

MY ÁNTONIA

by Willa Cather



THE AUTHOR

Willa Cather (1873-1947) was born in Virginia, and when she was nine years old her family moved to the Nebraska prairie. She was educated at home by her grandparents, then later went to a country school. At first she wanted to be a doctor, but upon arriving at the University of Nebraska, she discovered her true love - writing. She wrote for the university newspaper, then found employment as a journalist in Pittsburgh. As she turned to writing fiction, she supported herself by teaching high school English. She published her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, in 1912. It was given a lukewarm reception, but when she turned to writing about her experiences in the untamed Midwest, her efforts became classics - *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918). Cather won a Pulitzer Prize for a lesser work, *One of Ours* (1922), and found further success with *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). She eventually moved to New York, where she served as an editor at *McClure's* magazine. She never married, insisting that the artist must become a human sacrifice to the god of art, and became increasingly reclusive as she grew more famous. By the time she died at the age of 73, she was the most-respected female novelist of her generation, worthy of being compared with other realists like Ernest Hemingway.

My Ántonia, Cather's best-known work, is highly autobiographical novel. Like Jim Burden, Cather was born in Virginia, moved to Nebraska at a young age, lived in her grandparents' house, which was very much like that of Josiah and Emmaline Burden, befriended immigrant families from far and wide who settled on the prairie, moved into the town of Red Cloud (on which Black Hawk was based), went to school there, moved on to the University of Nebraska, and finally settled in New York. Among the immigrants she encountered in her childhood was the Sadilek family from Bohemia; the father was homesick for the old country and ultimately committed suicide, and one of the daughters, Annie, worked for the Miners, next-door neighbors to the Cathers in Red Cloud, and became the model for Ántonia (the novel is dedicated to Carrie and Irene Miner, the models for Frances and Nina Harling). Like Ántonia, Annie was impregnated by a scoundrel, returned home in disgrace, and later married and raised a large family on a farm. The novel is a paean to the beauty and simplicity, as well as the hardships and character formation, of the pioneer life. While it lacks a conventional plot structure, it is admired for its realistic portrayal of life on the frontier, its depth of characterization, and the beauty of its descriptive passages.

PLOT SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The introduction is written from the perspective of an unnamed childhood friend of the narrator. The two are traveling by train together from New York, where Jim is a lawyer for a large railroad. They discuss their childhood memories, and the friend observes that Jim's love of the prairie where he was raised has helped him build the railroad that runs through the land. They speak much of a childhood friend named *Ántonia*, with whom Jim has renewed connections. We also discover that Jim has begun to write down his memories of this girl and the central role he played in his youth. Months later, Jim comes to the friend's apartment in New York and delivers the finished manuscript of *My Ántonia*.

BOOK I - THE SHIMERDAS

The novel is narrated by Jim Burden, a lifelong friend of the title character. He is orphaned at the age of ten and sent by relatives to live with his grandparents in Black Hawk, Nebraska. The Shimerdas, an immigrant family from Bohemia, are traveling on the same train and heading for the same destination. The family has four children, including a girl about Jim's age who is the only one who knows even a minimal amount of English.

A farmhand named Otto Fuchs picks up Jim and his companion Jake Marpole and takes them to his grandfather's farm. The next morning he meets his grandparents explores their house, the only wooden house in the area (the others were made of sod). Otto, who has had many adventures in the West, promises to show him some cowboy tricks. He also discovers that the Shimerdas are their nearest neighbors. The next day he helps his grandmother dig potatoes for dinner, and she warns him to watch out for rattlesnakes in the garden.

The following Sunday Otto drives Jim's family over to meet their new Bohemian neighbors. They take supplies with them, assuming that the new family will be in need of almost everything. They apparently had been cheated by Krajiek, the man from whom they had bought the farm, paying far more than it was worth. The newcomers are grateful for the food, and soon Jim and *Ántonia* are running through the grass to a bluff overlooking a ravine. As they rest in the grass, *Ántonia* asks Jim about the English words for dozens of objects, and when they get back, *Ántonia*'s father asks Jim's grandmother to teach his elder daughter. In the days that follow, Jim and *Ántonia* study together and then roam the fields, particularly fascinated with the prairie dog town nearby. Jim meanwhile learns to ride his pony, and from then on he becomes the family's messenger, fetching the mail and doing other errands to free the adults to do their work.

