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### SYNOPSIS

**Introduction** After a chance meeting on a train ride across Iowa with childhood friend Jim Burden, Willa Cather learns that Jim, a New York attorney, is writing a portfolio of memories about their mutual acquaintance, Antonia Shimerda Cuzak. Months later around 1910, he brings the portfolio to her apartment and alters the title from "Antonia" to "My Antonia." He seems satisfied with the change.

**Book One, Part I** Ten-year-old orphan Jim Burden and Jake Marpole, a farm worker, travel from Virginia to Jim's grandparents' home near Black Hawk, Nebraska. On the way, Jim prefers to read about Jesse James than to meet an immigrant family. A hired man, Otto Fuchs, waits at the station to take Jim and Jake to the farm. The immigrants get off and board a wagon.

**Part II** In September, following a jolting, 20-mile ride over empty prairie, the travelers arrive at the farm at daybreak. Jim meets his 54-year-old paternal grandmother, who weeps at his arrival. She takes him down to the kitchen for a hot bath. She indicates that the immigrant family is their nearest neighbor. Grandfather says little at supper. Otto reports that there is a pony named Dude waiting for Jim at the barn. Jim and his grandmother go to the garden for potatoes, where he looks out on the quivering prairie. Contentment makes him happy.

**Part III** That Sunday, Otto introduces him to the Shimerdas, an illiterate Bohemian family of six who bought the homestead of Peter Krajiek and were cheated on the price of a stove and plow horses. The Shimerdas have sons Ambroz (Ambrosch) and Marek and daughters Yulka and 14-year-old Antonia, who leads Jim to Squaw Creek. She seems truly happy and wishes to learn English words from Jim. Mr. Shimerda gives Jim's grandmother a book with two alphabets—English and Bohemian. He asks that she teach Antonia.

**Part IV** Jim and Tony enjoy pony rides on the prairie. Mrs. Shimerda sends ashy loaves of bread. The family depends on Krajiek, a shadowy figure who sleeps in their barn.

**Part V** Mr. Shimerda meets two Russians, Peter and Pavel, who become their friends. Tony and Jim visit the men and eat melon with Peter, who plays his harmonica. The visitors return with cucumbers and milk for Mrs. Shimerda.

**Part VI** At the daily English lesson, Tony chatters on about nature and tells stories of an old beggar. Her father looks ill as he strokes her hair.

**Part VII** Jim dislikes Tony's superiority. On their ride to Peter's house, they dig into a prairie-dog town. Jim kills a large rattlesnake with a spade. They return home with Jim dragging the snake to hang on the corral. Tony no longer looks down on him.

**Part VIII** Peter suffers from dealings with Wick Cutter, the money lender. Pavel strains himself lifting timbers and must be put to bed. Jim rides with Mr. Shimerda to the Russians' farm. Pavel fears the cry of coyotes, which reminds him of wolves.

Peter doses him with hot water and whiskey, which helps him sleep. Tony tells Jim Pavel's story about a wild dash of sledges from a wedding, with the two Russians driving the newlyweds' sleigh. A pack of wolves ravaged the other vehicles; the brothers sacrificed the couple and escaped. Local people drove the brothers away. They worked their way to Nebraska. Pavel dies; Peter is financially ruined and departs to work for a railroad camp.

**Part IX** In December, Jim continues to serve as a messenger and drives a sleigh made by Otto. The Shimerda girls ride along. The return trip in bitter cold gives Jim an attack of quinsy. He enjoys his grandmother's snug, welcoming kitchen. Otto tells a story about crossing the ocean and assisting a woman who has triplets. He helps her, the three infants, and her two other children to reunite with her husband in Chicago.

**Part X** Otto's story about the Shimerdas hunting prairie dogs leads Grandmother Emmaline to pack them a hamper. Mrs. Shimerda gestures angrily at barrels of frozen potatoes and dwindling flour and an empty coffeepot. The girls sleep in holes in the earth. Mr. Shimerda explains that he was cheated while exchanging money in New York. Mrs. Shimerda gives Emmaline dried mushrooms.

**Part XI** On December 21, the Burdens are snowed in. Jim makes the girls a cloth book from magazine cutouts. Jake fetches a Christmas tree; Otto provides random items from his trunk as ornaments, which they string on Christmas Eve.

**Part XII** On Christmas Day, the laborers tell Jim how grateful the Shimerdas were for their gifts. Otto writes his mother. Grandfather Josiah prays over their breakfast. At four o'clock, Mr. Shimerda visits. Jim lights the tree at dusk; Mr. Shimerda kneels. At nine o'clock, he blesses Emmaline and leaves.

**Part XIII** After a thaw on New Year's Day, Tony and her mother visit the farm. Mrs. Shimerda complains that Emmaline has more pots than she. Emmaline gives her one. Tony says that her father dislikes America and that her mother made him come. Emmaline attributes Mrs. Shimerda's rudeness to the effects of poverty.

Later, bulls fight in the corral. A big snowstorm hits on January 20, Jim's eleventh birthday. The laborers struggle to feed the cattle and locate the henhouse.

**Part XIV** On January 24, the Burdens learn that Tony's father killed himself with his shotgun. Jake believes that Krajiek killed him with an axe. Ambrosch dozes and prays fitfully. Left alone while his grandparents pay a condolence call and await the priest and coroner, Jim recalls Mr. Shimerda's homesickness.

**Part XV** At noon the next day, Fuchs returns with Anton Jelinek, a Russian farm boy with some education. He believes the family will regret that there is no priest. Otto builds a coffin. Neighbors work together to arrange a funeral for Shimerda. The coroner arrives and suspects Krajiek. Mrs. Shimerda requests that her husband be buried at the corner of their property. Anton promises to dig the grave the next day.

**Part XVI** On the fifth day, Mr. Shimerda is buried in frozen earth. The women remain in the house. Sleet falls as neigh-

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bors gather. Mrs. Shimerda tries to force Yulka to touch the body and requests that Josiah pray. Jim loves the spot where Mr. Shimerda is buried.

**Part XVII** In spring, the Shimerdas enjoy a log house built by neighbors that March. In April, Jim gives reading lessons to Yulka. Tony takes an adult role in chores and declines to go to school. She asks Jim to remember her father. Mrs. Shimerda hints that she will not pay Josiah the fifteen dollars owed for the cow; Ambrosch denies breaking a saw. Tony seems rough, like a field hand.

**Part XVIII** Jim enters school and has little time to visit. He and Jake go to the Shimerdas' place to retrieve Josiah's collar. Jake and Ambrosch get into a fight. Jake believes that the immigrants are different since their hard winter. In town, Mrs. Shimerda presses charges, which costs Jake ten dollars for assaulting Ambrosch, who is only 15 years old.

Josiah refuses to get involved in the feud. In June, he invites Antonia and Ambrosch to help with the reaping on July 1 and declares that Mrs. Shimerda owes him nothing for the cow. She kisses his hand and presents Jake with handknit socks.

**Part XIX** In July, the corn is ready to harvest. Antonia flees the kitchen and works outdoors like a man. Jim asks why she behaves like Ambrosch, Tony replies that life will be hard for her family.

**Book II, Part I** When Jim is 13, his grandparents quit the farm and move to Black Hawk, a small prairie town where he attends school. Jake and Otto leave for the west. Months later, a card arrives from them saying they work for the Yankee Girl Mine. Jim never hears from them again. Ambrosch comes to town, but has nothing to say about Tony. Mrs. Steavens, the new occupant at the farm, says he hires her out like a farmhand. Emmaline saves Tony from working all winter by getting her a job with Christian Harling's family.

**Part II** A Norwegian family, the Harlings, are good, hard-working neighbors. Charley, Julia, Sally, and Nina—the children nearest Jim's age—become his companions. The eldest, Frances, works at her father's grain and cattle business. In August, the cook leaves; the Harlings hire 17-year-old Tony. Ambrosch demands her wages; Mrs. Harling demands \$50 a year for Tony and allots \$3 a week plus shoes. Mrs. Harling thinks Tony is a handsome girl.

**Part III** On Saturday, Tony arrives on Ambrosch's wagon. She works well, but spoils the children, especially Nina. The family is quiet when their tyrannical father is home. The rest of the time, the children and Mrs. Harling play the piano.

