

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY GROUPS

My Ántonia by Willa Cather

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?

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.)

"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"?

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?

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 role do you feel Lena Lingard plays in the novel--after all, one of the five books is named for her? Compare Lena and Ántonia according to their views on life, their lifestyles, and their successes and failures.

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

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?

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

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?

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

Jim says that this was "not a country at all, but the materials out of which countries are made." The novel introduces the "materials out of which countries are made." What are these "materials"? Do the materials include more than just the land? Are these the materials out of which Nebraska was made? America? The world?