



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1987 Volume II: Epic, Romance and the American Dream

Willa Cather's *My Antonia*: "The Happiness and the Curse"

Curriculum Unit 87.02.01
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This curriculum unit will be used as a segment of the American literature course for honors, college, and basic junior students. Also, it could be integrated with an American history course and correlated with the themes of immigration and westward expansion. In addition, it could be used appropriately for English four students if they have not read the novel in their junior year. It should take at least two weeks to cover adequately and experience deeply. It should be highly effective if taught with other novels or classics such as: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *O Pioneers!*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, *Main Street*, *Spoon River Anthology*, *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider*, *An American Tragedy*, *Ethan Frome*, and *Our Town* as a comparative group of American fiction.

A visit to the Yale Art Gallery to view early Twentieth Century paintings and sculpture would make this unit even more stimulating and pleasurable. Films for the Humanities has produced a film called *Willa Cather's America* which would serve as an ideal springboard for this unit. The film shows Cather's places and characters—the American land, her choice of characters and her countries—the red grass prairie of *My Antonia*, the New Mexico canyons of *Death Comes to the Archbishop*, and the many places of New York.

My Antonia is an ideal book to introduce to high school students because it deals with the great variety of people from other countries who were confronted simultaneously with the creation of new lives and a new country. Willa Cather focused on depicting ethnic values of the different cultures of the various immigrants who came to Nebraska. She wrote that Slavonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Bohemian and Latin "spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette."¹ Undoubtedly, students will want to know why people like the Shimerdas, the Lindgards, Krajiek, Otto, Anton Jelinek, Anton Cuzak, Peter, and Pavel emigrated to America. Moreover, they will be amazed at the hardships, the plight, and the conditions of life on the rural Nebraska prairie land of late nineteenth century America. Since Cather peopled her fiction with individuals and immigrant groups who had not been written about before, students will find her characters individualized, intriguing and true-to-life. These resourceful and brave people trekked into the unknown land of the Midwest and Nebraska, brought their families, and sometimes hired hands with them. About *My Antonia* H.L. Mencken wrote, "I know of no novel that makes the remote folk of the western prairies more real . . . and I know of none that makes them seem better worth knowing . . ." ²

Willa Cather said in her later years about Nebraska: "that country was the happiness and the curse" of her life.³ She greatly admired the pioneers who struggled to cope with the wilderness and to make a better life for themselves and their families. She loved the trees and the wildflowers, especially the sunflowers along the roads which she wrote always "seemed the roads to freedom." Moreover, she believed that the tree's lives

were connected with pioneers and that no place in the world grew more beautiful flowers than Nebraska. ⁴ Cather knew and wrote passionately not only of the resourcefulness, determination, and bravery of the first group of pioneers who tried to survive on their hope in the American dream, but also of the harshness, coldness and brutality of pioneer life in the prairie. Indeed, *My Antonia* resonates with Homeric and epic themes.

Most students will admire Cather's protagonists (especially Antonia) who possess the imagination and ideas to seek a more hopeful destiny in an unfamiliar territory through coping with hardships and stoically overcoming many of them. The heart of the novel, however, lies in Antonia's harmony and creativity with her environment and her contribution to the creation of new lives and a new country. "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." Jim remarks. (p. 2) I will discuss with students why Antonia has such a strong effect on the characters around her. As a catalyst for further discussion, I will ask the following questions. In what ways did Antonia symbolize the Nebraska land? How was she like Nebraska during the later part of the nineteenth century? Would she have made the same impression on family, friends, and neighbors if she had lived in another place? What character quality does Antonia portray during her life? Does her character change? Was her life a success?

The author's exploration of the relationship between him and Antonia is an uncommon one. I want the class to consider and express their own ideas on personal relationships. What is Jim's attitude toward Antonia and how does she feel about him? Does Jim seem romantic about Antonia and the other country girls? Even though most of the characters project individuality, they are partially revealed through their relationships with Antonia. For example, Ambrosch's and his mother's relationship with Antonia reveal much about them, as do the other characters, such as Mrs. Harling, Larry Donovan, Anton Cuzak, Lena Lingard, and Tiny Soderball. Furthermore, Lena Lingard, the blond Norwegian, who becomes a successful dressmaker is a foil to Antonia. Lena is creative, successful and generous too, yet she does not desire to marry and raise children as Antonia does, since she wants her freedom and a successful, self-sufficient life. Therefore, she does not measure up to the heroism represented by Antonia.

