

Questions for Discussing and Understanding *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather

DIRECTIONS: Use the study questions for your own understanding and in group discussion of the novel. I will not be collecting your answers or notes, but I might ask you to write a paragraph response in class on one of the questions each period after reading / discussion time.

Book One—"The Shimerdas"

XI and XII, pp. 52-56

- 1) Jim writes about Jake and Otto: "What unprotected faces they were; their very roughness and violence made them defenseless" (54). What does Jim mean? How do you interpret his description?
- 2) How does the Burdens' "country Christmas" sound to you? Have you ever experienced anything similar to this?
- 3) What do we learn about the kind of man Grandfather Burden is? What word(s) would you use to describe him?
- 4) What do you imagine Mr. Shimerda is thinking and feeling while visiting the Burdens' home on Christmas?

XIII, pp. 57-60

- 1) What attitude does Jim have toward Mrs. Shimerda and why?
- 2) What does Jim express about the Shimerdas' situation that we might hear about immigrants today?
- 3) What attitude or expectations does Antonia express about the Burdens in this chapter?
- 4) What response does Grandmother have?

XIV, pp. 60-65

- 1) How and why did Mr. Shimerda kill himself?
- 2) How does Jim react to Mr. Shimerda's death?
- 3) What religious faith do the Shimerdas belong to, and how do you know this?
- 4) What does Ambrosch believe about his father's soul?
- 5) What are your thoughts / reactions / feelings about the events of this chapter?

XV, pp. 65-71

- 1) Who is Anton Jelinek?
- 2) Jim refers to Anton's beliefs as "frank, manly faith" (67). What does he mean by this?
- 3) Where does Mrs. Shimerda insist that her husband be buried, and why? What significance might the spot have in light of Mr. Shimerda and how he died?

XVI, pp. 71-74

- 1) What are your impressions about the gathering around the open coffin? Why might Jim be afraid to look at Antonia?
- 2) What does Grandfather's prayer at Mr. Shimerda's funeral (73) show about Grandfather?
- 3) What do you make of the last paragraph of the chapter? What is it that makes it the "most dear" spot "in all that country" to Jim? What does it represent to Jim?

XVII, pp. 74-78

- 1) In the eight months since she arrived in Nebraska, how has Antonia changed? How does Jim feel about the changes he sees in her?
- 2) What does Antonia say to Jim's invitation to attend school? What do you imagine her reply might make him feel? What do you think Antonia really feels about going to school? (Give your evidence from the text for your conclusions, too.)
- 3) How does Jim react during dinner at the Shimerdas' and why? Explain what is happening to his relationship with Antonia and why.

XVIII, pp. 78-84

- 1) Look carefully at the tone of Jim's narration as this chapter begins. What word choices ("diction") reflect his attitude?
- 2) Explain what happens that creates "a distinct coldness" between the Burdens and the Shimerdas.
- 3) Do think Jake's and Jim's reactions would have been the same if the Shimerdas weren't immigrants? Why or why not? (Use textual evidence.)

XIX, pp. 84-86

- 1) What impressions do you get about Jim—and about Cather—from the description in this chapter?
- 2) Describe the relationship between Antonia and Jim as Book One ends.
- 3) What do you think Cather wants her readers to see, to understand, and to feel from her story so far?

VOCABULARY

- taciturn (70):
- propitiatory (74):
- indolence (79):