

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

My Ántonia by Willa Cather

This set of questions would also be appropriate for a parent/child discussion group. The session could be broken into four parts: 1) speaker [15 min], 2) break for cookies, 3) break into small discussion groups [of no more than 10-12 each—a student discussion leader is suggested], 4) return to large group to report on interesting findings of each group.

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?

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?

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?

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 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.

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. 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 *Ántonia* help Jim reach this understanding?

Ántonia 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?

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 *Ántonia*, Mrs. Harling, and Grandmother Burden. What similarities and what differences do you see when you compare and contrast these three characters?

My Ántonia 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 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?

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

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.

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?