As the reader experiences life on the prairie land, one realizes that the land is a richly complex symbol representing great hardships and great rewards. It serves as a natural and vital force that begins and sustains all living things in rich abundance—if one works hard enough cultivating it. Yet, the land is also a source of back-breaking labor, sacrifice, and deprivation during bad years. The pioneers felt challenged by the prairie land because of the packed grass and sod that covered it. In order to plant corn, wheat, sorghum, winter fodder, and other crops, they had to break up the sod with axes and hand plows. After the land was planted with crops, plagues of grasshoppers and locusts could destroy them and cause severe privation. Drought, prairie fires, and frost could also attack their hard-won planted fields.

The settlers had to depend mainly upon themselves, and to a lesser extent, their neighbors for farming equipment, for building houses, and for provisions. ⁵ Most of them had to build their houses out of the prairie sod as there were very few trees. Or, they could dig into a ravine and make a "cave-like" dugout with a "shed-like shelter, with a door and window set into a front wall of sod and a roof of sod supported by handhewn poplar logs." These sod shelters were very cramped, dark, wet, and uncomfortable, but eventually families hoped to build a frame house after about five years. (p. vii) The land in *My Antonia* is a powerful protagonist in the conflict to survive and prosper. The sense of space of the plains, land, and prairie gives an impression of greatness, "an epic scope" which Cather wouldn't have achieved if she had used another or smaller background. A pioneer herself, Cather in an interview many years after she had moved from Virginia to

Nebraska recalled:

My grandfather's homestead was about eighteen miles from Red Cloud—a little town on the Burlington . . . We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding onto the side of the wagon box to steady myself—the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days . . . 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 would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron. ⁶

Bernice Slote tells us that Cather experienced pioneer life in all its duality “both the dark and the bright of the moon, and she wrote of both sides.” ⁷ In the early years of settling in Nebraska there were many warm, exciting and memorable experiences too. Since the pioneers lived close together at first, they could give support and assistance to one another and become their brother's keeper. The family of the native-born Jim Burden often brought bundles of clothing, wood, and other provisions to the poor Bohemian Shimerda family. Anton Jelinek, a young Bohemian often rode on his horse to help others with their troubles. He, too, is very responsible and helpful in arranging the funeral after Mr. Shimerda's suicide when the Norwegians didn't want to have his body buried in their cemetery. Some of the pioneers, but not all, conquered the land, made it flourish, and helped others to gather their crops, thresh their grain and to build their houses.

The land gave opportunities for personal development and artistic inspiration also. Jim Burden remarks about his early Nebraskan life: “I was entirely happy . . . that is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great. (p. 15) “All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn.” (p. 21) “Antonia . . . lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true . . . She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting . . . She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.” (p. 229)

The suffering of change, family members growing older and dying, the disasters and uncertainties of the pioneers, the grave at the crossroads of Antonia's sensitive father who killed himself, the poverty, trouble, anxiety about everyday living, the burdensome, back-breaking labor of the immigrants' lives, and the sense of irreparable loss in time are one aspect of the duality of *My Antonia*. The other is the timelessness and creativity of those images associated with Antonia, the stoical strength of the hired men and the vivacity of spirit of the hired girls. The earth, like the plow image on the sun, expresses the ultimate relationship and continuity between humans and the universe. Cather once remarked that the city robbed man of his roots, heritage and continuity of feeling with the earth and mankind. The land of the Nebraskan country symbolized permanence, freedom of spirit, timelessness, and a sense of endurance. She viewed earth and nature as the personal, primeval force that enriched and sustained life and creativity. The pioneers passed on their old customs, culture and ways of life that enriched the land and the new way of life. The frontier gave the immigrants and pioneers creative individualism, a free will and an opportunity to develop the pioneer spirit. It would be interesting to make students recognize the contributions to the American character of people like the Shimerdas and the Lingards. Students will be stimulated to do research on various national groups in America to find out what they have added to America's development. Knowledge about the contributions of the various national and ethnic groups could include traditions, food, customs, names of places, and the character of the people.

