

My Ántonia Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Willa Cather chose to open the novel with the simultaneous arrival of Jim and the Shimerda family in Nebraska?
 2. When Jim arrives in Nebraska, he sees "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." [11-12] Yet at the novel's end that landscape is differentiated. It has direction and color--red grass, blue sky, dun-shaded bluffs. We are reminded of the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and of God's parting of the heavens from the earth. To what extent is *My Ántonia* an American Genesis? What are its agents of creation and differentiation?
 3. Grandmother Burden is described as "a strong woman, of unusual endurance" early in the story. Compare the different portraits of feminine strength and endurance in this novel: Ántonia, Mrs. Harling and Grandmother Burden. What similarities and what differences do you see when you compare and contrast these three characters?
 4. From their first meeting, when Jim begins to teach Ántonia English, he serves as her instructor and occasional guardian. Yet he also seems in awe of Ántonia. What is it that makes her superior to him? What does she possess that Jim doesn't? What makes her difference so desirable?
 5. 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?
 6. *My Ántonia* 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. Lena Lingard's landlord, Mr. Ordinsky, tells Jim, "kindness of heart...[is] not understood in a place like this. The noblest qualities are ridiculed." [Book III] In your opinion, what contributes to Jim's understanding of "the noblest qualities"? How does Ántonia help Jim reach this understanding?
 7. 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 achievement of Ántonia and the achievements of Tiny Soderball. How does Jim judge what it means to be "rich"?
 8. *My Ántonia* contrasts characters who stay rooted to the land and those who emigrate or travel. By the end of the novel, who seems more rooted in Nebraska, Jim or Ántonia? Why?
 9. Although *My Ántonia* is elegiac in its tone, it is also notable for its striking realism about gender and culture. Not only does the novel have a female 'heroine' who prevails in spite of male betrayal and abuse (and two secondary female characters who prosper without ever marrying), it also portrays the early frontier as a multicultural quilt in which Bohemians, Swedes, Austrians, and a blind African-American retain their ethnic identities without dissolving in the American melting pot. Significantly, at the novel's end Ántonia has reverted to speaking Bohemian with her husband and children. How important are these themes to the novel's overall vision? Do they accurately reflect the history of the western frontier?
 10. How does the novel address the promise and price of immigration?
 11. Why does Jim add "my" to the title of his manuscript and why do you think Cather chose a man to tell the story? In your estimation, who is the protagonist, Ántonia or Jim?
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