

PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

My ÁNTONIA

by Willa Cather



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

My ÁNTONIA



Willa Cather



Prestwick House

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

P.O. Box 658 Clayton, Delaware 19938 • www.prestwickhouse.com

SENIOR EDITOR: Paul Moliken

EDITORS: Lisa M. Miller and Joan Langham

COVER DESIGN: Larry Knox

PRODUCTION: Jerry Clark



P.O. Box 658 • CLAYTON, DELAWARE 19938

TEL: 1.800.932.4593

FAX: 1.888.718.9333

WEB: www.prestwickhouse.com

Prestwick House Teaching Units™, Activity Packs™, and Response Journals™ are the perfect complement for these editions. To purchase teaching resources for this book, visit www.prestwickhouse.com/material.

This Prestwick House edition is an unabridged republication of *My Ántonia*, published in 1918 by Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston and New York.

©2006 All new material is copyrighted by Prestwick House, Inc.

All rights reserved. No portion may be reproduced without permission in writing from the publisher. Printed in the United States of America. Revised 2012

ISBN: 978-1-58049-344-4

My ÁNTONIA

BY WILLA CATHER

Optima dies...prima fugit

VIRGIL

C O N T E N T S

Notes	6
Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights	7
Introduction.....	9
Book I	
THE SHIMERDAS	13
Book II	
THE HIRED GIRLS.....	101
Book III	
LENA LINGARD.....	169
Book IV	
THE PIONEER WOMAN'S STORY.....	189
Book V	
CUZAK'S BOYS	205
Glossary	230
Vocabulary.....	236

Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Willa Sibert Cather was born in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, on December 7, 1873. When Cather was nine, her family moved to Nebraska as homesteaders, and she wrote about the experiences, setting, and characters she found there in nearly all her books. During these years, Cather met Annie Sadilek, who would become the model for one of her most memorable creations: the simple, yet heroic Antonia Shimerda.

While attending the University of Nebraska, Cather wrote a column for the school newspaper, became managing editor for the college literary magazine, and wrote poetry for other publications.

After graduation, Cather continued her writing career and also taught high school in Pennsylvania. Between 1893 and 1895, books of her poetry and short stories were published; later, her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, also called *Alexander's Masquerade*, was serialized in McClure's Magazine. In 1913, the first of Cather's major works, *O, Pioneers*, caught the attention of the public, and *My Antonia*, which took two years to complete, was first published in 1918.

Over the next thirty years of Cather's life, she continued to write and associate with many literary figures of her time—Stephen Crane, D. H. Lawrence, publisher Alfred Knopf, and Sara Jewett, among others. In addition, Willa Cather won the 1923 Pulitzer Prize. She had a few health problems, both physical and mental, but these did not diminish her output. While living in New York, she wrote *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and it proved to be yet another success.

Willa Cather died of a cerebral hemorrhage on April 24, 1947.

Pointers

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

When reading *My Ántonia*, pay attention to the following points that will make the book more accessible:

Jim Burden is as much a main character as Ántonia Shimerda is:

- Ántonia is more mature than Jim as the book begins, but his understanding of life soon catches up with hers.
- Jim's social standing as a non-immigrant sets the stage his future success.
- Ántonia's difficulties in life do not prevent her from eventually being happy.
- Jim's feelings for Ántonia are tempered by her more mature understanding of their differences and her responsibilities.
- Consider whether Jim is in love with Ántonia.

Cather's depictions of immigrants' life is considered accurate and representative of their struggles to survive:

- Note the harsh weather and other difficulties they must endure.
- Understand how the families' successes and failures are dependent on the weather and how it sometimes foreshadows events in the book.
- Pay attention to the manner in which the immigrants, especially the women, are treated by non-immigrants.
- Note how death, through suicide or other means, becomes a force in the novel.
- Notice how, in her portrayal of immigrant life, Cather stresses the importance that women had, often in contrast to that of men.

