



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

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

Guide for Curriculum Unit 87.02.01  
by Carol Leavitt Altieri

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. It should take at least two weeks to cover adequately and experience deeply. It should be highly effective if taught with other 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.

"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." 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 conditions of life on the rural Nebraska prairie land of late nineteenth century America. Since Willa 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. . . ."

(Recommended for American Literature classes, grades 10-12; English classes, grades 10-12; and American History classes, grades 10-11)

### **Key Words**

*Cather Willa My Antonia*

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