Jim to teach English to Antonia for which she proves to be a quick learner. Mr. Shimerda is ill equipped to make a life in the harsh climate of the wide-open plains of Nebraska. He tragically takes his own life.

After Antonia's father dies, Antonia can no longer attend school and believes that she must work twice as hard, “like a mans,” with her brother Ambrosch to build their homestead.

Jim and his grandparents move from their land out on the Divide into the town of Black Hawk, Nebraska. Antonia moves to town as well to work as a “hired girl” for one of the wealthier families in town, the Harlings.

Jim and Antonia experience the difference between how “the hired girls” are thought of in the town of Black Hawk compared to the young women who are the descendants of the original settlers of the town.

At the weekly dances, the young men and “the hired girls” of the town intermix. Jim, through his friendship with Antonia, becomes friends with other hired girls
in town, Lena and Tiny.

Jim graduates from high school and gives a speech at his high school graduation, then he leaves Black Hawk to go to the University in Lincoln. While Jim’s away, Antonia follows Larry Donovan, a railroad man, to Denver.

At the University in Lincoln, Jim’s gifted teacher, Gaston Cleric, teaches him the classic works of Dante, introducing Jim to Virgil and Beatrice. Lena Lingard, one of Antonia’s friends from Black Hawk, comes to Lincoln to set up her own shop as a dressmaker. Jim and Lena spend time together, Lena distracts Jim from his studies.

Jim’s teacher, Cleric, receives an invitation to teach at Harvard and invites Jim to come with him. Jim says goodbye to Lena, and then he returns to Black Hawk to tell Antonia about this opportunity to study at Harvard. When he arrives at the Shimerda Homestead, Antonia is holding her new baby girl, Martha. Larry Donovan got Antonia pregnant, then abandoned Antonia to go to Mexico. Antonia had to return home penniless and pregnant to her mother and the Shimerda Homestead.

When Antonia sees Jim, she expresses her happiness that Jim will be able to go east to study. Jim promises Antonia that he will be back. He leaves Nebraska to study with Cleric in Boston. Jim eventually marries a woman in Boston and becomes a railroad lawyer.

Now, as a 40-year-old man, returning on the train to Nebraska, Jim thinks about the people he left back home in Black Hawk, Nebraska. In the novel and the play, he returns to Black Hawk and visits Antonia. Not sure what to expect, he finds Antonia a vital hardy woman surrounded by her children on a flourishing farm.

Walking across the fields with Antonia, Jim wishes he could go back to when they were young children running through the prairie. Antonia responds with “Oh, no, Jim, think of what we would miss.” Jim says, “Why did I stay away so long?” to which Antonia replies, “Is no matter. You are here now.”
Willa Cather

Willa Cather was born in 1873 in Back Creek Valley, Virginia. Her ancestors had been Virginia farmers for three or four generations. They came originally from England, Wales, and Ireland; her maternal family had come from Wales. The first Cather in America had fought in the Revolutionary War. The Cather family settled in a large home in Virginia, it was named Willow Creek.

In 1873, Willa’s paternal Uncle George, Aunt Francis, Grandmother Caroline and Grandfather William traveled west to the Great Plains. They came to homestead on land known as the Divide, the land between the Republican River and Little Blue River in Nebraska.

Willa’s father, Charles Cather stayed back in Virginia, raising sheep. His family encouraged him to come west to visit the Cather family’s settlement in Nebraska.

When Charles Cather returned to Virginia, his sheep barn burned to the ground. Charles Cather took that as an omen and decided to move west to join his family’s settlement in Nebraska. In 1883, when Willa was nine years old, she, her father, her mother, her three siblings Roscoe, Douglass, and Jessica, and her maternal grandmother Rachel Boak moved to Webster County, Nebraska, the part of Nebraska called Catherton after Willa’s Uncle George.

Willa remembered the trip, the land was wide open, and it seemed to her to be all land and all sky, the wagon wheels hardly left a track through the red grass of the Great Plains.