The author's use of symbolism and repeated motifs helps tie the story together:

- trees
- Mr. Shimerda's violin
- religion and superstition
- isolation
- the dances
- change and growth
- romantic love versus respect
- the contrasts between Lena and Ántonia
- similarities and differences between country life and life in the towns
- homesickness for life in Europe



I N T R O D U C T I O N

LAST SUMMER I happened to be crossing the plains of Iowa in a season of intense heat, and it was my good fortune to have for a traveling companion James Quayle Burden—Jim Burden, as we still call him in the West. He and I are old friends—we grew up together in the same Nebraska town—and we had much to say to each other. While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to the touch and red dust lay deep over everything. The dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things. We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said.

Although Jim Burden and I both live in New York, and are old friends, I do not see much of him there. He is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways, and is sometimes away from his New York office for weeks together. That is one reason why we do not often meet. Another is that I do not like his wife.

When Jim was still an obscure young lawyer, struggling to make his way in New York, his career was suddenly advanced by a brilliant marriage. Genevieve Whitney was the only daughter of a distinguished man. Her



Book I

THE SHIMERDAS

CHAPTER I

I FIRST HEARD of *Ántonia* on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America. I was ten years old then; I had lost both my father and mother within a year, and my Virginia relatives were sending me out to my grandparents, who lived in Nebraska. I traveled in the care of a mountain boy, Jake Marpole, one of the “hands” on my father’s old farm under the Blue Ridge, who was now going West to work for my grandfather. Jake’s experience of the world was not much wider than mine. He had never been in a railway train until the morning when we set out together to try our fortunes in a new world.

We went all the way in day-coaches, becoming more sticky and grimy with each stage of the journey. Jake bought everything the newsboys offered him: candy, oranges, brass collar buttons, a watch charm, and for me a “Life of Jesse James,”[†] which I remember as one of the most satisfactory books I have ever read. Beyond Chicago we were under the protection of a friendly passenger conductor, who knew all about the country to which we were going and gave us a great deal of advice in exchange for our confidence. He seemed to us an experienced and worldly man who had been almost everywhere; in his conversation he threw out lightly the names of distant

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

States and cities. He wore the rings and pins and badges of different fraternal orders to which he belonged. Even his cuff buttons were engraved with hieroglyphics,[†] and he was more inscribed than an Egyptian obelisk.[†] Once when he sat down to chat, he told us that in the immigrant car ahead there was a family from “across the water” whose destination was the same as ours.

“They can’t any of them speak English, except one little girl, and all she can say is ‘We go Black Hawk,[†] Nebraska.’ She’s not much older than you, twelve or thirteen, maybe, and she’s as bright as a new dollar. Don’t you want to go ahead and see her, Jimmy? She’s got the pretty brown eyes, too!”

This last remark made me bashful, and I shook my head and settled down to “Jesse James.” Jake nodded at me approvingly and said you were likely to get diseases from foreigners.

I do not remember crossing the Missouri River, or anything about the long day’s journey through Nebraska. Probably by that time I had crossed so many rivers that I was dull to them. The only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska.

I had been sleeping, curled up in a red plush seat, for a long while when we reached Black Hawk. Jake roused me and took me by the hand. We stumbled down from the train to a wooden siding, where men were running about with lanterns. I couldn’t see any town, or even distant lights; we were surrounded by utter darkness. The engine was panting heavily after its long run. In the red glow from the firebox, a group of people stood huddled together on the platform, encumbered by bundles and boxes. I knew this must be the immigrant family the conductor had told us about. The woman wore a fringed shawl tied over her head, and she carried a little tin trunk in her arms, hugging it as if it were a baby. There was an old man, tall and stooped. Two half-grown boys and a girl stood holding oil-cloth bundles, and a little girl clung to her mother’s skirts. Presently a man with a lantern approached them and began to talk, shouting and exclaiming. I pricked up my ears, for it was positively the first time I had ever heard a foreign tongue.