After the War between the States, The Homestead Act of 1862 was passed by Congress. This gave to any

American citizen over twenty-one the title of 160 acres of land, if he lived on the land for five years and improved it, starting on January 1, 1863. Many homesteaders, as they were called, from various countries of Europe were lured to stake out their territory in the wild land. ⁸ Sponsors believed that the law would help the owners improve the land and build small farms on it. Many of the pioneers who tried to build homesteads faced many difficulties, disappointments, and tragedies. Farming conditions were unfavorable because of drought periods when rainfall was meager and scarce. There was an economic depression and Nebraska was once considered the “Great American Desert.” One of the themes of *My Antonia* is the heroic idealism of the settlers. Nebraska was the first state and settlement beyond the Mississippi after the Civil War. ⁹ James Schroeter has written: “Within a single decade, half a million people—Yankee settlers, sod-house pioneers out of the Lincoln Country, Danes, Norwegians, Bohemians, Poles—pulled up stakes or emigrated from the farms of northern and eastern Europe to settle on the plains of a region [Nebraska].” ¹⁰

There are scenes in *My Antonia* that include the difficulty and failure of life as a pioneer. One of Cather’s early stories in the *Hesperia* is the one called “Peter,” the tragedy of the lonely, sensitive Frances Sadilek who becomes disheartened and disillusioned with Nebraska and takes his own life. ¹¹ This true event made such an indelible impression on Cather when she first came to Nebraska that she changed his name to Mr. Shimerda, the Bohemian, and included the episode in *My Antonia*. Here Mr. Shimerda breaks his precious fiddle angrily across his knees and then shoots himself with his gun. His son, Ambrosch, carries the bow to town to sell before his father’s funeral.

Willa Cather immortalized the settings of Webster County, Lincoln, and Red Cloud, Nebraska. Thus it is much more than a place on the map. It has an existence of its own. She vividly conveys the indelible impression that the land possesses—strength, force, American folklore, and symbolic meaning.

Symbols, sense, imagery, color, and figures of speech are particularly rich and poetic in *My Antonia*. The New Postwar Critics in the 1950’s stimulated many readers to re-read Cather’s novels. They discovered that they were full of myth and symbol. ¹² Therefore, this novel will be a valuable one to help inexperienced readers develop the sophistication to understand symbolism, myth, and figurative language. Cather was a high school teacher herself who possessed the ability to take inexperienced readers and bring them to a sophisticated level of understanding as well as awaken their curiosity and enthusiasm. Her masterful style teaches students to see differently and challenges them to read perceptively and deeply. She believed that “Every great work of art should teach, but never preach.” ¹³

There is the memorable, artistic scene where Jim Burden and some hired girls from the town of Black Hawk spending an afternoon by the river, spot a curious black figure of a plow that has been left standing in the field against the setting sun: “There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.” (p. 159) Many vivid, memorable symbols such as this one give power to Cather’s artistic achievement. The plow against the sun “is a romanticizing and mythologizing of the American West.” ¹⁴ Nature symbolized by the plow combine in the harmonious blending of the work of the earth with heaven. Furthermore, the plow image exemplifies humans recognizing their role as providers of food. Magnified by the sun, it also suggests “heroic physical proportions.” It is the symbol of creativity in the development of a new country. A symbol of the machine and the force that will change the landscape, it suggests advancement and progress. Finally, the plow could be seen as an artistic object suggesting Cather’s desire to transcend time and change. Jim Burden describes the plow as “picture writing on the sun.” (p. 159) This powerfully vivid scene, which ends Jim’s boyhood stage, exemplifies Cather’s artistic style in this novel.

Another symbol that fits together very effectively in *My Antonia* is the detestable, fat rattlesnake that horrifies Jim and Antonia, and that Jim kills, thus making him greatly admired in the eyes of Antonia. (p. 32) Krajiek the dishonest, greedy money lender who fleeced the Shimerdas and cheated the two Russians, Pavel and Peter, and nearly seduced Antonia, is similar to the rattlesnake attacking the prairie dog. Humanity and nature both breed such creatures. "They hated Krajiek, but they clung to him because he was the only human being . . . from who they could get information . . . They kept him in their hole and fed him for the same reason that the brown owls house the rattlesnakes—because they did not know how to get rid of him." (p. 23)

In another scene, the narrator Jim gives a vivid description of the landscape: "The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed . . . It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting up of a day." (p. 28) The symbolic illusion is to the Lord appearing to Moses. "And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush, and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning yet it was not consumed." (Exodus 3:2, New Oxford Bible)