"We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather’s homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself—
the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality...I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country, and I would have got on pretty well during that ride if it had not been for the larks. Every now and then one flew up and sang a few splendid notes and dropped down into the grass again. That reminded me of something—I don’t know what, but my one purpose in life just then was not to cry, and every time they did it, I thought I would go under.” (2)

In *My Antonia*, Willa Cather’s character, Jim Burden, describes his first experience of the prairie:

“I can remember exactly how the country looked to me as I walked beside my grandmother along the faint wagon-tracks on that early September morning. Perhaps the glide of long railway travel was still with me, for 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 kind of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping...” (3)

The Homestead Act of 1862 offered 160 acres to a head of household who would make a settlement, and then live five years on the land, and make improvements to the land. New immigrants from Bohemia, Russia, Poland, Germany, Denmark, France, Sweden, and Norway all came to the Great Plains to make a new place for themselves with the Homestead Act. They joined the Virginians and the Pennsylvanians who had arrived 10–15 years earlier. It was, in Cather's words-

“...a place where refugees from old, sad countries where given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range...It was over flat lands like this...that the larks sang and one’s heart sang there, too...it had nothing to do with words...” (4)

Later in 1885, Willa’s father moved off the prairie and into Red Cloud, where he set up a farm mortgage and insurance company. Red Cloud was on the Burlington Railroad Line. Nine trains came through Red Cloud each day. Even though it was a small prairie town, there were 2,500 inhabitants including immigrants from Bohemia, Denmark, Germany, Russia, and Sweden.
At the age of 11, Willa rode horseback and delivered mail to the farms around Red Cloud. She would listen to the stories, the language, and the experiences of her neighbors who had arrived from other countries to make a home on the Nebraska Prairies. Willa wrote that the Slavonic, Germanic, Scandinavian and Latin “spread across our bronze prairies like daubs of color on a painter’s palette.” (5)

Willa left Red Cloud when she was 17 to attend the State University in Lincoln. While a student, she wrote short stories for campus literary magazines and later wrote for the Lincoln Nebraska State Journal. She also wrote “A Passing Show” column for the Nebraska State Journal with scathing reviews of the theater and opera productions that traveled through Lincoln. She was paid $1.00 for each show she attended. Actors and actresses knew of the “Lady Critic” in Lincoln and dreaded playing there because of Cather’s sharp and pointed pen: “Poor companies tremble long before they get here…What would appear from the pen of that meat ax young girl of whom all of them had heard?” “…of Mr. Whiteside’s Leading Lady little need to be said, and that little is said in all charity and sympathy.” (6)

Willa graduated from the University in Lincoln and moved to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania in 1896 where she was offered a job on the Home Monthly, a small Pittsburg family magazine. She lived for 10 years in Pittsburg where she taught high school and wrote theater criticism for the Pittsburg Daily Leader. She met Isabelle McClung, the daughter of a wealthy judge. Isabelle invited Willa to live in the McClung house and Willa did for 5 years. Willa and Isabelle’s friendship lasted their entire lives. While in Pittsburg, Willa’s work was brought to the attention of S.S. McClure, the publisher of McClure’s magazine. Cather’s stories were published in McClure’s Magazine. S.S. McClure invited Willa to come work at the magazine and, in 1906, she moved to New York to work for McClure’s. Two years later, she became managing editor of the magazine and held that position for four years. In addition to her editorial duties, she ghost-wrote S.S. McClure’s autobiography.

McClure was a huge fan of Willa, but he did not encourage her own writing; he felt Cather’s true calling was in the magazine business.

While working at the magazine Willa met many of the men and women of letters whose work was published in McClure’s. One of the writers she met, Sarah Orne Jewett, was a Maine fiction writer who wanted Willa to leave the busy-ness of the magazine. Jewett had written about her land and the people she knew in The Country of Pointed Firs. Sarah Orne Jewett encouraged Willa to leave journalism, she encouraged her to write her own work.
An excerpt from Sarah Orne Jewett’s letter to Willa Cather:

“I cannot help saying what I think about your writing and its being hindered by such incessant, important, responsible work as you have in your hands right now. I do think it is impossible for you to work so hard and yet have your gifts mature as they should - when one's first working power has spent itself, nothing ever brings it back just the same...If you don't keep and guard and mature your force and, above all, have time and quiet to perfect your work, you will be writing things not much better than you did five years ago...Your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life and write from that to the world...you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all of humanity goes to make up. Otherwise what might be strength in a writer is only crudeness, and what be insight is only observation; sentiment falls to sentimentality — you can write about life, but never life itself. To work in silence and with all of one’s heart, that is the writer’s life; he is the only artist who must be solitary and yet needs the widest outlook upon the world.” (7)

Willa was being paid well by McClure’s, if she quit her job and devoted herself to writing, what would she live on? She also knew while she held the position of editor at McClure’s, she had little time to write her own work. Willa considered what Sarah Orne Jewett had written to her

