

## Questions for Your Understanding and Discussion

### *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather (Book Two)

**DIRECTIONS:** Before and *while reading* Book Two, refer to the study questions to increase your understanding of and thinking about the characters and what Cather is communicating about the time and place of her novel. I will not be collecting your notes, but I might ask you to write a paragraph response in class on one of the questions. Test questions will be related to the questions on this study guide.

#### **I, pp. 89-91**

- 1) How much time has passed since Jim came to Nebraska? How old is Jim now as Book Two begins, and how old does that make Antonia?
- 2) After the Burdens move to Black Hawk, what happens to Otto Fuchs and Jake Marpole?
- 3) What feelings does Jim express about them? How might he miss them?
- 4) How much does Jim see any of his former country neighbors now, and why?
- 5) What does Jim learn from Mrs. Steavens (their farm's new owner) about the way Ambrosch is treating Antonia? What is her life like?

#### **II, pp. 91-95**

- 1) Who are the Harlings—and what nationality are they? (Note that Jim [Cather] always mentions this aspect.) How are Mr. and Mrs. Harling described? How many children do they have and what ages and personalities do the children have?
- 2) Do you think any of the Harling children could be our unnamed train-traveling narrator at the beginning of the novel? If so, which of the children, and why? (Keep this question in mind as you read; there are suggestions to come!)
- 3) What does Grandmother Burden do for Antonia, and why?
- 4) What does Grandmother mean about Antonia possibly being "spoiled" by the hard life she has been leading? In what way "spoiled"?
- 4) What dispute about her wages do Mrs. Harling and Ambrosch have, and why? What deal is arranged between them? What does this dispute show about Mrs. Harling and about Ambrosch?

#### **III, pp. 95-97**

- 1) When Antonia arrives at the Harlings, she says with hope to Jim, "Maybe I be the kind of girl you like better; now I come to town." What do you think about this statement?
- 2) What mixed emotions does Jim have about Antonia after she comes to live with the Harlings? Why?
- 3) How and why is life different at the Harlings when Mr. Harling is home from his business traveling? What does that show about his personality? How is he different from other fathers in Black Hawk?

#### **IV, pp. 98-104**

- 1) Closely read the pages when Lena arrives at the Harlings (98-100). Think about the stated and unstated nuances of the interactions between Mrs. Harling and Lena, and between Antonia and Lena. What attitudes are reflected in each of the three?
- 2) What nationality is Lena Lingard? What clues show us her personality?
- 3) What are Lena's goals? What does she feel about marriage, and why?
- 4) After reading the chapter, why do you think Nick Svendsen's father made "a fuss" about his son wanting to marry Lena?
- 5) Who is Tiny Soderball, and what country is her family from?
- 6) What is the Boys' Hotel? What kind of people stay there?
- 7) What reputation does Lena have, and why?
- 8) How was Lena different from the other girls who were herders? What does this show about her character and personality?
- 9) Explain what happened with Ole Benson. Do you think Lena is to blame for anything? Why or why not? How do you interpret the episode and Lena?

#### **V & VI, pp. 104-110**

- 1) An interesting note: Jim recalls that "Lena often said she hoped I would be a travelling man when I grew up" (104). We learned from the Introduction that Jim did a great deal of traveling for the railroad as his career.
- 2) What does the description of Lena with her brother show about what kind of person she is?
- 3) How is Jim's description of winter in the town different from his description of winter in the country? How might this description be more than a physical one: "The pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify—it was the light of truth itself" (106).
- 4) What relief does Jim find from the bleakness of winter?
- 5) Notice that Jim now refers to Grandmother and Grandfather as "the two old people" (107). Why? What does this show about Jim?
- 6) How is Antonia faring at the Harlings'? Is she happy?
- 7) Jim (Cather) tells his listeners (and her readers) another gruesome story. Why do you think Cather includes the account of the old tramp and his death (and what's in his pocket)? What is the point?
- 8) How are Mrs. Harling and Antonia alike, according to Jim? What adjective(s) would fit Jim's description of the two?

#### **VII, pp. 110-117**

- 1) Jim says, "On the farm the weather was the great fact, and men's affairs went on underneath it, as the streams creep under the ice. But in Black Hawk the scene of human life was spread out shrunken and pinched, frozen down to the bare stalk" (110). What do you think Jim means?

How is the prominence and role of weather different for country folk compared to town folk?  
How does weather affect "men's affairs" today?

