

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS—CAFETERIA PLAN: CHOOSE YOUR OWN SET OF QUESTIONS

### *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather

If you prefer to compile your own unique set of questions to achieve the best responses in your situation, the following discussion questions may be of help. The questions are divided into categories. Some of the questions may be appropriate for student writing topics as well.

#### General

What is the importance of the Introduction? What do you think it adds to the narrative?

Do you feel that Jim's adding the word "MY" to the title is significant? Why?

One of the most compelling scenes in the opening pages of the book is the arrival in Nebraska of the immigrant Shimerdas and the arrival of Jim after the death of his parents. In what ways are Jim's and Ántonia's plight/situations the same?

When Jim kills the snake in Grandma Burden's garden, what is Ántonia's response? Do you think this incident is important? Why?

In what ways is the snake episode and Wick Cutter's attack similar?

Some readers have felt that Cather romanticizes the past rather than portraying it realistically. Do you feel that is so? What in the novel do you feel supports your position?

Choose the most horrific moment described in the novel and the most beautiful moment described in the novel. How do these two moments contrast with one another?

Consider all of the violent episodes in this novel. What strategies does Cather use to mitigate the impact of all this violence?

Jim Burden makes four significant geographic moves in the novel. What are they, why is each significant, and which has the most impact on him? (Argue from the text.)

Much of "the Shimerdas" section is a struggle against cold. Where is cold evident? Give examples of this struggle.

The novel creates sharp contrasts between moments of great happiness and moments of deep sadness, grief, and loss. In your opinion, what brings greatest happiness to Ántonia and Jim at different times in their lives?

"Jake and Otto served us to the last . . . Those two fellows had been faithful to us through sun and storm, and had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world" is how Jim describes their departure. Find other examples in the novel of things that cannot be purchased, packaged, or sold.

The novel is concerned with the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of success. Do you think these two pursuits are one and the same in *My Ántonia*? Compare the achievements of Ántonia and the achievements of Tiny Soderball. How does Jim judge what it means to be "rich"?

*My Ántonia* contrasts characters who stay rooted to the land with those who emigrate or travel. By the end of the novel, who seems more rooted in Nebraska, Jim or Ántonia? Why is this ironic?

Cather describes the plow "within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. . . . [and the plow sank] back into its own littleness somewhere on the prairie." How does this visual image of the plow become an important symbol in the novel?

### **Character**

Which of the novel's women have close relationships with Jim, and how do their relationships with him differ? Do these differences tell us more about the women or more about Jim?

From among the characters in the novel you consider to be good, decent, and appealing, choose one and describe his/her greatest character flaw. Similarly, from among the characters in the novel you consider to be bad, indecent, and unappealing, choose one and describe his/her greatest personal strength.

Who is the most interesting minor character in the novel to you and why?

What kind of man is Mr. Shimerda? Why did he take his own life?

How would you characterize Mrs. Shimerda? What do you think of her?

Under what circumstances do any of the characters feel most obliterated, marginalized, disregarded, or small? Under what circumstances do they seem to feel fulfilled, to blossom, to feel good about their place in the world?

What is Jim's work--and his marriage--like? What significance does this have to the story he tells?

What are Jim Burden's characteristics; that is, what is he like? What do you think of him?

What parallels--or contrasts--are there between the life of Jim and the life of Ántonia?

What are Ántonia's strengths? In what ways is she, as many readers have called her, "heroic"?

What role do you feel Lena Lingard plays in the novel--after all, one of the five books is named for her?

Compare Lena and Antonia according to their views on life, their lifestyles, and their successes and failures.

How is Jim's good-bye to Antonia after she has had her first baby both beautiful and cruel? Examine the text in this scene carefully to support your answer.

What does the final section suggest about the kind of relationship Jim has with Antonia?

*My Antonia* gives readers the opportunity to reflect on values that cannot be easily measured, yet are essential to a life well lived. The entire novel might be seen as Jim's own journey to discover what these values are. For example, in Book III, section iv, Lena Lingard's landlord, Mr. Ordinsky, tells Jim "'kindness of heart . . . [is] not understood in a place like this. The noblest qualities are ridiculed.'" In your opinion, what contributes to Jim's understanding of "the noblest qualities"? How does Antonia help Jim reach this understanding?

Antonia is a realistic character in the initial sections of the novel, but as we move away from her in later sections, she becomes a romantic figure, a symbol. Where does she seem real? Where romantic? What does she finally seem to symbolize?

### **Strong Women Figures**

Grandmother Burden is described as "a strong woman, of unusual endurance" in the early pages of Book I. Compare the different portraits of feminine strength and endurance in this novel. For example, compare Antonia, Mrs. Harling, and Grandmother Burden. What similarities and what differences do you see when you compare and contrast these three characters?

### **Immigration**

America's waves of immigrants have been greeted with varying degrees of welcome or hostility, more welcome to the degree that they were similar to those already here, more hostile if they differed in significant respects (e.g., color, nationality, habits). How does the novel reflect this?

Just about 20 years before Cather began *My Antonia*, the Statue of Liberty (with its inscription from Emma Lazarus' poem) was erected. It received enough attention in the public media to say that it was on "America's mind." Can you find any evidence in the novel that it was on Cather's mind?

*My Antonia* illustrates how immigrants, within one generation, can be as successful or more successful than Americans whose ancestors have lived in this country for many generations and who may have taken their blessings for granted. Choose one immigrant from the novel and show how that character made choices that would be viewed as daring by the standards of any era.

In Book II, Jim moves from the country into the town of Black Hawk. Here he discovers a prevailing attitude about immigrants, "All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English." Instead of seeing the immigrant "hired girls" as inferior, Jim sees them as far superior to the other young people of Black Hawk. Why?

What does Jim despise in the townspeople? Where does he reveal himself to be very much like them?

How does the novel address the promise and price of immigration?

### **Cultural Diversity**

Where does Cather contrast Catholic and Protestant rituals? How do religious differences explain cultural misunderstandings?

The black pianist Blind d'Arnault is portrayed as having an instinctive gift for music. Compare this portrait of d'Arnault with the assumptions made about other ethnic groups in the novel.

How would the novel have been different if Grandpa Burden had sat down with Mr. Shimerda occasionally to "talk"? If the neighbors had asked Mr. Shimerda to play his violin? If Mr. Harling had sent Ántonia to school along with his own children? Do the answers to these questions suggest problems that still exist in our society today?

### **Themes**

Why do you think Cather chose the epigraph "*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*" for the novel? Where does it appear in the novel itself?

### **Personal Response**

Name four or five people in the novel that a person such as you might reasonably be imagined to work for; tell which you would have most liked to work for and least liked to work for and why.

If you were to write a story today, similar to *My Ántonia*, how would the people, places, and circumstances have to change in order to bring them up to date?

In your family, or in your experience, are there any similarities to the incidents, events, characters, or situation in the novel?

### **Style**

In a 1915 interview, Cather commented, "No one without a good ear can write good fiction." What particular passages in show Cather's "good ear" for the sound of language? Discuss how and why these passages capture the moods and themes of the novel.