“The six years I spent on McClure’s Magazine in an editorial capacity, I call work. It was during the six years...that I came to a definite idea about writing. In reading manuscripts submitted to me, I found that 95% of them were written for the sake of the writer - never for the sake of the material. The writer seemed to want to express his clever ideas, his wit, and his observations. Almost never did I find a manuscript that was written because the writer loved his subject so much he had to write about it....” (8)

Willa left McClure’s in 1912 when she was 39, and devoted herself to her writing. O Pioneers was published in 1913; Willa dedicated it to Sarah Orne Jewett. Song of the Lark was published in 1915. My Antonia was published in 1918 and has never been out of print.

“When a writer once begins to work with his own material he realizes that, no matter what his literary excursions may have been, he has been working with it from the beginning - by living it...In working with this material, he finds that he need have little to do with literary devices; he comes to depend more and more on something else - the thing by which our feet find the road home on a
dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day. This guide is not always with him, of course, he loses it and wanders, but when it is with him corresponds to what...is called the wisdom of intuition, as opposed to that of intellect.” (9)
Willie Cather/Jimmy Burden

“When I crossed the Missouri River coming into Nebraska the very smell of the soil tore me to pieces. I could not decide which was the real, and which the fake me. I almost decided to settle down on a quarter section of land and let my writing go. My deepest affection was not for other people and the other places I had been writing about. I loved the country where I had been a kid, where they called me Willie Cather.” (10)

As a young tomboy, Willa cut her hair short, signed her name William Cather and wore boy’s clothes. Cather drew on many of her own childhood memories when she wrote My Antonia, choosing Jim Burden to be her voice. “I concluded that I would write from the point of a detached observer because that was what I had always been. Much of what I knew about Annie came from the talks I had with young men. She had an answer for them and they used to be with her whenever they could. They had to manage it on the sly because she was only a hired girl. But many respected and admired her and she meant a good deal to some of them so I decided to make my observer a young man. (11)

In the novel, Jim Burden’s parents have died, and he travels on a train to Nebraska. Here is how he describes this land in the novel as Jake and Otto drive him in a wagon to the Homestead:

“They’re seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. 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. I had never looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it...between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out.”(12)

Willa dedicated the book My Antonia to her childhood friends - “To Carrie and Irene Miner - In memory of affections old and true.” The Miner sisters grew up in Red Cloud with Willa. Their family ran the Miner Brothers’ store. Mrs. Harling in My Antonia is based on their mother, Mrs. Miner, Carrie and her sister are the Harling girls –Frances and Nina. Once, Carrie Miner asked Willa Cather about a detailed anecdote that Willa had written about her mother, “Willie, what a strange thing to remember? Where do you store such things? Cather replied, “Why, when I was writing it, it came right out of the ink bottle.”
Willa told a reporter:

“The ideas for all my novels have come from things that happened around Red Cloud when I was a child. I was all over the country then, on foot, on horseback, and in our farm wagons. My nose went poking into nearly everything. It happened that my mind was constructed of the particular purpose of absorbing impressions and retaining them. I always intended to write, and there were certain persons I studied. I seldom had much idea of the plot or the other characters but I used my eyes and ears.”(13)

Annie Sadilek Pavelka: the Inspiration for Antonia

The girl Antonia is based on Willa Cather’s real childhood friend, Annie Sadilek Pavelka. When Annie was 11, she arrived in Red Cloud with her Bohemian family to homestead a property on the Plains. Willa said “She was a Bohemian girl who was good to me when I was a child. I saw a great deal of her from the time I was 8 until I was 12.” (14)

Annie’s father, Francis Sadilek, a violin player and a refined man, found making a homestead on the harsh plains of the prairie too much; he took his own life. Later, Annie came to work for the Miners as “a hired girl” and became a favorite of Mrs. Miner, just as Antonia becomes a favorite of Mrs. Harling. Willa, like Jim, spoke at her high school graduation, her speech was titled “Superstition versus Investigation.” In this speech she spoke of how important scientific investigation is – “it is the hope of our age.” Willa had studied biology, she had planned to study medicine at college and become a doctor. As a high school student, she signed her name as “Wm Cather MD.” Her speech was a scolding to the townsfolk who criticized her for doing medical experiments, including vivisections on toads and frogs. All of Red Cloud was horrified that a young girl would do such things to animals.
Annie’s Family

Annie Sadilek, like Antonia, followed a railroad man, James William Murphy to Denver, he deserted her. She returned home pregnant, had her baby, and continued to work on the family’s land. Later, Annie did marry another Czech immigrant named John Pavelka and together they had twelve children.

