

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

My Antonia

by

Willa Cather

Book Information

Willa Cather, My Antonia
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Book Level: 6.9
Interest Level: UG

In this portrait of a pioneer woman, the strengths and passions of America's early settlers are memorably rendered.

Topics: History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; Places, Farms; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; U.S. States/Regions, Nebraska

Main Characters

Ambrosch Shimerda the eldest son of the family; unfriendly, especially to outsiders
Antonia Shimerda a Bohemian immigrant girl who embodies the prairie spirit
Grandfather Burden a wise, soft-spoken man who helps the Shimerdas more than they realize
Grandmother Burden Jim's kind grandmother, with whom he comes to live in Nebraska
Jim Burden a boy of romantic disposition who comes to a Nebraska prairie town as a boy and befriends a vivacious immigrant girl
Lena Lingard an immigrant girl who is both misunderstood and ahead of her time
Mr. Shimerda the father of the immigrant family, who was ill-prepared to undertake the life of a pioneer
Mrs. Shimerda the bitter, jealous mother of the Bohemian immigrant family
Otto Fuchs the Burdens' hired man whom Jim finds fascinating
Peter Krajiek a disagreeable Bohemian who sold the Shimerdas their homestead

Vocabulary

aigrette a plume or decorative tuft for the head
anarchist one who believes in the absence of government or law and order

Synopsis

Young Jim Burden travels by train from Virginia to the Nebraska prairie home of his grandparents. Also on the train west is the family of Bohemians named Shimerda. When he arrives at his destination, he finds that the Shimerdas are his neighbors. From the comfort and relative wealth of his grandparents' home, Jim watches the family struggle to make their way in their new country. He is immediately drawn to the daughter, Antonia, with whom he finds a kindred spirit. The Shimerda family ekes out a life from their dugout house, without much help from their dreamy musician father. The Burdens' and Shimerdas' lives are intertwined in ways both good and bad. As the children grow up, Jim sees Antonia change more than he would like her to, and like it or not, he changes too. After he goes away to school, he loses touch with Antonia, but rekindles a friendship with another immigrant girl, Lena Lingard, who is both similar to and very different from Antonia. Life comes full circle when Jim is reunited with Antonia, and he sees the kind of woman she has become.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

When Jim begins reminiscing about his first days in Nebraska, he remembers lying under the sun in the garden. He says, "I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be." What did he mean by this?

He knew his life there would be different from anything he had known before. He understood the power the prairie held and that many things in Nebraska were dependent upon nature. He felt the land was a sort of religion, and he felt rather insignificant among the rolling miles of grass.

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Literary Analysis

How were the Shimerda and the Burden families different? How were they the same?

The obvious difference is that the Shimerdas were immigrants and had a hard time adjusting to living in Nebraska. They seemed rough and unrefined compared to Jim's family. They did not emphasize education or manners, but they worked hard trying to get ahead. Both patriarchs were religious, and both men loved their families.

Inferential Comprehension

The author uses the Latin phrase, "Optima dies ... prima fugit," several times in the book. Translated, this means "the best days are the first to flee." How does this apply to Jim?

Jim looks back on those days as the best of his life. He remembers his childhood with the greatest affection, and he became melancholy as he grew older and lost his youthful innocence.

Constructing Meaning

Antonia once told Jim things would be easier for her if she lived the way he and his family did. Why?

She had to work as hard as a man did in order to successfully develop their family's land. She was bright and wanted to go to school, but she was needed in the fields and chose to work hard. The land was important to her; it was the measure of success for immigrant families.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting: The setting plays an important part in the story. The prairie brings the diverse people of the story together. The author even refers to it as "a kind of freemasonry." The Freemasons are a secret society with their own rituals and ceremonies. Write about rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and celebrations that are unique to your hometown. Describe an event and tell why the event is celebrated in your area, its history and relevance to your community.

Understanding Characterization: Antonia is a richly developed character who has a strong sense of family. If she would have had same the opportunities that were afforded to Jim, her life might have been quite different. Write a story about what would have happened to Antonia if she had lived with the Burdens without the influence of the Shimerdas. Or, write how her life would have been different if her father had not died.

Understanding the Main Idea: The main idea of the book deals with life on the Nebraska prairie near the turn of the century. Compounding the hard life for the Shimerdas was their immigrant status, which put them at a disadvantage. People today are still struggling to make a good life for their families; some are disadvantaged because of their race, gender, education, or financial status. Think of someone who has had to struggle to make ends meet or get ahead. Describe the problems the person had to overcome. What would have made the person's struggle easier?

Understanding Literary Features: The author's tone seems to be romantic and slightly melancholy. Willa Cather was born in Virginia and moved to Nebraska as a child. It is understandable that she felt a certain nostalgia for the prairie. Write about a place for which you feel a certain longing. Possibilities may include your old hometown, a vacation spot, or even your old house or school. Describe it in loving detail, and remember to make the reader see what it is that makes you miss it. Do the same for a person you miss.