



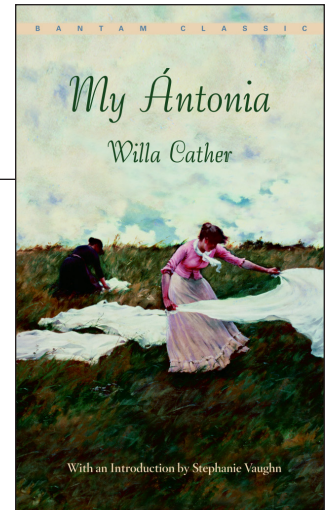
My Ántonia

by Willa Cather

Bantam Classics | MM | 978-0-553-21418-5 | 288pp. | \$4.95/\$6.95 Can.

Also available as an eBook, trade paperback, and hardcover.

Reading Level: 7.6



about this book

about this guide

Written in 1918, *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather is a novel of America's great expansion westward, the immigrants' journey, and the ideal of Manifest Destiny. This teacher's guide uses the various literary and historical themes of the book to help develop critical thinking in the classroom. Although there are many themes to teach from *My Ántonia*, this guide will focus on nostalgia, perspective, Manifest Destiny, and the undertone of religion.

When teaching about America's great expansion westward and the taming of the land, teachers may want to combine textbook work with a novel such as *My Ántonia*. The novel can also be taught alongside other novels of the time period, including *The Ox-Bow Incident* by Walter Van Tilburg Clark. This allows students to discover varying perspectives, themes, and content from an interdisciplinary perspective by yielding greater depth and understanding of the challenges and mindset of Westward Expansion.

The discussion and writing section of this guide divides *My Ántonia* into reading assignments approximately 30 pages in length based on theme. It also provides a brief plot summary and questions for use in classroom discussion and writing. *My Ántonia* is divided into an introduction and five books with shorter chapters within those books.

teaching ideas

note to teachers: Combining novels in the classroom offers students a chance to explore topics in greater depth. It also allows students to make connections, think critically, and create hypotheses. The following ideas can be used for teaching *My Ántonia* and *The Ox-Bow Incident* using interdisciplinary group work, research, and writing, or experiential learning techniques.

book groups.

Divide the class into two groups—one for each novel. Each student would be assigned a specific task to perform in order for the group to function effectively, for example: reader, note taker, presenter, energizer, etc. A specific question or aim for the day would serve as the focus for the day's lesson. For example, focus on a specific theme central to both novels (the role of the pioneer, expansion, time period, character relationships, and religion). Questions of the day may include: How is justice best served? How do characters tame an unsettled land? The groups would determine how their novel interprets the theme. To assess group work and share learned information, students should present their findings to the other book teams.

interdisciplinary research.

Pose the following question to students: Did law and religion bring order to the West at the end of the 1800s? Students can research the historical concepts of the novels, such as Manifest Destiny and Habeas Corpus, by using historical and literary evidence.

character analysis.

Characters in both novels react to the taming of the West in varying degrees. Have students create a scale of characters from most radical to most conservative. Then, have students compare and contrast the role of the characters in the novel. For example, Jim Burden and Mr. Davies or Ambrosch and Tetley could be compared and contrasted. Students should use evidence and quotes from the novel to defend their case.

the authors.

Are the authors' portrayals of Western America in the late 1800s accurate? Have students research the biography of the authors of *My Ántonia* and *The Ox-Bow Incident* and compare their lives to photographs, news articles, and stories about life during that time period. Have students develop a thesis and answer the question posed using historical and literary evidence.

artistic.

Have students choose a pivotal moment in either novel and draw it. Students should write a reflection on why they thought that the selected moment was pivotal to the novel. Post the illustrations around the room.

scene depiction.

Have students create a scene using the characters from the two novels together. The original scene could be based in the American West at the end of the 1800s or students could use a certain moment from either novel. For example, how would the grandfather from *My Ántonia* convince Tetley not to lynch the three suspects in *The Ox-Bow Incident*? This would work best as a group activity. Have students act it out!