Willa Cather returned often to Red Cloud, she visited with Annie and her family. Willa wrote that the lives of the Pavelkas and their neighbors seemed to her like stories out of a book, a book that went on “year after year, like War and Peace.”

“No child with a spark of generosity could have kept from throwing her heart and soul into the fight these people were making to master the language, to master the soil, to hold their land and get ahead in the world. Those friendships...still count immensely for her; and she says she could never find time to be bored in that community where the life of every family was like that of Swiss Family Robinson. Lighting and hail and prairie fires and droughts and blizzards were always threatening to extinguish this family or that.”(15)

Willa wrote that Annie

“was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, the love of people and in her willingness to take pains.” (16)

Willa wrote of the women of the prairie:

“The farmer’s wife, who raise a large family and cooks for them and makes their clothes and keeps house...and thoroughly enjoys doing it all and doing it well, contributes more to art than all of the culture clubs.” (17)

"There was the material in My Ántonia for a lurid melodrama. But I decided that in writing it I would dwell very lightly on those things that a novelist would ordinarily emphasize, and make up my story of the little, every-day happenings and occurrences that form the greatest part of everyone’s life and happiness.”(18)
Willa in Lincoln

Willa, like Jim, had studied Latin in Red Cloud then continued to study Latin in college. In Lincoln she had several gifted teachers. One of them Ebenezer Hunt submitted a paper she had written on the Scottish author Thomas Carlyle to the Nebraska State Journal and it was published. The Journal published other articles of hers; she wrote for two student literary magazines; then edited her class yearbook. The teacher in the play, Gaston Cleric, is based on Willa’s actual teacher in Lincoln, Herbert Bates,

In *My Antonia*, Jim returns to Black Hawk to meet Antonia and her children. Antonia has saved a box of photos, one is a photo of Jim right at the moment when he was leaving Black Hawk to go away to college. In the novel, Jim describes himself in this photograph as “a tall youth in striped trousers and a straw hat trying to look easy and jaunty.”(19)

There is a photograph of Willa just before she leaves Red Cloud to go to college in Lincoln in a jaunty straw hat.

In *My Antonia*, Jim and Lena attend the theater and opera in Lincoln. Willa, while at the University in Lincoln, wrote the column “A Passing Show.” Several actors protested that this “Lady Critic” never liked anything. Willa replied, “This season I have praised 14 companies and damned only 15!” (20)
Nebraska

As Jim Burden, now a successful railroad lawyer travels back to Black Hawk, Nebraska, he remembers his childhood:

“Before the land was fenced, and the highways surveyed, before the sea of red grass that covered the plain was plowed under and under. Before automobiles and society dinners, a fashionable address in New York, a so-called illustrious career. Even before I knew the pleasure of a pleasant evening spent in the theater. It’s been twenty years since I left Black Hawk...in the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I have not wished to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities and better than anything that can happen to you again.” (21)

Willa, like Jim, had a lifelong attachment to Nebraska, the Divide she grew up on, the prairie, the rivers, and the trees. She wrote:

“It’s a queer thing about the flat country - it takes hold of you, or it leaves you perfectly cold. A great many people find it dull and monotonous; they like a church steeple, an old mill, a waterfall, and a country all touched up and furnished like a German Christmas card. I go everywhere; I admire all kinds of country. I’ve tried to live in France. But when I strike the open plains, something happens. I’m home. I breathe differently. That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea - it’s the grand passion of my life. I tried for years to get over it. I’ve stopped trying. It’s incurable.” (22)
My Antonia Performance Style

What makes a play unique from a movie or a written text? How is the presentation of *My Antonia* enhanced by these differences?

**Actors play more than one character**
Each of the actors, except for the actor playing Antonia, play more than one character. For instance, the Narrator, the older Jim Burden, also plays Mr. Shimerda and Gaston Cleric.

Asking actors to play more than one part stretches both the actors’ abilities and the imagination of the audience. The actors in *My Antonia* transform from one character to another, sometimes right before our eyes, creating tension or excitement. This is a theatrical technique that has been used for centuries.