**Part IV** Lena Lingard, a hired girl from Norway, comes to Black Hawk and knocks at the Harlings' door. Mrs. Harling welcomes her and learns that she studies dressmaking with Mrs. Thomas. Lena is glad that her father rejected Nick Svendsen, who proposed to Annie Iverson. Lena prefers to remain single and encourages Tony to get out more. Tony confides that Lena has a bad reputation for tempting Ole Benson. His wife Mary, who was insane, threatened to cut Lena with a corn knife.

**Part V** Lena works at dressmaking and spends Saturday nights with Tiny Soderball, who works at the Boys' Home Hotel. Before Christmas, Lena's brother Chris comes to town to buy gifts, including initialed handkerchiefs for his mother, Berthe. Lena weeps with homesickness when he leaves.

**Part VI** That winter, Frances Harling teaches Jim to dance. Mrs. Harling plays opera music while Tony sews and tells stories. She recounts the death of a tramp who worked at threshing, then jumped into the machine.

**Part VII** By spring, Jim is weary of school. In March, Blind

d'Arnault, a former slave, comes to town to give a piano concert at the Opera House. At his request, Tony, Tiny, Lena, and Mary dance.

**Part VIII** In June, the Vannis set up a tent in town and teach dancing. Local people—Jim included—dance until midnight every Saturday. Some choose the hired girls as partners.

**Part IX** Life is pleasant for town residents, but a definite separation exists between Americans and immigrants: the poorest American farmers refuse to hire out their daughters; immigrant girls readily accept jobs out of the home. Consequently, immigrant fathers prosper and their daughters marry well. The dance floor unites the respectable Americans with foreigners, including the disreputable "three Marys." Jim loses respect for Sylvester Lovett, a bank clerk who dallies with Lena but marries a widow with land.

**Part X** Tony draws attention at the dance tent. Because Mr. Harling discovers Harry Paine trying to kiss her, he forces her to choose between dances and another job. She quits and begins working for the Cutters, who are less fun-loving than the Harlings. Mrs. Harling predicts trouble with Cutter.

**Part XI** Wycliffe "Wick" Cutter has a bad reputation with women. One Swedish girl who worked in his home became a prostitute as a result of his influence. Mrs. Cutter quarrels daily with her husband, giving hirelings gossip to spread about town.

**Part XII** Tony walks downtown to display her skill in sewing copies of expensive dresses. Tiny teases Jim about becoming a Baptist minister. Locals gossip about Jim's interest in hired girls; Anton urges him not to hang out in the saloon. Jim prowls the streets and hates the air of respectability that impedes pleasure. On Saturdays, he sneaks out to join Tony at Firemen's dances and enjoys her spirited schottisches. He demands a kiss and claims to have kissed Lena. Tony threatens him for getting involved with Lena and demands that he go away to school and make something of himself.

**Part XIII** Emmaline weeps because of Jim's night prowls. He stops attending dances and spends the summer preparing for college. Mrs. Harling attends Jim's graduation address and gives him a monogrammed umbrella. The hired girls applaud his speech; Tony thinks Jim sounded like Mr. Shimerda.

**Part XIV** The day after graduation, Jim concentrates on study. One Saturday in July, he takes a swim and finds Tony crying. She confides she misses home and recalls she and her mother were not allowed to enter her grandmother's house. He tells her and the other girls about finding the sword of a Conquistador. In the distance, sunset illumines a plow.

**Part XV** Tony returns home to her mother's log cabin after Wick Cutter creates an elaborate ruse to send his wife to Kansas City so he can seduce her. Jim sleeps in her place. Mr. Cutter beats him and forces him to flee in his nightshirt. Jim begs Emmaline not to call a doctor lest he become a laughing-stock. Mrs. Cutter vows revenge for Wick's seedy plot.

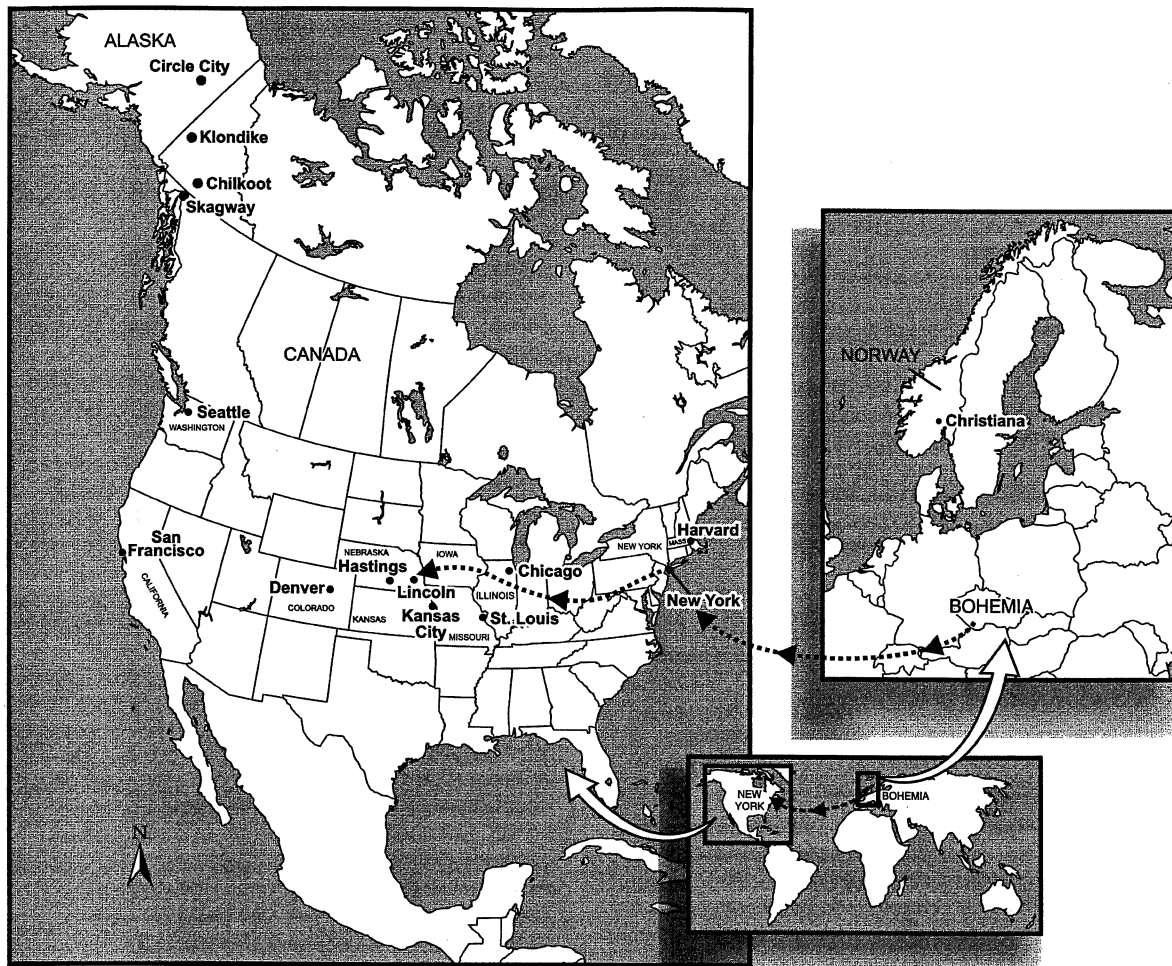
**Book III, Part I** In Lincoln, Jim rooms in a small suite in the house of an old couple. Gaston Cleric arranges his classical studies, but Jim longs for the rural life of his youth.

**Part II** Lena visits Jim in March of his second year and explains she has opened a dressmaking shop in Lincoln. She says that Tony works for Mrs. Gardener and is engaged to Larry Donovan, a train conductor and notorious ladies' man. Lena entices Jim to visit her. He realizes that women, like the hired girls, are a source of poetry.

**Part III** In April, Jim escorts Lena to opera and stage plays and weeps openly during *Camille*.

**Part IV** Lena invites Jim for Sunday breakfasts. A Polish roomer, Mr. Ordinsky, seems jealous and implies Jim takes

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advantage of Lena. Jim is distracted and grows lax in his studies. His mentor suggests that he go to Harvard. Lena tells him she will never marry because she prefers freedom.