Then, Cather uses history and legend in the story Jim tells the girls about Coronado and his search for the Seven Golden Cities. (p. 158) Coronado, the Spanish explorer wandered through the Southwest and perhaps to Nebraska. This connects the Nebraska landscape with all the ancient quests, as well as the history of Spanish penetration of North America.¹⁵ Also, Coronado suggests the adventurous spirit, romance and the kind of dreams young people have. A metal stirrup and sword were found by a farmer turning the sod of the prairie. Coronado died of a broken heart in his futile quest for gold. The death of Antonia's father echoes the Coronado symbol in that his death occurred in the wilderness of America that refused to yield its treasure.¹⁶ Antonia's father and the two Russians could not grapple with the challenge of America, thus they became victims and were defeated by the hardships of the immigrant's life.

The use of symbols is especially evident toward the end of the novel when after twenty years Jim Burden marshals his courage to return to Black Hawk to visit his old childhood friend, Antonia, who has married Anton Cuzak. She greets him with all the old enthusiasm and affection after laboring on the farm for many years and raising her large brood of eleven children. She appears "in the full vigour of her personality battered but not diminished." (p. 216) When taken to visit the fruit cave, Jim describes the children as "a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight." (p. 220) Antonia's dark and fair children burst forth with the intensity of life suggesting Antonia's fulfillment and enrichment after her dark beginnings in the cave of her early immigrant life. In addition, touching the trees in the orchard, she says that she loves her trees "as if they were people." (p. 221) One could say about her creative and adventurous life (by using Faulkner's words) that she and her family will prosper because she possesses "a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance" and it is through her spirit of determination, sacrifice and hard work that the trees, garden and her family come to ripeness and fruition. Jim says of Antonia: "all the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions. It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races." (p. 229) Antonia stands for the undefeated strength, power, and spirit of the pioneers. She not only displays a great physical strength, but also an inner spiritual one. Antonia may have given up something for her marriage but from another point of view, she has gained much—a loving husband, eleven children and the pride of accomplishment. I believe that my students will feel and think that way about *My Antonia*. Cather's novel not only offers opportunities for students to think about the immigrant's condition and experience in the western frontier of America in the late 1900's, but also to reflect on and appreciate her craftsmanship. To tell her story of the Nebraska frontier, she has created many memorable and complex characters who possess hidden recesses of personality and take us by surprise. Moreover, her characters take on vivid colors, live and breathe as they did in reality.

My Antonia is an ideal book for introducing readers to the various elements of character, theme, setting and style. Antonia's story is told with vividness of description and rhythm of phrase. Cather searches for the exact word, thus every word is important and carries its own weight.

Thematically *My Antonia* lends itself to many stimulating topics for discussion such as: the American dream, the sense of place, the reverence for nature and art, the idealization of a past way of life, women's relations with men, the deceptive nature of material wealth, the individual in a hostile environment and what is the something valuable and eternal that is in each human being?

One could launch *My Antonia* by a discussion about the following: Do you have a pioneering story that has been told by any of your grandparents? Often we hear of the better life of today's women compared with the arduous life of pioneer women. "Are there complexities in modern society that create problems pioneer women never encountered?" Do you know of any person today who can be said to be a pioneer? ¹⁷

Objectives

1. To enrich students' vocabularies from the words used in *My Antonia* .
2. To encourage students to analyze and interpret the main and minor characters.
3. To improve writing skills by providing a variety of writing assignments related to *My Antonia* .
4. To develop the literary ability to recognize and understand theme, figurative language, and symbols.
5. To help students not only to analyze the novel, but also to experience it deeply and to relate it to their own lives.
6. To urge students to become actively involved in analyzing and discussing the stories.
7. To introduce students to the central themes of Cather's novels.
8. To introduce students to biographical information about the author and period in which *My Antonia* takes place.
9. To supplement the novel with additional reading, composition, oral, and artistic activities.

Reading Guide for *My Antonia*

These questions will help to focus students' attention on the important themes, meanings, characterizations and artistry of the novel, as well as help them to achieve understanding and appreciation. They will serve as a guide for students of all levels of ability and can be used for occasional quizzes. The questions should be reviewed with the class before the students start their reading.