Soon the Shimerdas meet two Russian men, Peter and Pavel, and begin spending time with them because their languages were somewhat similar. One day *Ántonia* invites Jim to join her in a visit to the Russians. The two bachelors, who left Russia because of "the troubles," have made themselves quite a comfortable home. Peter is the only one there, but he is friendly and hospitable, feeding the children juicy watermelons and sending them home with cucumbers and milk.

As the autumn days passed, *Ántonia*'s English got better and better while her father's health grew worse and worse. The friendship between Jim and *Ántonia* deepens, but he is frustrated because she, being four years older, treats him like a little boy. All that changes when the two go to Peter's house to borrow a spade. On the way home they decide to dig into one of the prairie dog

holes to see where it goes. As Jim prepares to dig, Ántonia screams, and he turns to find himself face to face with the biggest rattlesnake anyone has ever seen. As the snake is about to strike, he leaps at it and crushes its head with the spade. His bravery makes a big impression on his companion, who no longer dares to treat him as a child. They measure the snake at five and half feet and take it home to show their families.

As autumn passes, Peter and Pavel face financial problems; their crop is insufficient to enable them to pay back their loans, obtained at exorbitant rates from a Black Hawk moneylender named Wick Cutter. Later Pavel is injured working in the barn and becomes seriously ill. He asks to see Mr. Shimerda, and Ántonia and Jim travel along. Pavel, emaciated and coughing up blood, rambles in his illness, telling Mr. Shimerda a story of his youth in Russia. He and Peter served as groomsmen at a friend's wedding, and after the reception the sledges in which the party was traveling were set upon by an enormous pack of wolves. Five of the sledges were overtaken by wolves and the horses and passengers devoured. Pavel saved Peter and himself by throwing the bride and groom off the sledge to the wolves; for this they were driven from the village, leading to their voyage to America. A few days after this confession, Pavel dies and Peter leaves the area to seek work with other Russian immigrants. The loss of his friends hits Mr. Shimerda hard, and Jim and Tony (Ántonia) never tell the horrible story of the wolves to anyone.

When the first snow falls in December, Otto Fuchs builds a makeshift sleigh for Jim, which he then uses to run his errands. One day he takes Ántonia and her sister Yulka on a sleigh ride to Peter's deserted cabin; on the way home the wind is in their faces, and Jim catches a bad case of tonsillitis as a result. As winter continues, the men work hard and tell stories around the fire, while Jim's grandmother keeps everyone warm and well-fed. The Shimerdas, meanwhile, struggle with the cold, and one day after Jim recovers he and his grandmother pay them a visit to bring them some food. After complaining bitterly of their plight, Mrs. Shimerda gives Mrs. Burden a small package of dried mushrooms. Because she doesn't know what they are, she throws them in the fire when she gets home.

A few days before Christmas the snow falls heavily, preventing the family from getting into Black Hawk to do any Christmas shopping. They make do with what they have around the house, and Jake rides out to deliver their handmade presents to the Shimerdas and cuts down a small cedar for a Christmas tree. On Christmas morning Jim's grandfather leads morning prayers and his grandmother makes waffles and sausages. That afternoon Mr. Shimerda pays them a visit to thank them for their presents. He seems strangely content in their comfortable cabin, though the family thinks it a little strange when he kneels and crosses himself before the candles on the Christmas tree and the figures in the creche.

In the thaw before New Year's Day, Mrs. Shimerda and Ántonia visit the Burdens. The old woman does nothing but complain about what they don't have and brag about how much better she could cook if she had the fine utensils the Burdens have, embarrassing Ántonia in the process. Jim learns that Mr. Shimerda is in a state of depression, pining for the old country. After three weeks of unseasonable warmth, a genuine blizzard descends on the prairie on January 20th. Two days later, Jim wakes to the news that Mr. Shimerda is dead. The night before, after meticulous preparations, he had gone out to the barn and put a shotgun into his mouth.

When Otto goes to Black Hawk to fetch the coroner, he returns with a young Bohemian immigrant named Anton Jelinek. A devout Catholic like the Shimerdas, he expresses sorrow about the suicide, certain that it is a terrible sin and that many years of prayers will be required to get the old man out of Purgatory. He tells them a story about his time in a war against the Prussians when

he assisted a priest by carrying the Host among the soldiers, insisting that, while others were dying by the hundreds of disease, he and the priest were protected by the body and blood of Christ. The next morning Jelinek sets out to break a road through to the Shimerda house while Otto begins work on a coffin. Some debate ensues about where to bury Mr. Shimerda; neither the Catholics nor the Norwegians are willing to have suicide in their churchyards. Finally Mrs. Shimerda insists that he be buried at the very corner of their homestead plot. A few days later the neighbors gather for the burial, and Mr. Burden gives an eloquent and biblical prayer, after which the mourners sing *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*.

