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Teaching Unit™

# Sample

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## Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



### My Ántonia

by Willa Cather

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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 **Prestwick House**

P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938  
[www.prestwickhouse.com](http://www.prestwickhouse.com)  
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## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to*

1. infer the thoughts, ideas, and actions of the characters when they are not expressly stated.
2. define the term “legend” and discuss how the legend of the sunflowers illustrates the idea that the West provides people with the freedom to begin a new life.
3. discuss the following metaphors in the story and point out how they contribute to the reader’s understanding of the characters:
  - the prairie dog community as a metaphor for the Shimerda family.
  - the Indian circle as a metaphor for the cycle of life.
4. cite incidents from the novel to support or refute the presence of the following themes and concepts in this novel:
  - the role of pioneer women in helping settle the West has been understated
  - the influence of childhood experiences cannot be appreciated until adulthood
  - the power of nature to shape lives and the natural cycle of life
  - the importance of the immigrants in settling the West
  - preoccupation with the acquisition of material possessions frequently has negative effects
  - there is an uneasy relationship between artists and society, in which artists are often misunderstood and unappreciated
5. comment on the following symbols in the story:
  - the land as a symbol for freedom
  - *Antonia* as the epitome of the hardworking female pioneer
  - the plow as a symbol of arduous work and the pioneers’ struggle to tame nature
  - the fruit cave standing for the pioneers’ success
6. point out how the author’s love of the land is shown in her imagery and is a motif that runs through this work.

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does Willa Cather's love for the land come through in this novel?
2. Describe how the Shimerda family is different from the Burden family in the following areas: food, language, religion, values, wealth, common sense.
3. In what ways are the Burdens good guardians for young Jim? How are they a problem for him?
4. Why do you think Jim and *Antonia* are never romantically involved?
5. What reasons does Lena give for not wanting to get married? How is her life in Lincoln and San Francisco similar to Frances Harling's life in *Black Hawk*?
6. What qualities does *Antonia* possess that make her a good mother? Support or argue against the following statement: *Antonia's* strength and endurance are symbols for the strength and endurance of the pioneers who settled the West.
7. Support the following statement with evidence from the text: Jim's feelings are often reflected in Cather's descriptions of nature.
8. Discuss the significance of the word "My" before *Antonia* in the title of this book.
9. Find examples of personification and simile in Cather's descriptions of nature.
10. Discuss how the land is considered a symbol of freedom for Jim, Peter, Pavel, and the other immigrants.
11. Read the description of the plow at the end of Chapter 14, Book II. What does the image of the plow silhouetted against the setting sun symbolize?
12. Many critics believe Chapter 14, Book II is a turning point in the story and in Jim's life. What happens in this chapter to make it significant?
13. Support the following statement: *Antonia's* children, who emerge from the fruit cave, are proof that she has lived a successful life.
14. Support or refute the following statement by referring to the novel: Willa Cather believes that marriage is not always good or necessary for women.
15. One of Cather's favorite themes is the relationship between artists and society. Which characters in the story are artists? How does being an artist affect the chances of a happy life?

## Chapter II

### Vocabulary

**chaps** – protective leather coverings worn over pants  
**covert** – secretive  
**decorum** – proper behavior, correctness  
**inflection** – the way words are pronounced; intonation; rising and falling of the voice  
**oracular** – solemn; as if from an oracle  
**sorghum** – a type of grain or grass used as a food  
**strident** – shrill  
**vermilion** – bright red

1. Briefly describe Jim’s grandparents.

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2. Cather is noted for her use of literary devices when describing the countryside of Nebraska. Find an example of personification, simile, and metaphor in Cather’s descriptions of the land in this chapter.

• Personification – \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

• Metaphor – \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

• Simile – \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. What sentences indicate that Jim feels in complete harmony with nature when he visits his grandmother’s garden?

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**Chapter IV**

Vocabulary

**tawny** – beige, light brown

- 1. What is the legend of the sunflower-bordered roads? Why does Jim think the sunflower roads are the “roads to freedom”?

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- 2. Find a comment in the book that shows how the prairie dog community is a metaphor for the Shimerda family and how the dog’s relationship with the rattlesnake is a metaphor for the Shimerdas’ relationship with Krajiek.

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## BOOK II - The Hired Girls

### Chapter I

#### Vocabulary

**compensation** – payment for  
**loath** – to hate; strongly dislike

1. Many critics believe the countryside is a symbol of freedom for Jim. Find a quotation in this first chapter supporting this view.

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2. How do Jim and his family receive news about Antonia after they move to town?

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3. Why does Jim's grandmother decide to find work for Antonia with their town neighbors, the Harlings?

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