Directions Some of the following questions require literal answers while others require creative, inferential, or critical thinking. Write complete answers in your notebook or journal as you proceed with your reading.

Introduction and Book One, Chapters 1 and 2:

1. From what point of view is *My Antonia* told?
2. Why does the author use this point of view? Is it effective?
3. Jim traveled on a train from Virginia to Black Hawk, Nebraska around 1880. What are some of the feelings he might have had?
4. What kind of a person is Jim Burden? Is he a three-dimensional character? What do you learn about him in the introduction? Does he now have a fulfilling life?
5. Explain Jim's concept of happiness (p. 15): "to be dissolved into something complete and great:"
6. "It was a kind of freemasonry," Jim said about growing up in "a little prairie town." (p.1) What does he mean?

Chapters 3—9:

1. What were some of the many challenging difficulties, miseries, and hardships that the pioneers had to face?
2. Did all the various ethnic individuals and pioneer groups help each other when they first arrived in Black Hawk? Explain.
3. What were some of the prejudices which the pioneers had?
4. Antonia is generous—spirited, eager to learn, affectionate, highspirited and tough. What elements shaped her personality and character? Does she grow, change and develop throughout the novel?
5. Is there a contrast between the way Willa Cather characterizes the native-born Nebraska settlers versus the European pioneers?
6. Would you predict that the Shimerdas will survive and prosper in America?
7. What are the various members of the Shimerda family like?
8. What advantages or disadvantages did Jim have in living among people of different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds.
9. What impression do you receive from the snake-killing scene?

Chapters 10—16:

1. How did the Shimerdas react during the extreme first Nebraska winter?
2. What kind of style best describes the novel? Give specific examples of Cather's rhetoric, vocabulary and figures of speech.
3. Show how Cather uses complex and contrasting emotions such as grandness and meanness or sadness and happiness in certain scenes in these chapters.
4. How did Mrs. Shimerda react to her difficult situation in her struggle against hardships?
5. Why did Mr. Shimerda commit suicide? Why did this make such a significant impression on Jim?

Chapters 17—19:

1. What were some of the details and impressions of Spring on the prairie?
2. Explain the statement: "It took a clear meditative eye like my grandfather's to foresee that they [the cornfields] 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, . . . which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war."

Book Two, Chapters 1—7:

1. Why has Antonia, whose life is so different from Jim's, made such a significant impression on him?
2. Why do you think Cather included the story of the tramp at the Iverson's harvest?
3. Why did Mrs. Harling like Antonia so much?
4. Give an example of individual heroism or nobility from these chapters. Explain why you think the episode is heroic or noble.

Chapters 8—15:

1. Describe the character of Wick Cutter. Why did he and his wife live together?

2. What were some of the children's Spring activities?
3. Why didn't Mr. Harling want Antonia to attend the dances in town?
4. Explain the statement: "The country girls were considered a menace to the social order" and "The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth."
5. What were some of the contributions of Lena, Tina, and Antonia to some of the families who hired them?

Book Three:

1. What do you learn about Antonia in these four chapters?
2. What influence did the scholarly Gaston Cleric have on Jim Burden?
3. What role does the Norwegian, Lena Lingard play in *My Antonia* ? How does she contrast with Antonia? Is she a complex, well-developed character?
4. Why were Jim and Lena so greatly impressed with the play *Camille* ?
5. Why does Jim still hold fast to his memories of the past?

Book Four:

1. What were some of the traits that Lena and Tiny had in common?
2. What role does the Widow Stevens play in the novel?
3. What traits in Antonia led to her betrayal by Donovan?
4. Why do some of the smug citizens of Black Hawk feel that they belong to the upper class?
5. What progress have the farm families made since they first arrived in Nebraska?
6. Explain why Cather called the part of the novel, "The Pioneer Woman's Story"?

Book Five:

1. Explain why Cather called this last part of the novel “Cuzak’s Boys”?
2. Explain the following remarks that Jim says about Antonia: “All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions. It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.”
3. In what ways does Antonia seem like the young girl Jim had known? Has she changed much since the days of their childhood?
4. What kind of relationship do Cuzak and Antonia have? What role does Cuzak play in Antonia’s life.
5. What do you think will happen to Antonia and Cuzak’s sons and daughters?
6. Do you think Jim Burden actually meant what he said in the introduction: “here is the thing about Antonia? . . . I didn’t take time to arrange it; I simply wrote down pretty much all that her name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn’t any form.” Do you think the novel has form and unity? If so, how is it achieved?