That spring the neighbors help the Shimerdas build a new log house to replace the dugout cave in which they had been living. Now when Jim goes to the Shimerda house, he teaches Yulka to read while waiting for Ambrosch and *Ántonia* to finish their work in the fields. *Ántonia*, now fifteen, is blossoming into a strong young farm woman. One day Jim asks her if she would like to attend the local school. She says she is too busy on the farm, but then bursts into tears and begs Jim to pass on to her whatever he learns. He fears, however, that she is taking on rough ways and losing her softness, replacing compassion with boastfulness about her prowess with a plow.

The growing distance between the two families becomes an open break when Jake and Jim go to retrieve a horse collar Ambrosch had borrowed. He treats them rudely, then tries to kick Jake, who levels him with a single punch. After that, the two families seem unable to pass one another without an insult or snub of some sort. Mr. Burden remains aloof from the feud, however, and soon brings about a reconciliation. He hires Ambrosch and *Ántonia* to do some work around his farm and forgives the debt Mrs. Shimerda owes him for a cow he had sold to her. She then sheepishly knits some socks for Jake, and the feud is over. That summer the corn crop is bountiful and all is at peace.

BOOK II - THE HIRED GIRLS

Three years after Jim's arrival at his grandparents' home, they move to the town of Black Hawk because they can no longer do the work needed to keep up the farm and they want Jim to go to school. At this point Otto and Jake decide to seek their fortunes out west and the Burdens never hear from them again. They still see their friends and neighbors from farm country when they come into town to shop, though Ambrosch always comes alone, so Jim doesn't get to see *Ántonia*, who hires her services out to help local farmers with their harvests. All that changes in the autumn, however, when Mrs. Burden gets her a job with their neighbors in town, the Harlings. Mr. Harling is a grain merchant. He and his wife have five children; the oldest, Frances, keeps the books for her father, while three are about Jim's age and the youngest, Nina, is six. Frances visits *Ántonia* at home and hires her, making sure Ambrosch fails in his effort to lay claim to all her wages.

Ántonia fits in immediately; the children love her and their parents appreciate her consistent hard work. She is especially fond of Nina, the spoiled youngest child, but also develops a bit of a crush on Charley, who is just her age. Her English improves greatly as she lives and interacts with the Harlings and their children. One day a friend of *Ántonia*'s from the farm, Lena Lingard, comes to town to work for the dressmaker. *Ántonia* is cool to Lena, who has a reputation for flirting with older men, especially one farmer whose crazy wife had actually come after Lena with a knife. Lena and Jim become friends, however.

During the winter months, the children often gather at the Harling home in the evenings to listen to music and hear *Ántonia* tell her stories of the farming life and old Bohemia. As the winter drags on, the only respite from boredom is a concert given by Blind d'Arnault, a renowned black

pianist, and the local hotel. The children sneak into the hotel, and the girls dance in the kitchen while the music plays. When the men hear them, they invite them to join them in the parlor, which the girls reluctantly do.

Spring comes as a relief, and the children are delighted to be able to work and play outside. In June, an Italian couple, Mr. and Mrs. Vanni, bring a dancing tent to Black Hawk and offer dancing lessons, then hold dances almost every night. Young people from the town and from the farms for miles around descend on the tent, and the hired girls like Antonia are the most popular dance partners because of their liveliness and energy. Though the immigrant girls are looked down upon by those “refined” girls raised in town, their labors contribute to the prosperity of their families. In the long run, the country girls grew up to manage large farms, and their children were better educated and more prosperous than those of the town families they had served as teens. Class prejudice was strong, however, and the town boys would dance with the country girls, but would never think of marrying one.

Antonia becomes the best dancer in town and is in constant demand at the Vannis’ tent, to which she rushes every night after finishing her chores. The boys begin to hang around her as much as they can, finding excuses to drop by the Harling house. One night a boy who was to get married in a few days walked Antonia home and tried to kiss her. She slapped his face, and when Mr. Harling heard the commotion, he told Antonia that she would no longer be permitted to go to the dance tent because she was getting a bad reputation. Unwilling to accept this, she quits and goes to work for the notorious moneylender and gambler Wick Cutter. Mrs. Harling fears for her in this environment because Cutter had already gotten two previous hired girls pregnant, and he and his wife argue constantly.