→ discussion and writing

reading assignments

reading assignment #1 – Introduction

My Ántonia's introduction is written in an unidentified first-person voice. The author introduces the narrator of the novel, Jim Burden, and later disappears from the novel. Jim Burden's story is a manuscript of his memories of the Bohemian immigrant, Ántonia Shimerda.

questions:

Theme—Author's Perspective, Emergence and Disappearance of Characters: Who could be the author of the introduction? How does the introduction foreshadow the events, the mood, and the tone of the novel? Why do you think Willa Cather chose to begin her novel in an unidentified first-person voice?

reading assignment #2 – Book 1: The Shimerdas—Chapters I, II, III

At the start of the novel, Jim Burden is moving to his grandparents' farm near Black Hawk, Nebraska as a result of his parents' death. Once there, Jim learns that a new family of Bohemian immigrants, the Shimerdas, had moved into a home near Black Hawk. The Shimerdas' journey to their new home was difficult: they were cheated out of money upon purchasing their new farm, inhibited by language barriers, and struggled against the hardships of being new immigrants in a strange and untamed land.

questions:

Theme—Perspective: Compare and contrast Jim Burden's move out west with the Shimerda's move. How would the voice of the book differ if Mr. Shimerda, Jake, Ántonia, or the grandmother wrote the first few chapters?

reading assignment #3 – Book 1: The Shimerdas—Chapters IV, V, VI, VII, VIII

The untamed land of Nebraska is difficult for the new immigrant family, and Mr. Shimerda encounters great hardships. Mr. Shimerda's hopes brighten when he meets two Ukrainian friends,

Peter and Pavel. The two Russian immigrants escaped the Ukraine and came to the United States after a tragic evening when an entire wedding party was overtaken by wolves. Also, in these chapters, Ántonia and Jim Burden's relationship blossoms and develops around one of varying roles—age, gender, strength, language, and origin.

questions:

Theme—Nostalgia, Perspective: What hardships does Mr. Shimerda face? How do Peter and Pavel help to lighten his depression? How does the story of Peter and Pavel in the Ukraine affect their new lives in the United States? What are the various factors that affect Jim and Ántonia's relationship? How do the other characters' experiences change/affect their perspective on gender, age, education, language, and origin?

reading assignment #4 — Book I: The Shimerdas—Chapters IX, X, XI, XII, XIII

In this section, two major concepts are in focus: religion and hardship. The Shimerdas are struggling during their first winter in Nebraska's countryside while the Burdens are enjoying a snowy and comfortable Christmas in the same region. The Shimerda's living conditions, food supply, and mental and physical health are in jeopardy. As a result, the Burdens take care of them. The Shimerdas, Catholics, and the Burdens, Protestants, find that differences in religion are overridden by the goodness of people.

questions:

Theme—Religion: How does religion play a part in setting the tone of *My Ántonia*? Do religious differences divide or unite the Shimerdas and the Burdens? How do the hardships that the Shimerdas face during their first country winter and the family's strong faith in religion connect?

reading assignment #5 — Book I: The Shimerdas—Chapters XIV, XV, XVI

During these few chapters, Mr. Shimerda commits suicide, and this act sets in place the defining moment of the novel. It is believed that Mr. Shimerda died of homesickness. Religion plays a heavy role during these chapters as the characters of the book discuss various options in how to bury and conduct the funeral of a suicide victim. It is decided by Mrs. Shimerda that Mr. Shimerda would be buried at a point where roads converge.

questions:

Theme—Religion, Nostalgia: How does religion determine the proper way to bury Mr. Shimerda and how does the country determine what is proper? Why is it significant that Mr. Shimerda is buried at a crossroads? How do the grandfather and Mrs. Shimerda have different views on the significance of being buried at a crossroads?

reading assignment #6 — Book I: The Shimerdas—Chapters XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX

The death of Mr. Shimerda transforms Ántonia's role in the family. In Jim Burden's view, her possibilities for education and "appropriate" work for a young woman are now limited. Ántonia's relationship with Jim becomes fragile as he sees her succumb to Ambrosch's (her brother) and Mrs. Shimerda's desires for Ántonia's life. Ántonia becomes hardened as a result of the difficult farm labor and breaking of sod.