Character Analysis

By studying the characters, students can learn to understand and appreciate the complexities, depth, and contradictions of excellent characterizations and of human personality and nature. An author describes a character in the following ways:

1. Action—what the character does.
2. Appearance—how the character looks.
3. Dialogue—what the character says or thinks and what others speak to him or about him.
4. Physical and emotional atmosphere—where the character lives, period of time, social class, events occurring around the character.
5. Stream of consciousness—the thoughts, feelings and imaginings that enter a character’s mind.
6. Comments by the author describing the character.

In each passage below from *My Antonia* decide which of the different ways Willa Cather is depicting the characters of Antonia, Anton Jelinek, Mrs. Burden, Mr. Harling, Mrs. Harling, Lena Lingard, Anton Cuzak, and Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda:

Person Method Quotation Or Description

Antonia	_____	1. Antonia coming home with her work-team in the evening.
Jim Burden	_____	2. "I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would he would be."
Antonia	_____	3. "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood."
Jim Burden	_____	4. "At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great."
Antonia	_____	5. "Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade . . . fixed there like the old woodcuts of ones first primer."
Mr. Shimerda	_____	6. Antonia says that her father "don't like this kawn-tree."
Mrs. Burden	_____	7. "Grandmother went on talking in her polite Virginia way, not admitting their stark need or her own remissness."
Mr. Shimerda	_____	8. He shot himself.
Mrs. Harling	_____	9. "Grandfather said Frances Harling was as good a judge of credits as any banker in the county. The two or three men who had tried to take advantage of her in a deal acquired celebrity by defeat."
Anton Jelinek	_____	10. "He was a strapping young fellow in the early twenties then, handsome, warmhearted and full of life, . . ."
Antonia	_____	11 "She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true . . ."
Antonia	_____	12. "She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."
Mrs. Shimerda	_____	13. Mrs. Shimerda laughed scornfully and "catching up an empty coffee pot from the shelf, shook it at us with a look positively vindictive."
Mr. Harling	_____	14. Mr. Harling forbid Antonia to attend the dances at the pavilion in Black Hawk.
Lena Lingard	_____	15. "I'm in business for myself. I have a dressmaking shop . . . I've made a real good start."
Jim Burden	_____	16. "I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall."
Antonia	_____	17. "She was there, in the full vigors of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky breathy voice . . ."
Anton Cuzak	_____	18. "He looked like a humorous philosopher who had hitched up one shoulder under the burdens of life, and gone on his way having a good time when he could."

Unit Evaluation of My Antonia

The following unit evaluation can be used completely or parts of it can be used as is appropriate for different levels of students. Part I. requires students to identify characters. Part II. measures students understanding of meaning, speaker, situation, significance and theme of a variety of passages from the novel. Part III. measures deeper and broader understanding of *My Antonia* . Part IV. focuses on theme and requires students to use creative and inferential thinking about the meaning of the novel:

I. Identify ten of the following by telling something significant about him/her or it:

1. Antonia Shimerda
2. Jim Burden
3. Otto Fuchs

4. Krajiek
5. Peter and Pavel
6. Tiny Soderball
7. Charley Harling
8. Blind d'Arnault
9. The Boys' Home
10. Wick Cutter
11. Larry Donovan
12. Anton Cuzak

II. Identify the speaker and situation, and discuss the significance in terms of plot, character, or theme, of six of the following quotes:

1a. “. . . if you can find that old rooster that got his comb froze, just give his neck a twist, and we'll take him along. There's not good reason why Mrs. Shimerda couldn't have got hens from her neighbors last fall and had a henhouse going by now. I reckon she was confused and didn't know where to begin.”

2b. “The older girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like Antonia, been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new.”

3c. “I think, Emmaline, I will ask Antonia to come over and help you in the kitchen. She will be glad to earn something, and it will be a good time to end misunderstandings. Do you want to go with me, Jim?”

4d. “She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last.”

5e. “Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he

exclaimed, 'My Antonia!'"

6f. "Oh, I'm not worrying, Mrs. Burden! I can bring something out of that girl. She's barely seventeen, not too old to learn new ways. She's good-looking, too!