After Antonia goes to work for the Cutters, she seems to be interested in nothing but dances, parties, and new clothes. Once the dance tent leaves at the end of the summer, life gets boring in Black Hawk. Jim is now in his senior year in high school. He finds his studies far too easy and has a great deal of trouble finding something to keep himself occupied at night. He occasionally sneaks out of the house to go to dances, and one night he walks Antonia home and kisses her. She still tends to treat him like a beloved younger brother, and when he tells her that Lena lets him kiss her all the time, she warns him to watch out for her flirtatious friend. One day Jim finds his grandmother crying; she has found out that he has been sneaking out to the dances and is heartbroken that he has deceived her. He promises not to do it again, and again falls into the boredom of empty evenings.

When time comes for him to graduate, he gives a commencement oration that draws the praise of all who hear it, not the least of whom is his beloved Antonia. He spends the summer preparing for college, studying trigonometry and the Latin classics. The only break he takes from his studies is one Sunday when he goes on a picnic with Antonia, Lena, and their friends. In August the Cutters take a vacation, leaving Antonia in charge of the house. Wick’s strange behavior upsets Tony, however, and she begs Mrs. Burden to let her stay with them. In order to keep the Cutter house safe, Jim reluctantly agrees to sleep in Tony’s bed. On the third night of his stay, he hears someone creep into the room in the middle of the night and he suddenly finds himself being assaulted by Wick Cutter, who thought to take advantage of Antonia. The two fight, and Jim finally escapes out the window, badly bruised and cut up around the face. When Antonia goes back the next morning to retrieve her things, she finds them scattered all over the room in frightful condition. An enraged Mrs. Cutter then appears and tells Mrs. Burden that her husband had delayed her return by putting her on the wrong train.

BOOK III - LENA LINGARD

That Fall Jim goes to the recently-founded University of Nebraska, where he takes lodging with an elderly couple in Lincoln and meets and is mentored by a young scholar named Gaston Cleric. The two become fast friends, though Jim quickly realizes that the life of a scholar is not for him. Jim stays in Lincoln to continue his studies in Greek during the summer between his freshman and sophomore years. One evening in March of his sophomore year he receives a visit from Lena Lingard, who has moved to Lincoln and opened her own dress shop. Lena is successful in business despite the fact that she never finishes a job on time and always runs over on the promised cost. She tells him that *Ántonia* is now working for the Gardeners at the hotel and is engaged to Larry Donovan, which is not good news to Jim, who mistrusts the man. He and Lena arrange to meet again in the near future. In the weeks that follow, the two often go to the theater together and soon arrange to have breakfast together every Sunday morning. Before long, Jim is in love with Lena, like every other man who encounters her. In June, Gaston Cleric is offered a teaching position at Harvard and encourages Jim to join him to get a real education. He also wants to get him away from Lena, whom he considers an unhealthy distraction. Jim agrees to go, says goodbye to Lena, and at the age of nineteen makes his way to Boston.

BOOK IV - THE PIONEER WOMAN'S STORY

Two years later Jim completes his work at Harvard and enrolls in the law school. Before beginning his law studies he pays a visit to his grandparents and friends in Nebraska. He is received with joy by all, but he is saddened to hear that *Ántonia* had run off with Larry Donovan and that he had deserted her without marrying her, leaving her with a young child. She now labors for her unpleasant older brother Ambrosch on the family farm. Jim thinks it strange that *Ántonia*, once so highly respected, is now pitied, while Lena, whom everyone thought was headed for a bad end, was successful and even envied. Another of the hired girls, Tiny Soderball, had done even better, starting a boarding house in Seattle, moving to the Klondike during the gold rush and making a fortune, then returning with her wealth to San Francisco, where she later invited Lena to join her and open a dress shop in a much more promising city than Lincoln.