Questions:

Theme—Perspective: How does hardship change a person? How does Ántonia change once her father dies? How about the Shimerda family? Are Jim's transformed feelings for Ántonia justified? Why or why not?

reading assignment #7 — Book II: The Hired Girls—Chapters I, II, III

As Jim's grandparents age, the Burdens move to the city of Black Hawk to escape the hardships of the farm and country life. The Burdens make an arrangement to bring Ántonia to Black Hawk as hired help of the Harlings, who live next door. This arrangement allows Ántonia to escape the hardships of the farm, the lowly expectations of her family, and to develop skills in housework. These chapters are filled with happiness and comfort, and during this time, the reader experiences the budding of Ántonia and Jim's relationship.

questions:

Theme—Perspective, Appearance and Disappearance: *My Ántonia* focuses on the right thing to do. Ántonia does what the Burdens feel is proper and right. How would the voice of these chapters change if Ántonia were writing the novel instead of Jim? *My Ántonia* is also a novel where numerous characters appear and disappear. In the midst of chapters of contentment, how do the appearance and disappearance of characters lend to the characters' joy and/or grief?

reading assignment #8 — Book II: The Hired Girls—Chapters IV, V, VI, VII, VIII

Lena Lingard, the beautiful daughter of Norwegian immigrants, moves from the country to Black Hawk and visits Ántonia and the Harlings. Lena has been hired to assist in dressmaking. Many stories surround Lena concerning her immoral and promiscuous nature. These chapters of *My Ántonia* are also the climax of joy; dancing, music, parties, and stories of visitors inhabit their lives.

questions:

Theme—Author's Perspective, Appearance and Disappearance: What does Lena's character resemble or signify? How do the entry and disappearance of characters of joy and gaiety affect the mood of the novel? What might characters such as Samson symbolize? Does any gloom exist among the gaiety of Black Hawk? Explain.

reading assignment #9 — Book II: The Hired Girls—Chapters IX, X, XI, XII

Country girls who come to town in order to earn money to send to their families on the farm come to be known as hired girls. This act allows their younger siblings to earn an education while the older girls learn a trade. There is tension between the townspeople and the hired girls; farm life emboldens and strengthens the hired girls' demeanor. The hired girls also spend time going to dance clubs at night to meet boys. Ántonia, now a hired girl, gets into trouble at a dance club one evening, and she is asked to leave the Harlings. As a result, she moves to the dysfunctional home of the Cutters. The hired girls become close friends of Jim, and they convince him that he has incredible intellectual and professional potential, but Jim continues to enjoy the evenings at the dances as much as the girls do.

questions:

Theme—Perspective: What is a hired girl? Why might the townspeople dislike them? Why might an immigrant or a foreigner be disliked? Compare and contrast the Harlings' and the Cutters' home life. How do the gender roles differ between Mr. and Mrs. Harling and Mr. and Mrs. Cutter?

reading assignment #10 — Book II: The Hired Girls—Chapters XIII, XIV, XV

The last chapters of *The Hired Girls* are filled with feelings of nostalgia as Jim and Ántonia reminisce about Ántonia's father, the old country, and their younger years. Jim tells Ántonia that he is certain that Ántonia's father's spirit went back to Bohemia after his death. Jim graduates high school and prepares to go to college. In his commencement address, Jim discusses his emotional successes and dedicates the speech to Ántonia's father.

questions:

Theme—Nostalgia: Jim's commencement address focuses on feelings of nostalgia and emotional success after the death of Ántonia's father. What is emotional success? Why do you think that the event was an emotional success for Jim Burden? How do feelings of nostalgia affect the characters of Jim and Ántonia and their relationship with each other? Is memory a reliable source of the past? How do memories mold and shape us?

reading assignment #11 — Book III: Lena Lingard—Chapters I, II, III, IV

Jim goes to Lincoln College in Nebraska and opens his mind to new ideas. Lena Lingard moves to Lincoln and visits Jim. Lena and Jim spend much time together discovering the arts and as a result, become close. Jim and Lena finally part because they realize that it is not healthy for them to be in contact.

questions:

Theme—Author's Perspective: A whole book is dedicated to Lena Lingard yet the book is entitled *My Ántonia*. Is *My Ántonia* a book about Ántonia? Why/why not? What might the author's intentions be in dedicating a book to Lena Lingard?

reading assignment #12 — Book IV: The Pioneer Woman's Story—Chapters I, II, III, IV