In the case of *My Antonia*, this technique adds extra layers of meaning to the play. We get the sense that Jim, as the narrator, is really stepping back into his memories of Mr. Shimerda and Gaston Cleric. We are also reminded as an audience that his perception and his remembering are probably different than the character we would see if Antonia was playing her father.

There is also the sense that, when Jim becomes himself again, he is taking a piece of the other characters with him. He has allowed his memories of these men to influence what he has become.

**The Set is transformational**
Dean Holzman’s set design for *My Antonia* is impressive in many ways. The novel and the play celebrate the wide-open spaces of the Great Plains, something that is much easier to describe than it is to depict on the narrow confines of a stage. It also moves episodically, from one place to another, and Holzman did not want to slow the feelings evoked by the story with large and clumsy set changes.

Holzman’s intention was to make the audience experience the vastness of the prairie and the simplicity of life on the land. It can be difficult to know when less is more, and for this play Holzman made choices to evoke the prairie and ask the audience to use their imagination to “furnish” the various places of the play.

Cather wrote that she did not like the “over furnished novel” She described this as “a novel crowded with physical sensations is no less a catalogue than one

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crowded with furniture...How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window...leave the scene bare for the play of emotions...”

(23) Holzman gave himself the challenge to not “over furnish” the set for this adaptation of Antonia.

The set is constructed of several platforms, which can be re-arranged to create different settings. Over the course of the play, they become a train platform, wagons carrying Antonia and Jim out to their homesteads on the Nebraska plains, the roof of the Harling’s house, an archway at the High School, and the bridge over a stream, to name just a few. Like the acting ensemble who transform to become all the characters in the play, Holzman limited the number of platforms and then turned them on their end, reused them in different ways to create the worlds of My Antonia.

**Music and Set Work together**

Robert Carlson, who composed the music for *My Antonia*, worked closely with Holzman to provide carefully chosen musical phrases to help identify the places that the platforms would represent. “In this way,” said Holzman, “both the composer and the set designer are inviting the audience’s imagination to be a participant in the creation of the places where the play unfolds.”

In addition, there are projections on the back wall of the stage showing images from the actual town of Red Cloud, Nebraska where Willa Cather grew up. All of this allows the audience to experience the wide open spaces of the play as well as the very specific places Cather places the action.
Interview with Allison Moore

Illusion’s Producing Director Bonnie Morris interviews playwright Allison Moore as Illusion Theater readies her new adaptation of Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*

**Bonnie:**
Well, let’s start with Willa Cather's books. Did you read Willa Cather in school?

**Allison:**
No. Never.

**Bonnie:**
Had you read *My Antonia*?

**Allison:**
Yes. It was the winter of 2004 and I was in the Walker branch library, in the stacks here in Minneapolis. I had heard of Willa Cather and for whatever reason I pulled *My Antonia* off the shelf and I just loved it. I recommended it to everyone, “It’s one of the best books I’ve ever read.” And almost no one I recommended it to had read it.

**Bonnie:**
When Professor Toni McNaron came to talk with the Antonia Company about Willa Cather, she talked about how well known Cather had been in her lifetime. She won the Pulitzer Prize, her books sold well, and *My Antonia* has never been out of print. Cather was lionized between World War I and World War II. Later in the world of American Letters, Hemingway’s style and work came to be celebrated and the esteem for Cather's work waned. Professor McNaron said that Cather was “de-canonized.”

**Allison:**
Well, I was surprised that so few of my friends and colleagues knew Cather's work. I wanted everyone I knew to read her.

**Bonnie:**
So, let's get to when Michael asked you to work on an adaptation.

**Allison:**
It was after a reading of my play *End Times* here at Illusion. Michael asked if I might be interested in working with Illusion to adapt *My Antonia.* I remembered I gushed to him about how much I loved the book. Michael said, “Take another look at it and let’s talk about how we might approach adapting it.” I read it again in one sitting.
**Bonnie:**
Really, how did you do that?

**Allison:**
I was coming back from teaching in South Carolina. I had a layover and the plane was delayed for 3 1/2 hours. I began reading it on the plane, continued through the layover and the delay, and then got back on the plane and finished it as we were descending into Minneapolis. The last twenty or thirty pages I was just weeping, tears streaming down my face. It was a great way to read it, to just let the book wash over me.