Ántonia is seen very little in Black Hawk anymore, but Jim longs to get in touch with her again. He visits the Widow Steavens, who had bought the old Burden homestead and was familiar with all the local tales. She had helped *Ántonia* prepare for her wedding, sewing clothes, tablecloths, and pillowcases and gathering all that was needed to set up a household. When Donovan told *Ántonia* that she needed to meet him in Denver, she was disappointed because she had wanted to live on a farm, but she went anyway, full of excitement and anticipation about her new life. When she gets to Denver she finds that Donovan has been fired from his job for cheating the company. They live on her savings for a month, and then he takes off for parts unknown, never having carried out his promise to marry her, though she had given herself to him as an act of good faith. She then returns home in disgrace, bringing her treasured possessions with her. Eight months later she bears a child, a little girl whom she loves dearly and is as proud of as if she had a ring on her finger. The next day Jim goes to see her, and the two talk and reminisce next to her father's grave and Jim tells her that she has been the most important influence in his life.

BOOK V - CUZAK'S BOYS

Twenty years pass before Jim is able to return to Nebraska. During that time *Ántonia* marries a sturdy Bohemian named Anton Cuzak and raises a large family on a fruitful farm, though their hard work never lifts them beyond the edge of poverty. Jim keeps putting off a visit because he does not want to disturb the memories of his childhood by seeing his dearest friend beaten down by labor and the cares of life, but finally none other than Lena Lingard convinces him to stop by to see her on his way back East. When he arrives at the farm, *Ántonia* does not recognize him at first, but then happily shows off her large brood of children. They show him around the farm, and after dinner they enjoy music played by the children and sit around looking at old photograph albums, with the children demonstrating that they know all about the people in the pictures, Jim included. The next morning he meets Anton and the oldest son Rudolph, returning from the nearest town, and is greeted warmly. During supper, Rudolph tells the story of Wick Cutter. He had continued in his deplorable lifestyle till the end, and the quarrels with his wife had gotten so severe that, in order to keep her despicable relatives from inheriting his property, he shot her, then killed himself shortly thereafter, making sure he survived her and leaving a hundred thousand dollars in ill-gotten gains to his heirs. Later Cuzak tells him the story of his life and how he came to meet and marry *Ántonia*; Jim realizes that he is still a city man at heart, but that his wife has kept him close despite the lonely life of the prairie. He promises to visit the family often and become involved in their lives. The next morning he stops by Black Hawk on the way back East, but much of what he remembers there no longer exists.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- *Ántonia* (Tony) Shimerda - The title character in this coming-of-age tale grows up on the Nebraska prairie in a family recently immigrated from Bohemia.
- Jim Burden - *Ántonia*'s friend from childhood, he is the narrator of the story.
- Josiah and Emmaline Burden - Jim's grandparents, they care for him after his parents die.
- Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda - *Ántonia*'s parents; he tends toward depression and ultimately commits suicide, while she is harsh and shrewish.
- Ambrosch Shimerda - *Ántonia*'s older brother, he is sullen and angry, but deeply devout.
- Marek Shimerda - *Ántonia*'s weak-minded younger brother, he is eventually committed to an asylum.
- Yulka Shimerda - *Ántonia*'s younger sister, she helps *Ántonia* raise her baby.
- Jake Marpole - He accompanies Jim to Nebraska, where he works for the Burdens until they move into town.

- Otto Fuchs - An Austrian farmhand who works for Jim's grandfather until the Burdens move into Black Hawk.
- Peter Krajiek - The homesteader who cheats the Shimerdas when he sells them his land, then continues to live with them, supposedly to protect them and serve as their translator.
- Peter and Pavel - Russian immigrants who live near the central characters and befriend them. When Pavel dies, Peter moves away and takes a construction job.
- Widow Steavens - A neighbor of the Burdens who rents their farm after they move to Black Hawk, she cares for *Ántonia* during her pregnancy and later tells Jim her sad story.
- Anton Jelinek - A Bohemian immigrant who came to America as a farm worker, he later opens a saloon in Black Hawk.
- Christian Harling and Mrs. Harling - A grain merchant and his wife who live next to the Burdens in Black Hawk, they hire *Ántonia* to help with the housework.
- Frances Harling - The oldest Harling child, she manages her father's business.
- Lena Lingard - A friend of *Ántonia* who moves to Black Hawk to work for the dressmaker. She has a reputation as somewhat of a flirt. She and Jim spend a lot of time together when the two are living in Lincoln, where she has opened her own dress shop.
- Tiny Soderball - A farm girl who takes a job at the hotel in Black Hawk, she eventually goes West and makes a fortune in the Klondike gold rush, then settles down comfortably in San Francisco.
- Wick Cutter - A moneylender in Black Hawk for whom *Ántonia* goes to work, he is dishonest and often takes advantage of his hired girls. Eventually he murders his wife and commits suicide.
- Gaston Cleric - Jim's tutor and mentor at the University of Nebraska, he convinces Jim to accompany him to Harvard, where he catches pneumonia and dies.
- Larry Donovan - A railroad conductor, he is the cad who impregnates and then deserts *Ántonia* without marrying her.
- Anton Cuzak - A poor Bohemian who marries *Ántonia*, and together they raise a large brood of children.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood.” (Introduction, p.2)