**Book IV, Part I** After attending Harvard, where he can concentrate on becoming a lawyer, Jim returns to Black Hawk for summer vacation. He learns that Donovan jilted Tony, leaving her with a child. She lives on the farm under Ambrosch's dour supervision. Lena moves to San Francisco to live with Tiny Soderball. A wealthy woman, Tiny made a fortune after nursing Johnson, a dying Swede, in Dawson City, Alaska, who left her a claim on Hunker Creek.

**Part II** That summer, Jim sees a picture of Tony's baby at a photographer's studio. At Mrs. Harling's suggestion, he decides to visit Mrs. Steavens to learn how Tony was left unwed and pregnant.

**Part III** Jim dines with the Widow Steavens and learns she taught Tony to hem while Tony was making a trousseau. That March, Donovan sent for Tony; Ambrosch bought a gift of silver and gave her three hundred dollars. In Denver, Tony lived with Donovan while he waited for a promotion. Over a month later, she returned. Donovan had been fired from his railroad job for defrauding the company and deserted her. Ambrosch again overworked her. That winter, she wore men's clothes to conceal her pregnancy and bore her child alone. Mrs. Steavens attended her and dressed the infant. Mrs. Steavens concludes that Tony loves her child and warns Ambrosch not to

harm the child.

**Part IV** Jim reunites with Tony, who cries in silence. He pities how poorly dressed she is and how hard she must work. He tells her he wants to practice law in New York. She pities Jim's city life, noting, "I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of lonesomeness . . . I want to live and die here." She vows that, like her father's memory, Jim is always with her.

**Book V, Part I** Twenty years pass before he sees her again. In 1908, Lena urges him to visit Tony who lives in Hastings, Nebraska, with her ten children and husband Anton Cuzak. Tony at first does not recognize Jim, but she shrieks for her family to greet her old friend. He meets Lucie, Leo, Ambrosch, Yulka, Anton, Nina, Anna, and Jan. She is concerned that Jim has no children and jokingly offers him 12-year-old Leo, her worst. They enjoy a satisfying country meal, including kolaches and milk, and pour over Tony's box of old photographs. That night, Jim and the boys sleep in the hay-mow.

**Part II** Tony brags on Martha, Donovan's daughter, who is married to Joe, a hardworking farmer, and has a son of her own. Later in the day, Cuzak returns with his oldest son, Rudolph, from a holiday at the Wilber street fair. Jim learns that Wick Cutter, in an effort to keep his wife from inheriting his money, killed her and then shot himself, clinging to life long enough to convince witnesses that Mrs. Cutter predeceased him. Cuzak relates his bad luck in the fur trade and the orange

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business and describes himself as a lover of the city he left 26 years earlier.

**Part III** After dinner the next evening, Jim returns to town, but finds little comfort in the changes he sees. Old friends are gone or dead. He dreams of past good times with Tony.

### TIME LINE

- 1854**     **March 1** Congress creates the Nebraska Territory.  
**1867**     Nebraska is admitted to the Union.  
**1873**     **Dec. 7** Willa Sibert Cather is born in Back Creek Valley, Virginia.  
**1880**     Indian wars come to a close in Nebraska.  
**1890**     The Cathers move to Lincoln, Nebraska.  
**1895**     John Pierpont Morgan organizes the J. P. Morgan Company.  
**1896**     Populist William Jennings Bryan enters politics. The Klondike Gold Rush begins.  
**1895-1896** Cather teaches English and Latin at Central High School.  
**1904**     The Kinkaid Homestead Act opens for settlement the last of Nebraska's open rangeland.  
**1912**     Cather publishes *Alexander's Bridge*.  
**1913**     *O Pioneers!* is published.  
**1918**     *My Antonia* is published.  
**1922**     Cather receives the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*.  
**1927**     Cather completes her last novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.  
**1930**     Sinclair Lewis wins the Nobel Prize for literature.  
**1933**     Cather receives the Prix Fémina Américaine.  
**1947**     **April 25** Cather dies of cerebral hemorrhage.

### AUTHOR SKETCH

Of her move to Nebraska in 1884, Willa Sibert Cather recalled, "The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality . . . I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country." Grit is exactly what Cather revealed in her change from a prim Southern child from Back Creek Valley, part of Virginia's Shenandoah range, to a tough, but sensitive woman of the prairie.

The eldest of seven children born to frontier farmer and financier Charles Fectigue and Mary Virginia Boak Cather on December 7, 1873, Cather was educated at Willow Shade, her home, then uprooted to the plains, where her uncle and grandparents ran a farm. Her father failed at agriculture; he resettled his family in Red Cloud, a railroad and marketing center, and sold real estate and insurance. Cather's memoirs note the spare existence in the backwoods of the Nebraska Divide where neighbors were often Scandinavian, French Catholic, German, Russians, or central European. She partook of plays, musicals, and readings in the classics with a local storekeeper. At age 15, when she longed to study surgery, she abandoned the female persona, dressed in men's work clothes, and shortened her hair to accommodate the name William, the pseudonym that replaced Willa.

Cather moved to Lincoln in 1890 to enroll at the Latin school; she completed a degree in classics and literature from the University of Nebraska. After an English professor submitted an essay for publication in the *Nebraska State Journal*, Cather was hypnotized by the sight of her name in print. From her experiences as associate editor of two campus literary magazines, she initiated a career in fiction based on her experiences in the West. Her first published short story, "Peter," appeared in a Boston journal.

A critic for the *Lincoln State Journal* her junior year, Cather continued writing for newspapers and magazines after she moved east to Pennsylvania. In Pittsburgh, she edited, reviewed, and wrote for the *Home Monthly* and the *Pittsburgh Leader* and taught English and Latin at Central High School from 1895-1896. Sharing her life with Isabelle McClung and later with Edith Lewis, Cather lived for a year in France, but returned to the United States to spend most of her adult years on the east coast. She joined the staff of *McClure's* and edited works by Stephen Crane, Rudyard Kipling, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Her colleague, Sarah Orne Jewett, warned her that magazine work would burn out her creativity. Cather took the advice, vacationed in Arizona, and returned to inaugurate the second stage of her writing career.

Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), was followed by *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *One of Ours* (1922), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In addition, she was a regular contributor of short fiction and poetry to *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's*, *Collier's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *McClure's*, *Smart Set*, *Atlantic*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Commonweal*, and *Scholastic*. Her collected works were published in 1941; and her critical essays, *The Kingdom of Art* (1893-1896), in 1966, featuring commentary on the novel and on the writings of Katherine Mansfield and Sarah Orne Jewett.

After a lengthy run of successes, Cather suffered depression and chronic wrist pain. She retired briefly to Cherry Valley, New York. She died April 25, 1947, in New York City of a cerebral hemorrhage and was buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where she had spent her summers. Her posthumous publications remained true to the prairie residents whom she immortalized, endearing herself further by sending money to stricken Nebraska farmers during the Depression. In a final observation about her career, she noted with characteristic vigor, "A book is made with one's own flesh and blood of years. It is cremated youth. It is all yours—no one gave it to you."

### CRITIC'S CORNER

A pioneer in both the literal and the literary sense of the word, Cather received worthy tributes; an honorary doctorate from her alma mater in 1917 and favorable commentary from critics H. L. Mencken, Maxwell Geismar, Lionel Trilling, and Edmund Wilson. Following receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*, she accepted degrees from the University of Michigan, University of California, Columbia, Yale, Smith, Creighton, and Princeton. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* earned her the Howells Medal from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1933 she won the *Prix Fémina Américaine*. In a memorable display of professionalism, Sinclair Lewis admitted to the press that his 1930 Nobel Prize should have gone to Cather.

In an autobiography, violinist Yehudi Menuhin wrote: "Willa Cather was the embodiment of America—but an America which has long ago disappeared. Her books . . . describe a country still overwhelmingly natural, a way of life still rural . . . Happiness itself had not become an abstraction and was still rooted in the earth, as Aunt Willa was herself. She had an eye and an ear for the aesthetic wonders of nature . . . and a realistic, penetrating, compassionate understanding of the human animal in his setting."

Partially because of the women's movement, many probing biographies and critiques of Cather's canon appear with regularity in print and on the Internet detailing her life and works. Two critical filmstrips describe her prairie novels: "Willa Cather: Rebel from Red Cloud" (Perfection Learning Company, 1969);

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and "Cather's Pioneers" (Thomas S. Klise Company, 1973). Her most frequently anthologized story, "Paul's Case," is available on disc recording from Caedmon and *O Pioneers!* on audio cassette from Recorded Books. A 1992 Hallmark Hall of Fame television movie of *O Pioneers!* starred Jessica Lange.