Another lantern came along. A bantering voice called out: “Hello, are you Mr. Burden’s folks? If you are, it’s me you’re looking for. I’m Otto Fuchs. I’m Mr. Burden’s hired man, and I’m to drive you out. Hello, Jimmy, ain’t you scared to come so far west?”

I looked up with interest at the new face in the lantern light. He might have stepped out of the pages of “Jesse James.” He wore a sombrero hat, with a wide leather band and a bright buckle, and the ends of his mustache were twisted up stiffly, like little horns. He looked lively and ferocious, I thought, and as if he had a history. A long scar ran across one cheek and drew the corner of his mouth up in a sinister curl. The top of his left ear was gone, and

his skin was brown as an Indian's. Surely this was the face of a desperado. As he walked about the platform in his high-heeled boots, looking for our trunks, I saw that he was a rather slight man, quick and wiry, and light on his feet. He told us we had a long night drive ahead of us, and had better be on the hike. He led us to a hitching-bar where two farm wagons were tied, and I saw the foreign family crowding into one of them. The other was for us. Jake got on the front seat with Otto Fuchs, and I rode on the straw in the bottom of the wagon box, covered up with a buffalo hide. The immigrants rumbled off into the empty darkness, and we followed them.

I tried to go to sleep, but the jolting made me bite my tongue, and I soon began to ache all over. When the straw settled down, I had a hard bed. Cautiously I slipped from under the buffalo hide, got up on my knees and peered over the side of the wagon. There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it. I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there; they would still be looking for me at the sheep-fold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures. I had left even their spirits behind me. The wagon jolted on, carrying me I knew not whither. I don't think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be.

Glossary

Background Notes: Many European immigrants came to America in the late 1800s to establish homes for themselves and their families because they were unable to make a living or possess land in their own countries.

The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed all men, single women, or former slaves to own 160 acres of land; the total land offered by the government totaled over 250 million acres and was located in most areas of the U. S., excluding the settled East. Homesteaders paid a fee of \$18 and were expected to live on the land for five years and make improvements to it, after which they would own it.

Most of the immigrants who settled in the Nebraska territory were not farmers, as noted in Cather's novel; the hardships of living off the land and the unpredictability and harshness of the seasons were extremely difficult for them. Consequently, only about four out of ten families were able to successfully complete the requirements. Despite the high failure rate, there are now over 46 million descendants of the original homesteaders.

Optima dies...prima fugit – [Latin] “The best days are the first to pass.”

Book I

Chapter I

Jesse James – a notorious Western outlaw

hieroglyphics – writing made in picture form by the ancient Egyptians; hieroglyphics served as records of the time, documenting history and compiling statistics.

Egyptian obelisk – a tall, pointed structure, similar in shape to the Washington Monument

Black Hawk – a fictional city patterned after the author's hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska

Chapter II

wandering Jew – a type of plant

Bohemian family – immigrants who came to the Nebraska from Bohemia (an area of southwestern Europe, now known as the Czech Republic)

selah – this word appears in the Bible in Psalms; some believe it is a direction for reading, reflecting, or interpreting the Psalms. It is considered a pause or a rest.

sod houses – primitive frontier homes cut from thick blocks of prairie sod that were built by homesteaders

dugouts – early frontier homes constructed by digging out a cave in a hill or a large hole in the ground

Chapters III-V

Vocabulary

Introduction

blustery – windy, gusty, blowy
bravado – boldness; showiness
patroness – a financial supporter
ardent – devoted, passionate
solicitous – considerate, attentive
impetuously – offhandedly, spontaneously

Book I

Chapter I

encumbered – weighed down, overloaded
bantering – good-humored, playful talk
sinister – menacing, threatening
desperado – an outlaw, a dangerous man
undulating – smoothly rolling or waving
jurisdiction – control, rule

Chapter II

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

Chapter III

draws – gullies, ditches
ravine – a dry riverbed
consolingly – comfortingly
uncouth – improper, impolite; without manners
chased – with a raised design; embossed
entreatingly – pleadingly

Chapter IV

tawny – beige, light brown