“There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.” (Book I, ch.1, p.8)

“At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.” (Book I, ch.2, p.15)

“Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us.” (Ántonia, Book I, ch.19, p.93)

“Gaston Cleric introduced me to the world of ideas; when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before is as if it had not been.” (Book III, ch.1, p.167)

“It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry.” (Book III, ch.2, p.175)

“Do you know, Ántonia, since I’ve been away, I think of you more often than of anyone else in this part of the world. I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister - anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me.” (Jim, Book IV, ch.4, p.208)

“In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again.” (Book V, ch.1, p.213)

“Whatever else was gone, Ántonia had not lost the fire of life.” (Book V, ch.1, p.218)

“The trouble with me was, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved.” (Ántonia, Book V, ch.1, p.223)

“Ántonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade - that grew stronger with time. In my memory there were a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one’s first primer.” (Book V, ch.1, p.228)

“It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.” (Book V, ch.1, p.229)

“I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man’s experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past.” (Book V, ch.3, p.240)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Analyze the title of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. In the Introduction, Jim is said to add "My" at the beginning of the title as an afterthought. What is the significance of the pronoun? What does it tell you about the nature of the narrative? about the relationship between Jim and Ántonia?
2. Speaking of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, journalist H.L. Mencken, who saw little good in much of anything, once said, "No romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is one half so beautiful." Do you agree or disagree? What characterizes the novel as a romance? What are the chief qualities that constitute its beauty?
3. Why do the narrator and the title character in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* never marry? In answering the question, consider their personalities, their ambitions, their strengths and weaknesses, and the circumstances of their lives.
4. To what extent are the feelings between the narrator and the title character in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* mutual? In what ways do the similarities between their feelings bond them together while the differences keep them apart? What are the most important of these similarities and differences?
5. Willa Cather, in *My Ántonia*, chooses to use a male narrator, Jim Burden, to tell the story. Why does Jim's character make him a suitable choice for the tale the author wishes to tell? Analyze his personality and explain how the content and style of the narrative grow out of who Jim is as a person.
6. In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, to what extent is Jim Burden, the narrator, a participant in the story he tells, and to what extent is he an observer? Do his keen observational skills lead the reader to trust the accuracy of his account? Why or why not?
7. Choose one of the protagonists in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the title character or the narrator, and discuss the extent to which the person changes during the approximately thirty years from the beginning of the novel to the end. How do the experiences of life cause the subject of your essay to change? In what ways does he or she remain fundamentally the same person throughout?
8. Foils are characters who, by contrast with one another, serve to bring out one another's qualities in sharper relief. In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, to what extent may the title character and Lena Lingard be seen as foils? What qualities serve to contrast the two, and how do their roles in the narrative help to bring those qualities out for the reader?

9. Discuss the importance of the Introduction in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. In what ways does it set the stage for the entire narrative that follows? How does it foreshadow all that goes after as the novel unfolds?
10. Discuss the role played by nostalgia in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. Consider not only the role of nostalgia in the mind of the narrator, but also the ways in which it is reflected in the lives of the other characters. What does their love of the past tell you about their present experience?
11. The characters in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* often look nostalgically back in time to what seemed a sweeter, more innocent period in their lives. To what extent does this constant reflection on the past color their description of it? Is the narrator, in particular, looking at his childhood with rose-colored glasses? Does this affect the degree to which the reader can trust his storytelling? Why or why not?
12. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* contains extensive descriptions of the settings in which the story takes place. Why are these descriptions important? To what extent do they support the characters' feelings about the events that they recall as they look back on the events of childhood?
13. Analyze the description of the immigrant experience found in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. Is the story intended to promote social change by gaining sympathy for the plight of the immigrants, or is it simply intended as an accurate description of conditions that no longer existed when the book was written?
14. Analyze the description of the immigrant experience found in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, comparing it to the experience of immigrants to the United States today. In what ways are the challenges faced by immigrants today the same, and in what ways are they different? What factors account for the differences?
15. To what extent does the budding sexuality of the central characters in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* affect the ways in which they develop from childhood to adulthood? In your essay consider Ántonia, Jim, and Lena and analyze the different ways in which they are changed by their passage into puberty and the accompanying sexual awakening.
16. Religion does not play a significant role in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, but lies in the background of many of the events that are described. It tends to be assumed rather than openly discussed. Describe the different ways in which the different forms of Christianity practiced by the main characters affect their behavior and their interactions with one another. To what extent is the religion that underlies the narrative a true biblical form of Christianity?
17. The title page of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* contains a quotation from Virgil: "*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*" ("The best days are the first to flee"). Why do you think the author chose this quotation? In what ways does it summarize the primary theme of the novel? In the context of the novel, is the quotation more a matter of truth or perception? Why do you think so?