### OTHER WORKS BY WILLA CATHER

*Alexander's Bridge* (1912)  
*April Twilights and Other Poems* (1923)  
*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)  
*The Kingdom of Art* (1966)  
*A Lost Lady* (1923)  
*Lucy Gayheart* (1935)  
*My Mortal Enemy* (1926)  
*Not Under Forty* (1936)  
*Novels and Stories* (1941)  
*O Pioneers!* (1913)  
*Obscure Destinies* (1932)  
*The Old Beauty and Others* (1948)  
*One of Ours* (1922)  
*The Professor's House* (1925)  
*Sapphire and the Slave Girl* (1940)  
*Shadows on the Rock* (1931)  
*The Song of the Lark* (1915)  
*The Troll Garden* (1905)  
*Uncle Valentine* (1973)  
*Willia Cather on Writing* (1949)  
*Willia Cather in Europe* (1956)  
*The World and the Parish* (1970)  
*Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920)

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- Tellefsen, Blythe, "Blood in the Wheat: Willia Cather's My *Ántonia*," *Studies in American Fiction*, Autumn 1999.

### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the values of an agrarian community
2. To account for the success of immigrants
3. To interpret contrasting social and religious customs
4. To contrast causes of jealousy, discontent, and despair
5. To discuss the themes of obsession and disobedience
6. To explain the main events from an adult perspective
7. To contrast responses to the weather, terrain, and entertainments
8. To describe attitudes toward illegitimate births
9. To contrast city and country settings
10. To analyze the roles of neighbors and relatives
11. To list ways in which gender roles limit women's choices
12. To read aloud examples of verbal conflict

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To acknowledge the roles of Emmaline and Josiah Burden
2. To outline events that reveal Tony's character
3. To recount how and why Jim leaves Nebraska
4. To explain Lena's fondness for Jim
5. To account for Mr. Shimerda's suicide
6. To account for Tiny's success
7. To contrast Tony and Lena as potential wives
8. To explain the symbolism of the prairie-dog town
9. To summarize Tony's preparations for marriage
10. To project how Tony's children will view the prairie

### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Willia Cather's style, present the following terms and applications:

**first-person narration** a story told from the point of view of a witness or participant. Jim Burden, the young man who grows up with Tony Shimerda and shares her platonic love, departs from the prairie, studies at Harvard, then returns in middle age to reassemble and reexamine feelings that have lain dormant for 20 years. His disappointment in the visit to Black Hawk concludes with a poignant acceptance of the past, his "road of Destiny" and "those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be."

**literary foil** a character who serves as an opposite or as a standard by which another character is matched. Throughout Jim's teen friendship with Black Hawk's hired girls, Tony remains his ideal, but Lena stirs his physical desire. In town, Jim perceives Lena is a true independent, but because she evaluates herself in terms of success at dressmaking, she has no need of marriage to legitimize her life. In contrast, Tony returns to an agrarian upbringing and establishes a large peasant family.

**realism** a recreation of life in theme, plot, setting, mood, and characterization. To project real situations, Cather writes of ordinary people, concentrating on actions and their consequences. A significant episode is the death of Mr. Shimerda, a scene that appears straightforward, then is clouded by doubts of local people, who believe that Peter Krajiek had the motive and method to kill the distraught immigrant farmer. Cather stresses the burden of realism—a study of people who accept the opportunities they are given and who abide by ethical or pragmatic choices, as demonstrated by Tony's decision to marry Anton Cuzak.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

The milieu of Willia Cather's *My Ántonia* becomes the controlling factor in character attitudes and behaviors. To Jim and

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his grandparents, life on their Nebraska farm is difficult, but bearable because they live in comfort and hire laborers to ease the worst of the heavy planting, harvesting, and livestock work. For newcomers like the Shimerdas, lack of money and language and unfamiliarity with the land threaten to overwhelm them. Living on frozen potatoes and sleeping in holes in the ground unsettle them. Cather symbolizes hardships in the suicide and interment of Mr. Shimerda in frozen earth, which makes his funeral difficult for the neighbors to complete.

Cather tinges the milieu with such positive views as the gold-hued plow and islets in the river to counter the grimness of coyotes that sound like wolves and a long-lived rattlesnake that threatens the children. When wintry blasts isolate the Burden farm, the cozy interior of their farmhouse draws the family together for a pleasant Christmas. As though blessing the lifestyle of settled farm folk, Mr. Shimerda kneels at the Christmas tree and makes the sign of the cross.

Because of their dissimilar backgrounds, Jim and Tony take divergent paths based on their relationship to the land. Tony remains on the prairie, working for her evil-natured brother Ambrosch while atoning for Martha's illegitimate birth. The elements that coarsen and toughen Tony seem far removed from Jim's classical schooling and from his subsequent decision to study at Harvard. Linking these disparate milieus are rutted wagon trails and the railroad, which returns Jim to his boyhood home. In the final glimpse of his boyhood home, he is able to acknowledge, "This had been the road of Destiny."

### CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

#### Novels

Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth*

Rose Wilder Lane, *Let the Hurricane Roar*

Conrad Richter, *The Sea of Grass*

O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth*

#### Short Stories

Gertrude Atherton, "The Wash-Tub Mail"

Stephen Crane, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky"

#### Poetry

Walt Whitman, "O Pioneers, O Pioneers!"

#### Internet

"Willa Cather Home Page,"

[icg.harvard.edu/~cather/home.html](http://icg.harvard.edu/~cather/home.html)

"Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation,"

[www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org)

"Willa Cather Site," [www.libfind.unl.edu/Cather/content.htm](http://www.libfind.unl.edu/Cather/content.htm)

#### Videos/DVDs

*My Antonia*

*O Pioneers*

*Sarah, Plain and Tall*

### THEMES AND MOTIFS

#### Themes

- immigration
- the prairie
- farm labor
- family
- sex roles
- loss
- injustice
- ambition
- memory

#### Motifs

- coping with bad health and financial setbacks
- understanding the romantic outlook
- loving and losing
- assuming the role of rescuer and teacher

- comprehending the need for entertainment
- coping with community disapproval and trauma

### MEANING STUDY

Below are significant words, phrases, or sentences from the novel. Explain each in context. Book, part, and page numbers pinpoint each entry so that you can re-read the passage in which it appears.

1. "They can't any of them speak English, except one little girl, and all she can say is 'We go Black Hawk, Nebraska.'" (Book I, Part I, p. 6)  
(A Sauk war chief from Rock Island, Illinois, Black Hawk displayed courage and savvy. During the War of 1812, he led warriors to Lake Erie to fight the pioneers, waylaid a boat convoy on the Mississippi River, and slew settlers in Missouri. Diminished by the growing political influence of Keokuk, Black Hawk continued to oppose American colonists. In 1829, he and his followers immigrated to Iowa, but returned to the Great Lakes in 1832 because he could not endure the prairie winters. After initiating the Black Hawk War, he spent months in prison in St. Louis before journeying to Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Boston. He died in Iowa on October 3, 1838.)
2. On Sunday morning Otto Fuchs was to drive us over to make the acquaintance of our new Bohemian neighbours. (Book I, Part III, p. 13)  
(The Shimerdas are land-based peasants who come from a proud, historic country in central Europe that emerged from the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburgs' Austrian Empire. Defining the area's borders were Austria, Bavaria, Saxony, Silesia, and Moravia. In 1918, Bohemia became a district of Czechoslovakia.)
3. As we rode away with the spade, Antonia suggested that we stop at the prairie-dog-town and dig into one of the holes. (Book I, Part VII, p. 30)  
(A common species of stout, burrowing rodents, the prairie dog is kin to the squirrel and earned its common name because of its canine bark. Prairie dogs live in colonies within well-defined communities. In the western United States and northern Mexico, they became so common that ranchers and farmers shot and poisoned them to reduce their destruction of crops and pasture.)
4. Oh, great and just God, no man among us knows what the sleeper knows, nor is it for us to judge what lies between him and Thee. (Book I, Part XVI, p. 76)  
(Grandfather Burden, who tends to speak in compassionate aphorisms, observes at Christmas that the prayers of all good people are good. In the same spirit of love and respect for others, he declines to comment on suicide and refers to Mr. Shimerda as "the sleeper." The one-sentence funeral prayer leaves to God the disposition of a soul released from earthly despair and anguish. At the end of the chapter, Jim blesses the burial spot and remarks on its effect on others who pass that way.)
5. It was his plan that every cent of his sister's wages should be paid over to him each month, and he would provide her such clothing as he thought necessary. (Book II, Part II, p. 99)  
(Bohemian patriarchy becomes an issue as Tony works her way out of her brother's control. Mrs. Harling dislikes Ambrosch's Old World subjugation of his sister into slavery as a hired girl. Rather than pay him all that Tony earns, Mrs. Harling insists that Tony keep \$50 of her earnings of \$156 per year and receive a pair of shoes.)