Jim hears disturbing news about Ántonia. She has given birth to a child, out of wedlock, by Larry Donovan, a crook who left Ántonia to raise the child alone. As a result, Ántonia moves back to her home in the country to raise the child. Jim goes to the country to visit Ántonia. Again, Ántonia and Jim exude feelings of nostalgia as they discuss her father and his grave. Jim and Ántonia discuss the differences in their character and decide that although they must be apart, they will always be a part of each other. This is the last time that Jim and Ántonia see each other for twenty years.

questions:

Theme—Nostalgia, Author's Perspective: Why do you think that this book is entitled the *Pioneer*

Woman's Story? Why would the author choose to have Ántonia's father recalled whenever Jim and Ántonia meet?

reading assignment #13 — Book V: Cuzak's Boys—Chapters I, II

Twenty years later, Jim visits Ántonia. After many years of hardships and eleven children, Ántonia becomes a battered woman physically, but she is still the same fiery woman inside. The last book conjures up the many memories of the past, through reminiscing and photographs. Ántonia's children are named after characters of the previous chapters. Ántonia closes the book as the backbone of her family, embodying the spirit of her family.

questions:

Theme—Nostalgia, Appearance and Disappearance of Characters: The novel *My Ántonia* is filled with many symbols—roads, paths, nostalgia, and the appearance and disappearance of many characters. What do these concepts symbolize? How do the characteristics of Ántonia's children resemble Ántonia, Jim, and/or the book? What characters do not disappear at all from the book? Why?

→ suggested activities

activities

interdisciplinary activity.

The main historical attribute of *My Ántonia* is the subtle presence of the concept of Manifest Destiny. (It is recommended to teach the concept of Manifest Destiny before beginning this project.) To introduce an interdisciplinary project on Manifest Destiny, teachers may want to place the following quote on the board and ask students to respond in writing:

“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.” (Book V, Chapter III)

You may ask students to respond literally to this quote. After completing this introductory assignment, have students find evidence of Manifest Destiny throughout the novel by finding one quote relating to the concept. These can be found through religious references and discussion of motivation behind Westward Expansion. They should quote the reference and page number. Have students write the quote on a piece of large paper. Place the quotes as artifacts around the classroom. Have students walk around the room and react to the quotes silently and in writing. After this is completed, have students discuss as a whole or in groups what they found during their walking tour of quotes.

character analysis.

Have students build a family tree of the numerous characters in the novel—starting with Ántonia and Jim or the Burdens, Shimerdas, and/or Harlings. Students should write next to the characters' names a short description that defines the role of the characters in the novel.

creative writing exercise.

Have students choose someone in their lives—past or present—who has made a large impact on them. Have students make a spider's web map of 3-5 indelible moments/memories of the person that they have selected. Have students choose one of the memories of that person and tell the story of that person in writing. For more advanced writers, have students focus on varying themes that are present in *My Ántonia* as a base for their story.

→ vocabulary

freemasonry — *n.*, natural fellowship based on some common experience

suffrage — *n.*, the right of voting

missionary — *n.*, a person undertaking the work of a religious organization to propagate its faith or carry on humanitarian work

sod — *n.*, the grass and forb-covered surface of the ground

Bohemian — *n.*, a native or inhabitant of Bohemia

tether — *n.*, the limit of one's strength or resources

mutton — *n.*, the flesh of a mature sheep used for food

tallow — *n.*, the white nearly tasteless solid rendered fat of cattle and sheep used chiefly in soap, candles, and lubricants

corral — *n.*, a pen or enclosure for confining or capturing livestock

Providence — *n.*, God conceived as the power sustaining and guiding human destiny (This term is important in introducing the concept of Manifest Destiny.)

provisions — *n.*, a stock of needed materials or supplies

squall — *v.*, to cry out raucously

intercessor — *n.*, prayer, petition, or entreaty in favor of another

Prussia — *n.*, historical region - North Germany bordering on Baltic Sea

cholera — *n.*, any of several diseases of humans and domestic animals usually marked by severe gastrointestinal symptoms

Sacrament — *n.*, a Christian rite (as baptism or the Eucharist) that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and that is held to be a means of divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality

homestead — *n.*, a tract of land acquired from U.S. public lands by filing a record and living on and cultivating the tract

prospect — *v.*, to explore an area especially for mineral deposits

— about this guide's writer

OPHIR LEHAVY is a graduate of Teachers' College, Columbia University, with a Masters degree in Education and is a former NYC high school teacher. Her greatest joy in the classroom was creating innovative projects and assessments to energize her students.