18. In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the suicide of Mr. Shimerda serves as an important turning point for the central characters. After this, Ántonia is forced into the life of a farm laborer (and eventually a servant to a series of town families), while Jim soon moves into town and starts the formal education that will lead him eventually to a prosperous career in New York. To what extent do the different directions their lives take drive them apart? What eventually allows them to overcome these differences and reestablish their relationship by the end of the novel?
19. Discuss the portrayal of gender roles in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. Especially in the early part of the novel, Jim prefers spending his time with girls while Ántonia is a bit of a tomboy. To what extent do these personality traits change as the two approach adulthood, and to what extent do they never really change? Support your analysis with specific details and quotations from the novel.
20. In Book II of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Frances Harling tells the narrator, "The problem with you, Jim, is that you're romantic." What does she mean by this? Is she correct? To what extent does this aspect of his personality shape not only his experiences, but his perceptions of those experiences as they are reflected in the novel?
21. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* suggests that the memories of the past are more real and meaningful than the events and conditions of the present. To what extent is this true? Is the answer to the question determined by the characteristics of the individual, by time of life, or by some other factor?
22. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* lacks the typical rising and falling structure found in most novels. Instead, it is anecdotal and episodic. Why do you think the author chose to use what was at the time a radical new approach to the writing of fiction? How does her structure (or lack thereof) suit the themes she intends to convey?
23. In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the author clearly feels great affection for the pioneer life of her youth on the Nebraska prairie. The values cherished by the people who built the land are important to her and she wants them to be important to her readers as well. What are these values? Choose three prominent values characteristic of farm life in the pioneer Midwest, discuss how they are displayed in the story, especially in the person of Ántonia, and explain why they are important.
24. Distinctions of social class based on occupation, nationality, and religion play an important role in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. How do these distinctions and people's attitudes toward them affect the plot and the central characters? How does the narrator's attitude toward such distinctions change as the story progresses? Is the novel an accurate picture of the "melting pot" that was the United States in the nineteenth century? Why or why not?

25. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is not only episodic in character rather than following the traditional arc of narrative fiction, but it also contains lengthy anecdotes, such as the tale of Peter and Pavel throwing the newlyweds to the wolves, that seem to have little relationship to the overall story or the main characters. What is the purpose of these anecdotes? Do they demonstrate parallels with the central characters or symbolize something important in connection with the themes of the novel? Choose three such anecdotes and analyze them in terms of their relationship with the novel as a whole.
26. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* portrays three happy families - the Burdens, the Harlings, and the Cuzaks. What do they have in common that constitutes the foundation of their happiness? What do these qualities tell you about what the author values, despite the fact that she never married or raised a family?
27. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* was written in 1918, near the end of World War I. Cather, like many others, was disillusioned with the horrors that conflict produced. To what extent does the novel constitute a rejection of the materialistic values that the author associated with the war in favor of the simpler and more fundamental values of pioneer life on the farm? Is Cather looking back longing for what has been irretrievably lost, or is she affirming values that are eternal in contrast to the fleeting ambitions of the scientific age?
28. Some critics have suggested that the true protagonist of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is neither the title character nor the narrator, but the land that provides the setting for the story. Why might someone argue this? Do you agree or disagree? Support your analysis with specifics from the novel.
29. Both Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* idealize a way of life that is no more, whether the life of pioneers on the Great Plains or the life of small-town New England. Compare and contrast the values that the authors portray and see as foundational to all that is true and decent. Would the two agree about what is really important in life? Why or why not?
30. In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the Burdens and the Harlings disapprove of the young people who go regularly to the dance pavilion, to the extent that Jim has to sneak out of the house and Ántonia is forced to give up her job in order to continue. Disapproval of dancing was part of the moral framework of conservative Protestantism in the United States, not only in the nineteenth century, but up through the middle of the twentieth. Why did Christians then view dancing as immoral? Was their approach biblically justifiable? How does the novel illustrate the dangers about which they were concerned? Why have Christians today largely changed their views on the subject?
31. In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, why does Mr. Shimerda commit suicide? What does this illustrate about the struggles faced by immigrants to America near the end of the nineteenth century? How does his death affect the other characters in the story, particularly Ántonia and Jim?