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6. In the winter bleakness a hunger for colour came over people, like the Laplander's craving for fats and sugar. (Part II, Book VI, p. 112)  
*(Central to Cather's themes of escapism and self-fulfillment is the prairie's influence on moods. In winter, the yearning for entertainment sweeps over people like a physical hunger for sweets and fats among the Laplanders of Norway. People long for colors to relieve the tedium of snow and linger outside the church after choir practice and prayer meeting to savor "the crude reds and greens and blues of that coloured glass.")*
7. The men gathered round him, as he began to play "My Old Kentucky Home." They sang one Negro melody after another, while the mulatto sat rocking himself, his head thrown back, his yellow face lifted, his shrivelled eyelids never fluttering. (Book II, Part VII, p. 119)  
*(The "Negro" melodies that the text refers to are the compositions of a white composer, Stephen Collins Foster. From his contact with church folk tunes, minstrel shows, and the work songs of black laborers, he produced series of popular melodies—"Oh! Susanna," "Swanee River," "Camptown Races," and "Old Black Joe." The tunes sentimentalized black enslavement while ignoring the hardships of black Americans.)*
8. Charley Harling was already at Annapolis, while I was still sitting in Black Hawk, answering to my name at roll-call every morning, rising from my desk at the sound of a bell and marching out like the grammar-school children. (Book II, Part XII, p. 139)  
*(Adolescence generates discontent in Jim, who is jealous of Charley Harling for escaping home discipline to live on his own while he is enrolled at Annapolis, the naval academy in Maryland.)*
9. I liked to schottische with her; she had so much spring and variety, and was always putting in new steps and slides. She taught me to dance against and around the hard-and-fast beat of the music. (Book II, Part XII, p. 142)  
*(Tony is adept at a social folk dance for couples that combined steps and hops as well as promenades and turns. Derived in Scotland or Germany, the dance blends numerous folk steps and traditions from Scandinavia, Scotland, and Mexico. It was popular in American and European ballrooms in the late 1800s.)*
10. Toward the end of April, the billboards, which I watched anxiously in those days, bloomed out one morning with gleaming white posters on which two names were impressively printed in blue Gothic letters: the name of an actress of whom I had often heard, and the name "Camille." (Book III, Part III, p. 174)  
*(A popular tragedy by French dramatist Alexandre Dumas Fils, La Dame aux Camélias [The Lady of the Camellias] (1848), known in English as Camille, debuted in 1852. Dumas deliberately portrayed the ruinous nature of illicit love to scold his father, who was a known womanizer. Giuseppe Verdi turned the play into an opera, La Traviata (1853).)*

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers with quotations from the novel.

#### Motivation

1. What causes Willa Cather to write about immigrants?

*(One of American literature's most prominent realists, Willa Cather devoted much of her fiction to reflections of immigrant culture and farm life in the midwest and southwest. Critic Clifton Fadiman has described her spare prose as stoic, balanced, and pacifist, a tribute to the gentility peculiar to the doughty farmers and immigrant settlers of both O Pioneers! and My Antonia. During Jim's train ride to the Burden farm in Nebraska in the latter novel, he immerses himself in a Jesse James thriller without realizing that a realistic frontier drama is beginning in the car ahead that carries "a family from 'across the water.'" Cather depicts the helplessness of Bohemians who "can't any of them speak English."*

*When Jim gets to know the immigrants as friends and neighbors, he begins to realize the heavy job they have in adapting to the prairie. Mr. Shimerda's loss of money in a fraudulent exchange in New York and his determination to survive until spring impresses both Jim and the reader. After the man's death, Jim's increasing number of visits and meetings with immigrants attests to his admiration of their spirit of enterprise, particularly in hiring out sons to work the Burdens' harvest and daughters to American families to cook, sew, and tend children.)*

#### Setting

2. Describe life in Black Hawk.

*(After the Burdens move to Black Hawk and rent their farm to Mrs. Steavens, Jim's life changes from chores, message-running, and prairie rambles to school. At age 13, he is developing a normal interest in girls and socializing. He looks out on a "new world" that is clean, well fenced, and divided into green yards and dusty streets lined with shady sidewalks. He remarks, "Our own house looked down over the town, and from our upstairs windows we could see the winding line of the river bluffs, two miles south of us. That river was to be my compensation for the lost freedom of the farming country."*

*Freedom becomes an issue between Jim and his elders. He enjoys church, hotel, opera house, and community activities at the Firemen's Hall. When winter descends, he learns to dance and enjoys a performance by pianist Blind d'Arnault. When the Vannis put up a dancing pavilion in a vacant lot near the Danish laundry, it becomes a magnet—"like a merry-go-round tent, with open sides and gay flags flying from the poles." As the enjoyment of dancing with Tony and other hired girls quickly ends Jim's contentment at home, his Grandmother Burden increases her disapproval of nighttime carousing.)*

#### Character Development

3. How does Jim change over time?

*(At age ten, Jim arrives weary and disoriented to the Burden farm outside Black Hawk, Nebraska. After settling in, he expresses worthy character traits, particularly concern for other people and their sufferings. His interest in the Shimerdas develops into a genuine friendship with Tony. After she quits school and becomes a farm laborer, he loses touch with her and flinches when he observes her coarse clothing, secondhand boots, and brutish labors under the direction of Ambrosch.)*

*After freeing himself from parental authority in Black Hawk, Jim enjoys a teen rebellion that sends him prowling at night. His hard studies in the classics in preparation for college in Lincoln sobers him somewhat. The convivial side re-emerges while he boards off campus and spends*

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his evenings and free time with the voluptuous and alluring Lena Lingard. On return from the East 20 years later, he is sober and markedly melancholy, perhaps, as the narrator remarks, because his wife seems "unimpressible and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm." For whatever reason, Jim sinks into a reflective reverie of good times past with Tony, whom he longs to see once more.)

### Historical Milieu

#### 4. How does the novel reflect on American history?

(Willa Cather grew up in a multi-ethnic prairie community where people from Germany, France, Scandinavia, and eastern Europe lived and farmed the demanding Nebraska heartland. Within the novel, she layers varied religious faiths and cultural diversity, including food, dialect, death rituals, church socials and choir practice, dancing the schottische, story-telling, sled and pony rides, and shared farm labor. Although groups maintain stereotypes of the typical Bohemian, the attractive Swedish hired girl, and the despairing Russian, local folk coalesce as neighbors and supporters of immigrants.)

Cather's pervasive theme of industry and husbandry showcases the ragged, ill-fed immigrants who gradually get ahead in farming and who wisely marry off their daughters to likely land-owners. Rather than focus on male achievers, Jim recounts the rise of Tiny Soderball, who operates a hotel in the Klondike and encounters Jim in Salt Lake City in 1908. There, he learns about her wealth from inheriting a Swede's money. To express the sacrifice necessary for success, the text remarks that "she lost three toes from one of those pretty little feet that used to trip about Black Hawk."

On return to Black Hawk after 20 years' absence, Jim, educated in law at Harvard and married to a citified woman, finds the prairie changed. The high country is "broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing." In place of wide open tableland, he now witnesses red barns, orchards, and children playing in yards. He is pleased to find changes that "seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea.")

### Theme

#### 5. How does the prairie express a major theme?

(To Cather, the prairie represents opportunity. In open grassland that the Plain Indians have left untouched, pioneers turn the virgin soil with their plows and begin the hard task of taming nature. Like other hard lands, the prairie presents its challenges in the form of harsh winter winds, blizzards, and the long distances between settlers. Although they are religious and home-centered, isolation and unending toil darken their lives and make them morose and ill-tempered. Cather stresses that the survivors are those who deliberately seek money and amusements in proper balance and who learn to be neighborly and to depend on other settlers for a sense of community.)

