

## Questions for Your Understanding and Discussion

### *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather (Books Two-Five)

**DIRECTIONS:** Before and *while reading*, 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 test questions will be related to the questions on this study guide.

#### **Book III—Lena Lingard**

##### **I, pp. 155-158**

- 1) Where is Jim as Book 3 opens?
- 2) Who is Gaston Cleric, and what influence does he have on Jim?
- 3) Note that although Jim is excited by the new ideas and learning he is getting at the university, his thoughts and imagination keep returning to the people and places of his past. Why? How does he relate the Greek and Latin poems to the country of his youth and to the image of the plow against the sun?

##### **II, pp. 158-163**

- 1) What mood is Jim in as the chapter opens? Why?
- 2) The Latin reflection "*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*" begins the novel and appears in this chapter, as well. What does it mean, and how does that relate to Jim, to the story, and, perhaps, to America? (10 extra learning enhancement points for typing a paragraph explanation to answer this question [double space])
- 3) Note: Critics have suggested that Jim is a version of author Willa Cather, who hoped to "bring the Muse" into the plains of Nebraska in writing a truly American story.
- 4) How long has Jim been away from home when Lena Lingard appears at his door?
- 5) What does Jim learn from Lena about her life? (And why do you suppose Grandmother hasn't written to tell Jim that Lena is in Lincoln?)
- 6) What news about Antonia does Jim learn from Antonia?
- 7) What kind of a man is Larry Donovan? Refer back to p. 134.
- 8) Note how Jim and Antonia are each protective of the other. How and why?
- 9) Jim says, "If there were no girls like them [the country girls] in the world, there would be no poetry" (162). Why not? What does he mean, and what is he feeling? (10 extra learning enhancement points for typing a paragraph explanation to answer this question [double space])

##### **III, pp. 163-167**

- 1) Note: For a time, Willa Cather was a journalist who reviewed theater in New York. These chapters of the novel show Cather's love of and familiarity with the period's theatrical productions. Skim to get a sense of the types of shows. (no test questions about the details)

- 2) Note Jim's disdain for the girls of Lincoln at the bottom of p. 165. Why? Is it the same disdain he held for the town girls of Black Hawk?

#### **IV, pp. 167-175**

- 1) Note Jim's enjoyment of Lena's company. What about her is so companionable to him? Is Jim falling in love with Lena? What contrast does he see between Lena and Antonia? (pp. 167-70)
- 2) What do we learn from Lena about Ole Benson? What was the truth behind the rumors—and is Lena trustworthy in her explanation? What do you think, and why?
- 3) What attentions does Lena get from other men, and why? What does she feel about these attentions? Is she looking for someone to marry?
- 4) How is Lena affecting Jim's studies at the university?
- 5) How similar to Jim's are Lena's feelings about the country life? What does it mean to her?
- 6) Why does Jim decide to change schools and move to Boston to attend Harvard?

### **BOOK IV—The Pioneer Woman's Story**

#### **I, pp. 179-182**

- 1) As Book IV opens, how old is Jim now, and what has happened?
- 2) Since Jim has left home, what has happened to Antonia?
- 3) How does Jim react to this news? Why does he react this way?
- 4) Think back to Book Two: When else has Jim felt similarly toward Antonia? Do the two events have something in common that triggers this reaction in Jim?
- 5) What happens to Tiny Soderball? What do we learn about her story?
- 6) Where does Lena end up living years later?

#### **II and III, pp. 182-190**

- 1) What does Jim resent about Antonia's mistake?
- 2) How has the prairie changed in just the four years that Jim has been away at college (184)?
- 3) What does Jim learn from Mrs. Steavens about what happened between Larry Donovan and Antonia? (186-87)
- 4) How does Antonia react to her disgrace, and how do people treat her?
- 5) How does Antonia change, physically and emotionally, after her return from Denver?
- 6) What is Ambrosch's reaction when he sees Antonia's new baby, and why?
- 7) Note: Does Antonia's story at this point remind you of someone else we have encountered in our reading this year?
- 8) Carefully read the final paragraph on p. 190. What do you think Jim is thinking and feeling at this moment?

#### **IV, pp. 192-193—read these pages carefully!**

- 1) Why *doesn't* Jim ask Antonia to marry him?
- 2) Why *can't* his "way" end there in Black Hawk with Antonia?

- 3) Note the imagery in the last two paragraphs on p. 192. What is symbolically being represented in the imagery? How does it relate to both Jim and Antonia's relationship specifically and to something greater than just the two of them? (10 extra learning enhancement points for typing a paragraph explanation to answer this question [double space])
- 4) What are your thoughts and feelings about this scene between Jim and Antonia? (10 extra learning enhancement points for typing a paragraph explanation to answer this question [double space])

## **BOOK V—CUZAK'S BOYS**

### **I, pp. 197-211**

- 1) How much time has passed since Antonia and Jim parted in Book IV?
- 2) What has taken place in Antonia's life during this time?
- 3) Note the details of Antonia's home: What do they show about her and her life?
- 4) How is Antonia described? What adjectives are used?
- 5) What is ironic about Jim's hesitation to confront a ruined, changed Antonia? (p. 199)
- 6) Is Antonia happy with her life? Is Jim happy with his life?
- 7) Carefully read Jim's description of Antonia on p. 211: What thoughts and/or feelings do you have as you read this?
- 8) How do you feel about Cather's writing style? (10 extra learning enhancement points for typing a paragraph explanation to answer this question [double space])
- 9) Why do you think Cather titled this book "Cuzak's Boys" and not Antonia's Boys?

### **II, pp. 212-19**

- 1) What kind of man is "Papa" Cuzak? (Note the details of Jim's descriptions)
- 2) What kind of relationship do Antonia and her husband seem to have?
- 3) What happened to the Cutters?

### **III, pp. 220-222**

- 1) What impressions do you get from the ending?
- 2) What does Jim feel about the path his life has taken? (Is he married at this point?)
- 3) Will Jim see Antonia ever again?
- 4) What feeling(s) are you left with as the novel ends?
- 5) Who is the main character, Jim or Antonia? Why?
- 6) Be thinking about big idea(s) Cather might want her readers to take away from her novel.

## **VOCABULARY TO KNOW**

- cordial (101)
- stalwart (122)
- dissolute (127)
- ingenuousness (123)
- licentiousness (128)
- disapprobation (137)
- indolent (158)
- aloofness (183)