**Bonnie:**
Cather would have loved that you fell absolutely, completely under her spell.

**Allison:**
I thought, “If I can read this in six hours, it could happen in the theater in two hours.”

**Bonnie:**
What’s the difference between adapting a work and generating your own play?

**Allison:**
It's so different. What is good is that I’m not responsible for thinking up the characters, the plot. Usually in a first draft, I'm exploring the characters, coming from an intuitive place. In this, I am using the craft part of my brain more. Now at this point in the process, I am working with all the technical stuff, the time it takes for the transitions between Cather’s episodic scenes.

**Bonnie:**
Talk about some of the challenges in adapting Cather’s book.

**Allison:**
I’ve told people I wish I was adapting a terrible book; it would be so much easier.

**Bonnie:**
This is a huge undertaking, and it doesn’t have an easy structure to adapt.

**Allison:**
Exactly. The book doesn’t have a simple, single plot driving it. We're taught in school that plays should have rising action that comes to a climax. *My Antonia* is episodic, and things don’t come together and pay off in the way that we've
come to expect. In graduate school, we discussed this idea of feminine dramaturgy or alternative dramaturgy, which doesn't operate in the mode of the traditional idea of a well-made play, and is less reliant on conflict. Cather's work is like that, but it's challenging. Conflict is very useful in the theater. The book has a style I have never seen before.

**Bonnie:**
Willa wrote about *My Antonia*. She wrote that she wasn't writing a melodrama or anything sentimental. She wrote about the difference between her book and the way other books are structured. She wanted the story to be “the other side of the rug, the pattern that is not supposed to count.” There would be “no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, and no struggle for success. I knew I would ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern. I just used it the way I thought was absolutely true.” (24)

**Allison:**
The book has a style I had never seen before.

**Bonnie:**
What were some of the things about her writing that particularly resonated for you?

**Allison:**
I am a transplant here in Minnesota. Reading her book, I thought, “Oh, this is where I live.” In her words I could find some of the beauty in the landscape where I now live. Also, the sense of Jim's struggle of wanting to be with Antonia, and wanting to stay in this landscape, and yet ultimately knowing that he couldn't live the life he wanted to live in Nebraska. Jim is displaced from his home. His ambivalence rings so deeply for me. The way into the novel for me was through Jim's struggle. Where do I make a life? Where do I make my home? And where will I make my life if it's not in my home? In America, so many of us have so many choices about how we make our lives. I grew up in San Antonio, Texas. I live very far from my family and where I grew up. Whenever I go back, there's always a moment when I think, “God, I want to move home.”

**Bonnie:**
Her language about the prairie, the sky, and the weather is so lush..

**Allison:**
Cather writes so gorgeously about landscape. My family took lots of car trips west from Texas into the Southwest That landscape - that amazing flatness - it's elemental, like the way the mountains are elemental. You feel your own smallness. You feel that the world is big and mysterious out there. Cather
evokes the landscape so beautifully. There is a sense of freedom in the landscape that is amazing.

Coming from Texas, it's not been easy learning how to live in Minnesota, especially the winters. Cather's language about winter is beautiful. It’s never sentimental; she doesn’t shy away from the horrors of winter. But it’s given me an appreciation for the changed landscape of winter.

“Winter comes savagely over a little prairie town. The Wind sweeps in from the open country and the streets become desolate. In winter the hunger for color comes over you intensely, like a craving.” (25)

Bonnie:
In the story that Antonia tells about the tramp who is working the saw and then he throws himself into the thresher and kills himself, I love the line that Antonia has “Why would anyone want to kill themselves in the summer?”(26)

Allison:
Right. It’s not that Antonia can’t imagine someone killing themselves, because she can. She understands that. Her father killed himself. But not in summer!

Bonnie:
I love the scenes you wrote for Jim and Antonia.

Allison:
Creating those scenes has been the most fun. Cather didn't write a lot of dialog in the book between the two of them. In the book, Jim narrates, so he remembers and tells what Antonia said, but he doesn't report what he said. I've had to come up with what they say to each other.

“Antonia: Name? What name?

Jim: Tree.

Antonia: What name?

Jim: Um, Grass

Antonia: Um grass.

Jim: No, just grass.

Antonia: Grass."from Allison's adaptation of My Antonia
**Bonnie:**
What has been hard?

**Allison:**
Trying to tell such an episodic story that takes place over thirty years. It’s a lot of scenes. The script used to be 50% transitions, now it’s maybe 35% transitions. One of the things we’re finding is that the scenes between Jim and Antonia are so grounded that when we try to put in all those wonderful scenes in the book that are less central to the Antonia and Jim story, they don’t seem to hold. It’s a moral dilemma. As this theater piece begins to form itself, are we desecrating Cather’s book by leaving so much out? Are we ruining something that’s already perfect, a work of art?