### Interpretation

#### 6. What does the title reveal?

(After 20 years of separation from Black Hawk, Jim looks back on Antonia Shimerda Cuzak as someone who shared a part of her life with him. As a title of his manuscript, the possessive "my" reveals his unwillingness to release boyhood memories of their expeditions on the prairie and long sled rides, where buffalo robes ward off

the winter chill. In reflecting on her job with the notorious Wick Cutter, he remarks with romantic intensity, "She was, oh, she was still my Antonia!" When he reunites with Tony, she is middle-aged and laden with family responsibilities. She has weathered Martha's birth, public humiliation, and Ambrosch's cruelty after Donovan abandoned Tony.

Still intent on their mutual childhood, Jim shares Tony's box of photographs and assesses her life with Cuzak, a hard-working farmer. On witnessing how she domesticated a city man who preferred theater, music, and dominoes to farming, Jim muses that "[Cuzak's] wife had managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world." Jim concludes that the family enjoyed a fine life, even if it fails to meet Cuzak's yearnings. From a mature perspective, Jim wonders "whether the life that was right for one was ever right for two!" In the concluding scene, Jim retraces a rutted road and relishes his link with "the precious, incommunicable past.")

### Conflict

#### 7. Why does gossip threaten Jim and the hired girls?

(In *Black Hawk*, where "the respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youths," the closeness of city life introduces social control mechanisms that were less rigid on the farm. Jim discovers the discipline that communities establish by stratifying behaviors between males and females along complex economic and cultural lines. Girls like the outspoken Lena Lingard, Tony, and the "three Bohemian Marys," who hire out and live apart from parents, come under suspicion, especially when they enjoy dancing a spirited schottische under the tent and flirting with men who admire their dresses and try to kiss them. The text notes that the potential for disaster in the Marys, who "were considered as dangerous as high explosives to have about the kitchen."

In view of Jim's interest in town girls, Grandmother Burden suspects that his prowlings about the city introduce him to habits that threaten his studies and undermine his morals. Ironically, Jim receives additional scolding from outsiders. Anton Jelinek notes, "You know how the church people think about saloons. Your grandpa has always treated me fine, and I don't like to have you come into my place, because I know he don't like it, and it puts me in bad with him." Resolved to slip out his bedroom window, Jim continues to party at Firemen's Hall until he finds his grandmother crying. Without specifics, she remarks, "I've heard things. You must 'a' known it would come back to me sometime." Rather than break his grandmother's heart, he gives up Firemen's Hall and returns to his studies.)

### Atmosphere

#### 8. How does life change for the Shimerdas after Mr. Shimerda's suicide?

(After the somber mid-winter funeral at Shimerda's place, community attitudes shift toward sympathy and kindness. In spring, the Shimerdas move to a log house that neighbors built for them in March. Jim notes that "the family were now fairly equipped to begin their struggle with the soil." Mrs. Shimerda acquires enough English to converse and to demonstrate a feisty, often combative nature.

The demands of farming end Tony's schooling. Like a male farm worker, she dresses in her father's boots, her arms and neck "burned as brown as a sailor's." Jim perceives a strength in her that serves the family well, but



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notes that Ambrosch is developing a sulky, defensive personality and lies about breaking Grandpa Burden's saw. The surly behavior suggests that the Shimerdas have fallen under a new taskmaster who threatens them with increasing bluster. After Jim graduates from high school, he observes Tony plowing corn and remarks disgustedly, "All that spring and summer she did the work of a man on the farm; it seemed to be an understood thing. Ambrosch didn't get any other hand to help him.")

### Author Purpose

9. Why does the novel appeal to readers?

*(Cather's ability to express the westering spirit within an engaging love plot draws readers into Jim and Tony's story. Filled with dismaying labors and unrelenting winters, life on the prairie appears to grant success and contentment at a snail's pace. The gradual gentling of the land reveals the fierce dedication of settlers to attain their ambitions and to build a better community for their children. Cather leaves the reader with a greater appreciation for the work involved and for the number of people who fail at the endeavor because they encounter ill luck or lack the pioneering spirit.*

*Parallel to the story of the land is Jim's revelation of a bitersweet affection for Tony. Unlike in temperament and background, the two are not meant for each other. Nonetheless, Jim stokes memories of their childhood affection and carries east with him a belief that Tony is still his. On his return after an absence of 20 years, he spends the summer in Black Hawk and reunites with a different Tony. Graying and weighted down with children, domesticity, and farm work, she manages enough of the old sweetness to convince Jim that she hasn't changed entirely. At the novel's end, Cather leaves with the reader a complex picture of Jim as a grown man, well trained in law, married to an unenthusiastic wife, and still boyishly clinging to memories of the prairie girl he once loved.)*

### Structure

10. How does the novel create a sense of destiny?

*(Cather salts in enough mention of American history to connect Jim's memories of Tony with other dreamers and settlers of the New World. On the way west, Jim reads pulp fiction about Jesse James, the bank and train robber who nurtured the poor and weak. Jim is sleepy and train-weary as he pulls into the station at Black Hawk, which bears the name of a war chief who failed to acclimate to the prairie after settlers forced him out of the Great Lakes region into Iowa.*

*Sprinkled in among these legends are characters' own anecdotes as well as mention of a Civil War veteran, black minstrels, the conquistador's sword, "My Old Kentucky Home," Scandinavian religion, and Squaw Creek, all part of the tapestry that became American folklore. Jim recognizes that the farming country the pioneers tame "makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world." Completing the scenario of risk-takers and unusual speculators is the saga of Tiny Soderball, whose venture to the Klondike placed her in Alaska during the gold rush era and rewarded her courage and character with a windfall fortune.)*

### HOW LANGUAGE WORKS

Cather creates memorable characters from the way people converse and from what they have to say:

1. The grandmotherliness of Emmaline Burden is obvious in

her doting kindness to Jim: "Had a good sleep, Jimmy? . . . My, how you do look like your father!"

2. The isolation of the immigrant Bohemians is obvious in Mrs. Shimerda's attempt to complain about the hardships of living in a shed thatched with grass, "House no good, house no good!"
3. In explanation of Mrs. Shimerda's crotchety personality, Grandmother Burden expresses compassion: "A body never knows what traits poverty might bring out in 'em. It makes a woman grasping to see her children want for things."
4. One of the most optimistic female characters is Mrs. Harling, who drives out to the Shimerda farm as a means of understanding Tony's background. Mrs. Harling remarks, "I can bring something out of that girl. She's barely seventeen, not too old to learn new ways. She's good-looking, too!"
5. In Lincoln, Lena is forward and flirtatious with Jim. She invites him for Sunday breakfasts and boldly asks, "What's on your mind, Jim? Are you afraid I'll want you to marry me some day?"
6. The spirited Widow Steavens tends Tony at Martha's birth and intends to wash her in mild soap. To Ambrosch's dark hint that the baby should be drowned in the rain barrel, Mrs. Steavens barks, "There's a law in this land, don't forget that. I stand here a witness that this baby has come into the world sound and strong, and I intend to keep an eye on what befalls it."
7. On reuniting with Jim, Tony blends her old infatuation for him with good manners and hospitality to a guest. She remarks at nightfall, as Jim contemplates sleeping in the haymow, "The chest is full of clean blankets, put away for winter. Now I must go, or my girls will be doing all the work, and I want to cook your supper myself."
8. Jim, who accepts Tony's new life while clinging to shreds of memory, concludes, "The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is."

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Art

Design an appropriate banner for the Black Hawk train station, multiple views of an historically accurate passenger train or homemade coffin, a platte of a farm and sod house, a signboard pointing the way to Denver or Kansas City, dance instructions for the schottische, a handbook for coroners or Scandinavian-American priests, a genealogy of the Shimerda family, detailed sketches of frontier fashions from 1880-1900, a news headline announcing gold strikes in the Yukon, a map depicting the immigrants' European homelands, a list of state props used by an opera company, the title page for *Traviata* or *Camille*, a biographical sketch of Joseph Jefferson, or a detailed drawing of prairie grass.

#### Cinema

Draw settings for a film or television version of *My Ántonia*. Show the placement of actors, music, costumes, props, sound effects, and lighting. Center on dramatic entrances and exits.