32. While Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* has no true villain, it does contain peripheral evil characters. Choose three such characters and analyze what makes them evil, how they take advantage of the good characters, and what their fates indicate about the consequences of evil in the world.
33. In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the title character comes home in disgrace when she becomes pregnant without benefit of marriage. Today, such situations are commonplace and rarely generate a reaction. What explains the differences between the two cultures that react in such opposite ways to such an event? Which culture is more to be admired? Why? Be sure to support your evaluation from a biblical perspective.
34. Compare and contrast the plight of Ántonia when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* and that of Lydia under similar circumstances in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Consider the reasons for the girls' actions, the reactions of those around them, the ways in which the girls respond to their circumstances, and the impact on their future lives in your analysis.
35. Compare and contrast the plight of Ántonia when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* and that of Fantine under similar circumstances in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Consider the reasons for the girls' actions, the reactions of those around them, the ways in which the girls respond to their circumstances, and the impact on their future lives in your analysis.
36. Describe what the author portrays as constituting "family values" in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. Are the values she promotes biblical ones? Why or why not?
37. In the Introduction to Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the unknown narrator describes Ántonia by saying, "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." To what extent is the title character a symbol of something greater than herself? Of what is she a symbol? How does she embody all that the narrator ascribes to her?
38. In Book I, chapter 1 of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden describes the endless prairie through which he travels on his way from Virginia by saying, "There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." How does the story that follows demonstrate how the country was indeed made from the raw material of the Great Plains?
39. In Book I, chapter 2 of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the narrator defines happiness as "to be dissolved into something complete and great." What is that into which he became dissolved, and how did that absorption constitute happiness? Did Jim find this happiness in childhood? in adulthood? in his memories?

40. At the end of Book I of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the title character insightfully remarks to the narrator, "Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us." How does this summarize in simple terms the chasm that existed and continued to exist between the two central characters? What were the causes of this chasm? Could it have been breached?
41. In Book III of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Jim goes away to college and finds a different world. He describes it in these terms: "Gaston Cleric introduced me to the world of ideas; when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before is as if it had not been." Was the loss of the past a permanent change in Jim, or did he ultimately regain what was lost temporarily? In the long run, was Jim influenced more by his childhood or by his education? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
42. In Book III, chapter 2 of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Jim reflects on the hired girls he had known in Black Hawk and relates them to the poetry of Virgil that he is reading at the university. He says, "It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry." Why did he argue that girls like Ántonia and her friends were the true Muses in the artistic world? How does the novel itself demonstrate the truth of his assertion?
43. In Book V, chapter 1 of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the title character describes her fundamental weakness in these words: "The trouble with me was, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved." Is this an accurate self-assessment? How did her tendency to think only good of those she loved turn out to be a character flaw? In what ways was it also a strength?
44. In Book V, chapter 1 of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Jim remarks about Ántonia's family, "It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races." In what ways is this an accurate description of the title character? Is she truly a woman of mythical proportions? Why and how?
45. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* ends with these words: "I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past." Discuss the role of Fate and shared experience in the worldview of the author and her understanding of the essence of human relationships.
46. Three of the hired girls in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* went on to have successful lives in one fashion or another. Which of the three, Ántonia, Lena, or Tiny, was the most successful? Why do you think so? Be sure not only to support your choice with specific pieces of evidence, but also to argue why she was more successful than the other two.

47. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* was unusual in its day not only because it involved a female author speaking through a male narrator, but also because that male narrator told a story centered on a woman. How would the novel have been different had Ántonia been the narrator? Consider matters of point of view, content, and language in your analysis.