**Bonnie:**
You came up with a device, Jim’s magic lantern, which transports us back into his memory, when he was young in Nebraska, with his childhood friend, his Antonia.

**Allison:**
When we first started the workshop of the piece, one of the ideas we were batting around was to structure it as a one-man show, with Jim telling the story. So I was thinking about ways to evoke some of the images of the prairie. Cather has lots of references to shadows in the book, so I was toying with ways to use shadow imagery—which is very theatrical. Around the same time, I started reading *Remembrance of Things Past*, and in the very first section of the book, there’s a description of a magic lantern. It fits so perfectly with the period, and seems to evoke some of the feeling of Jim’s memories, I decided to use it.

**Bonnie:**
You have two actors play Jim Burden, one the Narrator and one Jim, the young boy. How did you determine that two Jims would be in the play?

**Allison:**
In the first workshop where we worked on the material I knew my way into Cather’s novel was through Jim’s struggle to be in both places - in Nebraska and yet not in Nebraska. Jim the narrator is Jim at 40 years old, a successful Railroad Lawyer, married, living in New York. In the book, Antonia starts off as a young girl of 14 and Jim is 10. Imagining a 40-year-old actor playing himself as a young boy alongside a girl who’s supposed to be older than he is would be unsuccessful and potentially creepy. Cather created a frame to tell her story, so I felt I could have a frame to tell the story theatrically.
Bonnie:
The scene at the end of the play when Jim says to Antonia “All I have to do is close my eyes and I’m ten years old again, running through the grass with you...I wish we could go back!” Jim still wants to return to the time and place when he was a boy and Antonia was his best friend. He is so holding on to those memories.

Allison:
And she says, “Oh, no, Jim. Think of everything we would have missed.” She has not missed out on one thing in her life. Antonia knew that she couldn’t have had a marriage with Jim. She possesses this immense self-knowledge. The book is so powerful for me emotionally; I want to create an approach that allows that core emotional truth that Cather has written so beautifully to come through.
My Antonia - Study Questions

Middle School Age Questions:

1. Why do you think the book is called My Antonia?

2. My Antonia is the story of the friendship with Jim Burden and Antonia. The first time Jim meets Antonia, she is speaking the only words she knows in English, we go Black Hawk. Remember the first time you heard a foreign language. What do you remember? Why do you think it’s important to Mr. Shimerda that his daughter learn English?

3. Antonia discovers a small grasshopper on the prairie and then takes it home with her to make a warm place for it to survive. Think of a time when you looked out for something, some animal or creature, when you took care of something smaller than yourself.

4. Compare the hardships Antonia’s family faced, with the hardships Jim Burden’s family faced. How do you think the hardships Antonia and Jim struggled with changed them?

5. Ask the students to bring Pictures to Life. Divide into groups, then ask each group to make a statue of the Picture, then ask them to bring the Picture to Life. Some ideas for the Pictures:

   1) The spirited Immigrant Girl on the Nebraska Plains
   2) The boy, the Virginian, Jim Burden on the Nebraska Plains
      “There was nothing but land, not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.”
   3) The Girl burying her Father in a lonely place on the plains.
   4) The Boy leaving his small town saying goodbye Antonia to go to the University of Nebraska in Lincoln
   5) The Girl eloping with a shiftless railway conductor, becoming pregnant and having to return to the small town, being abandoned by the railroad man
   6) The Girl with her gentle Farmer husband surrounded by lots of rambunctious children
   7) The Two meeting again on the land, the Girl surrounded by her children, the Boy, now a man who graduated from Harvard who works as a railroad lawyer.
6. Think of a person in your past or now in your present-- who made an impact on you. It could be a childhood friend, a grandparent, a teacher, a neighbor. Remember three or four memories or moments that you shared with this person, write them in your journal.

**High School Age Questions:**

1. "If there were no girls like Lena or Tony there would be no poetry." (27) What does the narrator mean by this statement, i.e., what does “poetry” suggest to you and how do Lena and Tony exemplify it?”

2. As Antonia and Jim Burden grow up, the land around them changes as well. The efforts of the Swedes, the Norwegians, the Bohemians, and the Danish settlers, as well as the Pennsylvanians and Virginian homesteaders, were successful in transforming that hard scrabble soil into rich loamy earth which eventually would yield large crops of corn and wheat. The railroad brought the world to Black Hawk and the young people from Black Hawk took the train to go further west, as well as back east. The town and the people of Black Hawk prospered.