#### Education

1. Role-play the parts of dance teachers, bartenders, farm wives, dressmakers, shopkeepers, farmers, railroad employees, and Harvard law students. Indicate how each

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person contributes to Jim's education. Discuss how the novel would change if Jim had remained at Harvard and visited Tony only through memories.

### Drama

Create several conversations in which characters react to Tony's return from Denver and the birth of her daughter Martha. Include comments by Mrs. Shimerda, Emmaline Burden, Anton Jelinek, Tiny, Ambrosch, Mrs. Steavens, the three Marys, Mrs. Gardener, Harry Paine, Norwegian Anna, Josiah Burden, and Frances Harling. Act out your dialogue for an audio or video taping.

### History and Social Studies

1. Explain to a small group why Cather juxtaposes people of different social and educational levels, tastes, values, and behaviors.
2. Make an oral report on the themes of snobbery and hypocrisy. Explain why Nebraskans view immigrants as ignorant and unpolished because they speak accented English. Comment on men who dance with and lust after spirited, red-cheeked hired girls, but who reject them as potential wives.
3. Create a bulletin board contrasting settings described or mentioned in the text. Place landmarks on a map. Note the areas connected with American frontier literature, especially the Klondike and San Francisco.
4. Create a bulletin board illustrating the effects of immigration on Nebraska history. List surnames of Czech, Russian, Austrian, and Scandinavian families. Locate towns, churches, and other landmarks that display Scandinavian and eastern European influence.

### Language Arts

1. Compose a character sketch emphasizing Cather's strong women.
2. Discuss with a group the purpose of stories about a dying Swedish prospector, a tramp who kills himself by jumping into a thresher, Tony's vindictive grandmother, a Swedish girl whom Wick forces into prostitution, and Pavel's fear of coyotes. Work as a team to compose a story about the Vannis, Jake, Coronado, Joseph Jefferson, Camille, Jesse James, or Black Hawk.
3. Compose a short newspaper article in which you relate the change in the town of Black Hawk after people begin dancing. Name music and dance styles that participants prefer. Describe styles of dress designed by local dress-makers.
4. Present a time table of major incidents in the novel. Note the passage of time from Jim's arrival in Black Hawk to his visit with the Cuzaks. Explain how the school year provides a framework for dating his activities and major events.
5. Explain in a theme how Cather uses literary foils. Why does she depict Lena as forward, Tony as stubborn, Frances as opinionated, Nina as girlish, and Mrs. Harling as brow-beaten? How does Mrs. Shimerda violate the stereotype of housebound farm wife? What type of wife and neighbor is Emmaline Burden?
6. Discuss in a paragraph your response to lyrical descriptions of winter, spring, rain, snow, grain fields, rivers, plants, and animals. Summarize how memories draw Jim back to his childhood and to the farm.
7. Study other works of frontier literature. List standard traits or motifs, for example, isolation, wilderness, tests of

courage, intense labor, oneness with animals, staunch individualism, or yearning for cities.

8. Explain briefly the purpose of realism in historical fiction. What elements in the novel depict an historical era? Why does Willa Cather emphasize Tony's high spirits and lost hopes? What other characters comment on the change in Tony after she returns back from Denver? How does the era reward risk-takers like Tiny Soderball?
9. Read aloud other family-centered works such as Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* or William Gipson's *The Miracle Worker*. Discuss the importance of teamwork, holidays, traditions, and ritual in establishing family rhythms.
10. With a group, create a web site or flash cards explaining these terms: freemasonry, moral maxim, schottische, Mormons, persecution, Providence, their brothers' keepers, Protestantizing, conquistadors, Seven Golden Cities, Siwash Indians, sod house, fraternal order, Masonic Hall, ell, asylum, fast set, steerage, minstrel troupe, civil marriage, blacklisted, journeyman, usury note, and bonus.

### Law

List and summarize laws that characters in the novel break, including assault, communicating threats, fraud, murder, and suicide. Comment on the difference between a law practice in New York and one in Black Hawk.

### Logic

1. Apply a Venn diagram to pairs of unlike characters, e. g., Martha/Tiny, Ambrosch/Gaston Cleric, Mrs. Cutter/Emmaline Burden, Mr. Ordinsky/Blind D'Arnault, Jim/Cuzak, Wick/Mr. Harling, and Otto Fuchs/Larry Donovan. Point out differences in age, experience, social status, ambition, reputation, and background.
2. Compose an extended definition of framework fiction. Explain why Cather gives the impression that Jim Burden wrote the novel and sent it to her in a portfolio, complete with title. Why does she use a masculine persona in her reflection on prairie life?

### Religion

Compose a first person account of the funeral. Explain the conflict of Baptist and Catholic beliefs. Why does Ambrosch alternately sleep and pray? Why do neighbors remember Otto's contribution long after the event? Why does the grave remain special to Jim? Which characters believe Krajek murdered Mr. Shimerda?

### Speech

Compose a short speech in which you contrast prairie couples. Include the lifestyles and work styles of the Shimerdas, Harlings, Gardeners, Burdens, and Cutters. Analyze the importance of trust, money, land, isolation, work, harsh winters, and shared responsibility.

### Science and Health

In a term paper, indicate how Willa Cather's social commentary gives insight into immigrants and their adaptation to weather, agriculture, physical and emotional strain, wild animals, and the austere American prairie.

### Psychology

1. Lead a discussion of pioneer spirit. Assess the qualities that save settlers from despair. Include daring, flexibility, appreciation of nature, pride in work, perseverance, courage, and ambition.
2. Describe aloud Jim's frame of mind when he leaves Virginia and settles at his grandparents' farm. Discuss how arrival on the prairie unsettles the boy and causes him to

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mourn his parents. List clues that Jim will acclimate to the plains, for example, his love of nature and solitude and his pleasure in serving as a messenger.

3. Compile lines that indicate character flaws.
4. Compose an informal essay on the role of humor in grim situations. Explain how Jim's flight in his nightshirt, Mrs. Shimerda's demand for a pot from the Burden kitchen, and Wick Cutter's dying words become comic scenes in otherwise serious episodes.

### ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. Compose a list of scenes for a mural, storyboard, or cartoon depicting these details:
  - a. Mr. Shimerda's funeral and burial
  - b. Lena's attention to customers in her dressmaking shop
  - c. Jim and Tony's visit to a prairie dog town
  - d. the Burdens' Christmas tree
  - e. Mrs. Cutter's arrival at a Kansas City depot
  - f. Mrs. Harling's musicales
  - g. Jim's night in the Cuzak's haymow
  - h. Tiny's arrival in San Francisco
  - i. Gaston Cleric's lessons with Jim
  - j. Emmaline Burden's packing of goods for the Shimerdas
2. Summarize ways that prairie women create happiness and contentment apart from men.
3. Characterize phases of Tony's life, beginning with young girlhood as an immigrant from Bohemia, growing up on the farm, hiring out to the Harlings in Black Hawk, working for the Cutters, becoming a farm laborer, eloping, and becoming a wife and mother. Explain why photographs are important to her.
4. Explain the role of anecdotes and stories to the text. Note the points in the narrative when characters reveal such reflections as the death of the newlyweds, Tony's return from living over a month with Donovan, the suicide of a harvester in the reaping machine, Peter and Pavel's flight from wolves that devour newlyweds, and Wick's evil reputation.