7g. "It was a beautiful blue morning. The buffalo-peas were blooming in pink and purple masses along the roadside, and the larks, perched on last year's dried sunflower stalks, were singing straight at the sun, their heads thrown back and their yellow breasts aquiver."

8h. "For Mrs. Thomas, the dressmaker. She is going to teach us to sew. She says I have quite a knack, I'm through with the farm. There ain't any end to the work on a farm, and always so much trouble happens. I'm going to be a dressmaker."

9i. ". . . you're a kid I'm awful fond of, anyhow! You can like me all you want to, but if I see you hanging round with Lena much, I'll go to your grandmother . . . Lena's all right, only—well, you know yourself she's soft that way. She can't help it. It's natural to her."

III. Short Essays: Use specific quotations, episodes and supporting details from the novel to support your opinions.

1. Discuss Mr. Shimerda's death, including such things as the circumstances and significance of it and the contributions made by the people around the Shimerdas at the time of the death.
2. Discuss the changes of important stages in Antonia's life from her girlhood to the end of the book.
3. Discuss your interpretation of the relationship between Jim and Antonia, including such things as how they felt about each other and what they meant to each other.

IV. List (in phrases) at least five important themes which you feel are central to this novel.

Some Suggestions for Writing Assignments

1. After reading *My Antonia* and learning about the characters, write a portrait of a friend, neighbor, grandparent, or parent who gave you a deeper understanding, greater awareness, and better appreciation of life.
2. Would you be interested in visiting, joining a moon expedition, or pioneering on the moon?

Why or why not? If you were a pioneer on the moon, what do you imagine would be some of your problems, difficulties, or fears?

3. Write the obituary or eulogy for Mr. Shimerda that would appear in the *Nebraska Times* shortly after his death.

Include facts of Mr. Shimerda's background, parentage, ancestors, education, accomplishments, and personal life.

Include Mr. Shimerda's values, beliefs, attitudes, and hopes.

Include opinions, remarks and comments about him as expressed by family members, his wife and friends.

4. Discuss Antonia's development as a person of strength, integrity, and creativity. Support your position by citing related scenes from *My Antonia*.

5. Do a research paper on one of the following:

Willa Cather's life

The Oregon Trail

The Mormons

Coronado and the Seven Golden Cities

The Wild West, the Klondike and the Alaskan Gold Rush

Homesteading in Nebraska

The immigrant experience in America

Westward Expansion

6. Neil Armstrong in 1969 while on the moon said: ". . . one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Write an essay relating Armstrong's statement to the theme of *My Antonia*.

7. Compare and contrast Lena Lingard with Antonia Shimerda Cuzak, giving evidence from the novel to show how they are alike and how they differ.

8. Discuss the element of evil as shown in *My Antonia*. How do the evil characters manipulate the good characters? How should people deal with evil characters?

9. Choose a character from *My Antonia* and write an essay on that person's dreams and hopes for his/her future and how his/her life is influenced by those dreams.

10. In *My Antonia* the narrator is Jim Burden, an adult who tells the story of his childhood and of Antonia's with the benefit of his adult knowledge. Why do you think Willa Cather chose Jim, the corporation lawyer, to tell the story? Pay close attention to the brief prologue related by a narrator other than Jim.

NOTES

1. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner, *The Art of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. viii.
2. James Schroeter, ed. *Willa Cather and Her Critics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967) p. 9.
3. Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1951), p. xi.
4. Bennett, p. 140-144.
5. Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, Introduction by Walter Havighurst (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), p. vi. All subsequent references to this book will be in parenthesis in the body of the paper.
6. Philadelphia Record, August 9, 1913; reprinted in *The Kingdom of Art*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 448.
7. Bernice Slote, *The Kingdom of Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 109.
8. *World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Field Enterprise Educational Corporation, pub. 1971), p. 86.
9. Schroeter, p. 162.
10. Schroeter, p. 142.
11. Phyllis C. Robinson, *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), p. 46.
12. Slote and Faulkner, p. 46.
13. Slote, p. 406.
14. Slote and Faulkner, p. 48.
15. David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 2.
16. Slote and Faulkner, p. 52.
17. Margaret Ryan, *Teaching the Novel in Paperback* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963) p. 107.