"It brings me back to the burning summers, when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when you’re practically buried in corn and wheat. Back before the land was fenced, and the highways surveyed, before the sea of red grass that covered the plain was plowed under and under. Before automobiles and society dinners, before a fashionable address in New York." (28)

How does Cather interweave the changes in Antonia and Jim and the changes in the Nebraska prairie? How does this contribute to the power of the story?

Think of a place that you love to be in or visit, describe what you love about a landscape or a town, or a season.

3. Antonia and Jim watch a thunder storm approach on Jim’s grandparents’ roof. Antonia talks about how much she loves summer and how she wishes that her father could have lived to experience a Nebraska summer. Jim asks, “Why aren’t you always nice like this ..like yourself? Antonia replies” Things will be easy for you .but they will be hard for us.” Think of a time when things were either:
   Easier for you ?
   Or
   Harder for you? Explain why.
4. *My Antonia* has been described as episode-driven, rather than plot driven. Willa wrote about her book:

“There was the material in My Ántonia for a lurid melodrama. But I decided that in writing it I would dwell very lightly on those things that a novelist would ordinarily emphasize, and make up my story of the little, every-day happenings and occurrences that form the greatest part of everyone’s life and happiness.”

“My Antonia for instance is just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in the story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success, I knew I’d ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern. I just used it the way I thought ABSOLUTELY TRUE.” (29)

How do you think this way of telling the story enhances your experience of the story? What would have happened, for instance, if Jim had not been the narrator?

5. Pick one of the women or the men in the play and pretend you are her or him. Speak to the group the way you think she would talk. Do not speak “about” the character but “as” the character. (e.g. Antonia: “I like dancing. I don’t care what some of the stodgy townspeople say. Let them talk. No one can tell me not to dance.”)

6. The Hired Girls. *In the novel, Jim Burden says* “I thought the altitude of the townspeople toward these girls was stupid. If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard’s grandfather was a clergyman and much-respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn’t speak English...The Black Hawk boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls and living in a brand new little house with the best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand painted china that must not be used.....the county girls were a menace to the social order* (30)

What does Jim think about the way the Immigrant girls are treated in Black Hawk?

What role are current “new immigrants” (e.g. Somalis, Latinos, or Hmong) playing in the social structure of our community? Pick an observation Cather makes about immigrant families that might ring true to the current social structure of our own communities.
Book Club/Reading Group Discussion Questions:
(Please feel free to also discuss all above questions)

1. Willa draws on many of her own real life experiences in writing My Antonia, but she chooses to make the narrator a man, Jim Burden. Discuss how this choice affects your experience of the novel.

2. Consider the quote “I had searched for books telling me about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, the heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil and I did not find them. And so, I wrote…” (31) 
I will be the first to bring the Muse to my country.” Gaston Cleric encourages Jim to write what he knows. How does Cleric’s encouragement of Jim parallel with Willa Cather herself bringing the Muse to her country. Cather is the first to tell the stories of the immigrants who made a home on the Great Plains.

What knowledge do you possess about a place or a people where you could share your insights, where you might be the first “to bring the Muse to my country.” Write about a person, place or country that you know about.

3. Willa put at the beginning of My Antonia, an epigraph (an epigraph is defined as a quotation set at the beginning of a literary work to suggest its theme.) The epigraph in My Antonia is Virgil’s phrase: “Optima die…prima fugit.” It is Latin and means “The best days are the first to flee.” Describe how this epigraph fits Jim Burden. Does it fit Antonia? Why or why not?

4. Because of her writings about Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona Willa became known as a Western writer. H. L. Mencken wrote about My Antonia: “I know of no novel that makes the remote folk of the western prairies more real than My Antonia…and I know of none that makes them seem better worth knowing…” (32)

Find passages where Cather's imagery and language make us see the poetry of the Great Plains.

5. Think about the quote,
“I remember her hands. How strong, and warm and good they were. How many kind things they did for me. And I carry her face with me always. The closest, realest face, under all the shadows of all women’s faces, at the very bottom of my memory.” (33)

What is a memory that you carry with you at the very bottom of your memory?
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**Other Resources**

**The Cather Collection**
University of Nebraska Lincoln [http://cather.unl.edu](http://cather.unl.edu)

**Willa Cather Foundation**
www.willacather.org