## ANSWER KEY

### VOCABULARY TEST

1. menace, conventional
6. evasions, propitiate
2. poulticing, arnica
7. listlessly, melancholy
3. aristocrats, menial
8. meditative, foresee
4. stalwart, grizzled
9. notoriety, steerage
5. solicitude, grave
10. clannish, liberal

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Identification (20 points)

- |                      |                  |
|----------------------|------------------|
| 1. Otto Fuchs        | 6. Lena Lingard  |
| 2. Wick Cutter       | 7. Larry Donovan |
| 3. Josiah Burden     | 8. Anton Cuzak   |
| 4. Ambrosch          | 9. Mrs. Steavens |
| 5. Crazy Mary Benson | 10. Mr. Harling  |

#### Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

- |                  |                      |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Otto          | 6. the Vannis        |
| 2. Harvard       | 7. prairie-dog town  |
| 3. Ambrosch      | 8. messenger         |
| 4. pot           | 9. Mr. Shimerda      |
| 5. Josiah Burden | 10. Sylvester Lovett |

#### Part III: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. T  |
| 2. T | 7. F  |
| 3. T | 8. F  |
| 4. F | 9. T  |
| 5. T | 10. F |

#### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. F  |
| 2. A | 7. J  |
| 3. H | 8. C  |
| 4. D | 9. E  |
| 5. B | 10. I |

#### Part II: Fill-In (20 points)

1. Lena, Camille
2. farmers, immigrants
3. Jake, Burdens
4. Mr. Shimerda, Christmas tree
5. Ambrosch, shoes

#### Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

1. Lena, dressmaking
2. Josiah Burden, knitted socks
3. get involved with Lena, go to college
4. Anton Jelinek, priest
5. swimming, a Conquistador's sword

#### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

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### VOCABULARY TEST

Complete each of the following sentences with an appropriate pair of words from the list below. You will have answers left over when you finish.

aristocrats, menial  
clannish, liberal  
evasions, propitiate  
listlessly, melancholy  
meditative, foresee  
notoriety, steerage  
solicitude, grave  
weevil, hartshorn

cholera, sacrament  
disdainful, minstrel  
lariat, gorging  
maxims, whereat  
menace, conventional  
poulticing, arnica  
stalwart, grizzled  
zest, impose

1. The country girls were considered a \_\_\_\_\_ to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a \_\_\_\_\_ background.
2. She spent the whole morning bathing and \_\_\_\_\_ me, and rubbing me with \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Larry Donovan was a passenger conductor, one of those train-crew \_\_\_\_\_ who are always afraid that someone may ask them to put up a car-window, and who, if requested to perform such a \_\_\_\_\_ service, silently point to the button that calls the porter.
4. Antonia came in and stood before me; a \_\_\_\_\_, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little \_\_\_\_\_.
5. I was thinking about Antonia and her children; about Anna's \_\_\_\_\_ for her, Ambrosch's \_\_\_\_\_ affection, Leo's jealous, animal little love.
6. The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of \_\_\_\_\_ and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to \_\_\_\_\_ the tongue of gossip.
7. I propped my book open and stared \_\_\_\_\_ at the page of the "Georgics" where tomorrow's lesson began. It opened with the \_\_\_\_\_ reflection \_\_\_\_\_ that, in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee.
8. It took a clear, \_\_\_\_\_ eye like my grandfather's to \_\_\_\_\_ that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war.
9. This event made Fuchs the object of undeserved \_\_\_\_\_, since he was travelling with her. The \_\_\_\_\_ stewardess was indignant with him, the doctor regarded him with suspicion.
10. If these foreigners are so \_\_\_\_\_, Mr. Bushy, we'll have to have an American graveyard that will be more \_\_\_\_\_-minded.

**MY ANTONIA**

**COMPREHENSION TEST A**

**Part I: Identification (20 points)**

Identify the following characters by their descriptions:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. the ends of a moustache twisted into little horns
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. merciless Black Hawk money-lender
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. silver-rimmed spectacles used to read several Psalms
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. sly and suspicious with little shrewd eyes
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. walked 200 miles on feet hard as hooves
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. brushed, smoothed, and dressed like a town girl with perfect composure
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. a train-crew aristocrat with an air of official aloofness
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. failed furrier and orange grower
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. widow who teaches sewing and hemstitching
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. an enterprising grain merchant and tyrant to his family

**Part II: Short Answer (20 points)**

Answer the following questions in a word or phrase and explain its significance.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Whom do neighbors remember for making a coffin?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Where does Gaston Cleric urge Jim to study law?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Whom does Mrs. Stevens threaten if anything happens to Martha?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. What does Mrs. Shimerda covet in Emmaline's kitchen?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Who believes that all prayers of good people are good?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Who brings the dance tent to Black Hawk?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Where do Tony and Jim encounter the rattlesnake?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. What job do Jim and Dude perform with the sleigh?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Whom does Tony think of when she watches Jim's commencement speech?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Who dallies with Lena, but marries a widow with land?

## MY ANTONIA

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- 1. Emmaline Burden weeps because Jim visits Lena's room in Lincoln.
- 2. Chris comes to town to buy Christmas gifts for Berthe, his mother.
- 3. Lena believes that Ole is just lonesome and wants someone to be with.
- 4. Tony conceals from Anton that she is lonesome for Denver.
- 5. Rudolph and his father visit the Wilber street fair.
- 6. Wick murders Mrs. Cutter to keep her from inheriting his money.
- 7. The Burdens keep up with Otto and Jake through regular letters from the Yankee Girl Mine.
- 8. After Johnson dies in Dawson City, Tiny writes Lena in Lincoln and offers her a job in San Francisco.
- 9. Tony has bad teeth, but refuses to have them treated because she is ashamed that Larry Donovan abandoned her.
- 10. The monogrammed umbrella reminds Jim of his brief romance with Lena.

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Compare two characters who gossip or criticize hired girls.
- 2. List ways that Tony helps Mrs. Harling.
- 3. Compare Tony in girlhood and as a wife and mother.
- 4. Express the novel's depiction of farm work.
- 5. Describe ways that Jim tries to impress and amuse Tony.

**MY ANTONIA**

**COMPREHENSION TEST B**

**Part I: Matching (20 points)**

Match the following actions with places and names from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- |                                                                            |                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| ___ 1. Mrs. Shimerda lives more comfortably than she did in the sod house. | A. Kansas City            |
| ___ 2. Mrs. Cutter realizes she has been tricked.                          | B. Firemen's Hall         |
| ___ 3. Jim encounters the author on a long train trip.                     | C. Atlantic Ocean         |
| ___ 4. Blind d'Arnault recognizes the sounds of women dancing.             | D. Opera House            |
| ___ 5. Jim dances the schottische with Tony.                               | E. barn                   |
| ___ 6. Tiny works in Black Hawk.                                           | F. Boys' Home Hotel       |
| ___ 7. Mr. Shimerda is buried in frozen earth.                             | G. log house              |
| ___ 8. Otto assists a woman who gives birth to triplets.                   | H. Iowa                   |
| ___ 9. Krajiek keeps watch on the Shimerdas.                               | I. Dawson City            |
| ___ 10. Tiny nurses a dying Swede.                                         | J. corner of the property |

**Part II: Fill-in (20 points)**

Fill in the following statements with names or details.

1. In April, Jim escorts \_\_\_\_\_ to opera and stage plays and weeps during the performance of \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The poorest American \_\_\_\_\_ refuse to hire out their daughters; \_\_\_\_\_ prosper because their girls take outside jobs and marry rich men.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ and Otto leave for the west after the \_\_\_\_\_ move to Black Hawk.
4. On Christmas Day, \_\_\_\_\_ spends the afternoon and evening with the Burdens and kneels beside the \_\_\_\_\_.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ demands Tony's wages; Mrs. Harling pays her three dollars a week plus \_\_\_\_\_.

## MY ANTONIA

### Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline a word or phrase to complete each of the following statements.

1. (Mrs. Cutter, Tiny, Frances, Lena) knocks at the Harlings' door and tells Tony and Mrs. Harling that she is learning (the schottische, dressmaking, to help Mr. Harling at the grain elevator, to drive a sledge.)
2. (Josiah Burden, Pavel, Anton Jelinek, the coroner) charges nothing for the cow; Mrs. Shimerda responds by giving Jake (Christmas ornaments from Austria, a book on Jesse James, handknitted socks, powdered mushrooms.)
3. Tony insists that Jim not (get involved with Lena, dance at the Vannis' tent, fight Wick Cutter, lie to Emmaline Burden) and that he (pick her up at Mrs. Thomas's shop, go to college, keep the strong box under the bed, play music from opera.)
4. (Anton Jelinek, Mr. Bushy, Rudolph, Marek) understands how much the Shimerdas want a (cow, tutor for Yulka, priest, friend who speaks Norwegian.)
5. After an afternoon of (dancing, swimming, piano music by Blind d'Arnault, riding Dude), Jim tells the hired girls about (a golden plow, how Larry jilted Tony, a Conquistador's sword, the money and gifts Ambrosch gave his sister.)

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain how Jim learns news from Black Hawk after he establishes his practice in New York.
2. Compare the attitudes of these prairie women: Tony, Mrs. Shimerda, Mrs. Steavens, Crazy Mary Benson, the "three Bohemian Marys," Lena Lingard, and Emmaline Burden.
3. Account for Jim's dislike of prejudice toward hired girls.
4. Describe activities that bring together the people of Black Hawk.
5. Summarize the ways that community overcomes the isolation of the prairie, particularly in winter.



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