Annotated Bibliography

There are many critical studies and resources available. These books reflect my distillation from the numerous ones available. Most of the following books were used in doing research in writing this unit. They are good reference books for both the teacher and students. Books especially relevant for students are marked with an asterisk.*

*Bennett, Mildred R. *The World of Willa Cather* . New York: Dodd Mead, and Co., 1951.

Primary source on Willa Cather's family history and the autobiographical influence on *My Antonia* .

*Bloom, Harold. *Modern Critical Views: Willa Cather* . New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985.

An excellent collection of critical essays dealing with all of Willa Cather's novels.

Brown, E. K. *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* , completed by Leon Edel. A collection of essays on Willa Cather's art.

Murphy, John J. ed. *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* . Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1984.

Mr. Murphy believes that Cather has been neglected in the past, but from 1970 on, her fiction has evoked significant criticism and analysis with much of it contained in this book.

*Robinson, Phyllis C. *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983.

Biography of the people, places, events and experiences that helped to mold Cather's life and art.

Schroeter, James ed. *Willa Cather and Her Critics* . New York: Cornell University Press, 1967.

This book is a compendium of the most perceptive and representative criticism of Willa Cather's work.

*Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley. *Willa Cather: A Memoir* . Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963.

Included are memoirs written by a close friend of Cather's, from years 1910-1931. Many enlightening insights into why, how, and for what intent, she wrote *My Antonia* .

*Slote, Bernice. *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir* . Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973.

Brilliant photographs of Nebraska, the Southwest, Quebec, the East, and Virginia, the settings of many of Cather's novels and descriptions from her novels and poetry. Also, included are pictures of people and other places in her life combined with short essays.

Slote, Bernice. *The Kingdom of Art : Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896* . Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968.

This book is about Cather's beginning as a writer and the forces that shaped her art and life.

*Slote, Bernice, and Virginia Faulkner. *The Art of Willa Cather* . Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 1974. An excellent sampling of the criticism and insights of eighty-five scholars from seven nations who attended "The

Art of Willa Cather: An International Seminar” held in Lincoln, Nebraska, October 25-28, 1973, sponsored by the College of Arts and Sciences, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Stouck, David. *Willa Cather's Imagination* . Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975. This book focuses on Cather's imaginative, intellectual, and aesthetic development in the rich range of styles, forms, characters, and ideas in her more than fifty year writing career. He often describes the union of her life and art.

Classroom Materials

Films:

American Literature: The Westward Movement . Coronet.

11 minutes, color.

Midwest Literature: The City Background . Coronet.

13 1/2 minutes, 6 + w/color.

Midwest Literature: The Town Background . Coronet.

13 1/2 minutes, 6 + w/color.

Filmstrips:

The American West In Literature : GA.

A sound/color filmstrip in two parts.

Willa Cather's Pioneers

A sound/color filmstrip. Thomas S. Klise Co., P.O. Box 3418, Peoria, Illinois 61614.

Dreiser's Tragic America .

Thomas S. Klise Co., P.O. Box 3418, Peoria, Illinois 61614.

Spoon River Anthology . Coronet.

Two sound/color filmstrips.

Videos:

Women Writers: Voices of Descent . Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather.
B7RHF-41087-2 Spoken Arts, Inc., Dep't. S87, P.O. Box 289, New Rochelle, N.Y. 10802.
Willa Cather's America . 60 minutes, color. Films for the Humanities Inc. Box 2053, Princeton, N.J.
08543.
Westward Expansion . 06044-900. GA. Guidance Association, Inc., Communications Park, Box
3000, Mount Kisco, M.Y. 10549-9989.

Student Reading List

- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Bantam Books, 1969.
- Cather, Willa. *My Antonia* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954.
- . *Death Comes for the Archbishop* . New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1927.
- . *Lucy Gayheart* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935.
- . *My Mortal Enemy*. New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1926.
- . *One of Ours* . New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1922.
- . *O Pioneers !* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941.
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- Crane, Stephen. *The Red Badge of Courage* . New York: Bantam Books, 1985.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie* . New York: Bantam Books, 1983.
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- Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* . New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1930.
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Walker, Alice. *Meridian* . New York: Washington Square Press, 1976.

Welty, Eudora. *The Optimist's Daughter*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1909.

Wharton, Edith. *Ethan Frome* . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911.

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town*. New York: Signet Pocket Books, 1938.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son* . New York: Harper and Row, 1940.

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