- 2) What did you think of the story of Blind (Samson) d'Arnault? What did you learn and/or relate to what you have learned in U.S. History class?
  - Some interesting and enlightening terms used: "the soft, amiable Negro voice . . . with the note of docile subservience in it" (112). "He had *the* Negro head, too. . . ." (my emphasis)—what does "the" suggest?
  - what of the terms "mulatto," "yellow," and "pickaninny"? Do you know what these mean and/or indicate?
- 3) Jim says, "He [Sampson] was always a Negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully" (115). Does that seem an oxymoron? What is Jim feeling about his playing? The following paragraphs (115-16) give more description of what Jim likes in his piano playing (and note the stereotyping and attitude of the time). Does this feeling about Sampson's music relate in any way to why he is attracted to Antonia? (Keep this in mind, too, as you continue reading about the country girls vs. the town girls.)

#### **VIII, pp. 117-119**

- 1) Who are the Vannis (what nationality, too), and what do they bring to Black Hawk?
- 2) What kind of activity goes on in their tent, and how is it received by the townspeople?

#### **IX, pp. 120-124**

- 1) The chapter begins with Jim's observation that "there was a curious social situation in Black Hawk," referring to the country girls' effect on the boys and how that is regarded. Read this chapter carefully and make sure you understand how society and class was structured and what prevailing attitudes were toward these country girls who were hired in town.
- 2) How did these country "hired girls" change their families and the country?
- 3) What irony does Jim remark on (122, top) about Mr. Shimerda and how the men of Black Hawk regard all foreigners?
- 4) Explain why the hired girls are considered "a menace" to the social order (122).
- 5) Who are "the three Marys," and what happened to them? (123) What does this illustrate?
- 6) What does the Vannis tent activity have to do with this social order? (123)
- 7) In telling us about what happened between Sylvester Lovett and Antonia, Jim says, "To escape from his predicament he ran away with a widow six years older than himself, who owned a half-section [i.e., wealthy]" (123). In thinking back, do you see any foreshadowing parallels to anyone?

#### **X, pp. 124-126**

- 1) How is Antonia changing, and why?
- 2) How does this lead to a dispute with the Harlings? What are their concerns?
- 3) What ultimatum do the Harlings give Antonia, and what is the outcome?

### **XI, pp. 126-129**

- 1) Who is Wick Cutter, why has he come west from Iowa, and what kind of man is he?
- 2) What happened to the Swedish girls who worked for him?
- 3) What kind of woman is his wife—physically and in personality (and note the connection)?
- 4) What is the relationship like between the Cutters?
- 5) What does Jim think about Mrs. Cutter—his conclusion—and how do you know this? (129)

### **XII, pp. 129-136**

- 1) How does Antonia further change while working for the Cutters?
- 2) What kind of relationships does Jim have with the hired country girls? What do the townspeople think of this?
- 3) How is Jim changing, and how does this show?
- 4) What does Jim think about the people of Black Hawk (132)?
- 5) Carefully read Jim's account of when he kissed Antonia (135). Explain her reaction and then Jim's reaction to hers. What does he end up feeling about Antonia from this episode, and why?
- 6) Examine the dream Jim relates (135-36). What is suggested in the dream? (guesses are fine) Why might Jim talk about this dream right after the episode with Antonia? Are they related?

### **XIII & XIV, pp. 136-147**

- 1) Jim says, "Disapprobation hurt me" (137). What does this mean, and how might that be part of how his life turns out?
- 2) After his commencement, Jim recalls, "I have had no other success that pulled at my heartstrings like that one" (139). What "success" is he referring to? Why is it significant?
- 3) This chapter is filled with landscape imagery. What do you feel is the general feeling conveyed by the imagery? How might that relate to Jim's life at this point?
- 4) What do you make of Lena and Antonia getting the sand from Jim's hair? What is going on?
- 5) What does Jim's "lesson" about Coronado add to Cather's story? How does it relate?
- 6) Carefully read and imagine the description of the sunset and the vision of the black figure on pp. 146-47. What is Cather's imagery suggesting symbolically and emotionally?

### **XV, pp. 147-151**

- 1) Explain what happened at the Cutter's: How did Mr. Cutter set it up and what was his plan?
- 2) Explain Jim's reaction to the attack: Who was he angry with and why?
- 3) What gossip about the attack does he dread?
- 4) What does Jim conclude about Mr. and Mrs. Cutter in light of this episode?

### **VOCABULARY TO KNOW**

- cordial (101)
- stalwart (122)
- dissolute (127)
- ingenuousness (123)
- licentiousness (128)
- disapprobation (137)