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Study Guide

for

My Ántonia

by Willa Cather



New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Willa Cather



Art must spring out of the very stuff that life is made of. The German housewife who sets before her family on Thanksgiving day a perfectly roasted goose, is an artist. The farmer who goes out in the morning to harness his team, and pauses to admire the sunrise—he is an artist.

—Willa Cather

Since childhood, Willa Cather had the ability to see her own brand of art in the people, situations, and emotions of everyday life. Her unique perspective on ordinary life can be found in her celebrated novels, short stories, and essays. Cather is best known as the voice of frontier life on the American plains, where she spent the years of her youth and young adulthood. According to Cather, these were the years during which she unconsciously gathered the rich material that would inspire her to write when she was an adult. She says:

Every story I have written since then has been the recollection of some childhood experience, of something that touched me while a youngster. You must know a subject as a child, before you ever had any idea of writing, to instill into it . . . the true feeling.

Cather was born on December 7, 1873, the eldest child of Charles and Mary Virginia Cather. When she was ten years old, her family moved to a small settlement west of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Cather was at first homesick and had difficulty adjusting to the rough, open landscape of the

Nebraska prairie. However, she found that her diverse collection of neighbors was a striking and welcome contrast to the flat, drab countryside. At that time, immigrants came from all over Europe to farm in Nebraska. Young Cather was befriended by some of the older immigrant women, and their unique experiences made a strong impression on her. Later, Cather relates:

I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these old women at her baking or butter making. . . . I always felt . . . as if I had actually got inside another person's skin.

Nebraska's immigrant settlers appear in many of Cather's novels and short stories. In *My Ántonia*, where a narrator tells the story of his friendship with an immigrant settler, parallels can be drawn between the experiences and feelings of the narrator and of Cather's early years.

Eventually, Cather's family left farming and moved into Red Cloud, where Cather attended school and decided she wanted to become a doctor. It wasn't until she attended the University of Nebraska that her attention turned to literature and writing. After graduating in 1896, she lived for ten years in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and worked as an editor of a woman's magazine, an editor and reviewer for a newspaper, and a high school teacher. During the same period, she published reviews, short stories, and a collection of poems. In 1906 Cather moved to New York City to become a staff writer and eventually the managing editor for *McClure's Magazine*.

Cather's own desire to write about the subjects she loved prompted her to leave the magazine in 1911 to focus her attention on writing fiction. Her efforts led to great literary success. Before her death in 1947, she wrote several novels and numerous poems, short stories, and essays. She also received numerous honorary academic degrees and awards, including a Pulitzer Prize and the National Institute of Arts and Letters gold medal. Today she is considered one of the major American novelists of the twentieth century.

Introducing the Novel

During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had both known long ago. 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, *My Ántonia*

Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is written as a young man's reflections on the people and places of his youth. The narrator, Jim Burden, is a New York City lawyer who grew up on the Nebraska frontier. His memories show his affection for the past and his connection to his childhood friend, and paint a vivid portrait of life in Nebraska in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

From its first pages, *My Ántonia* depicts the ethnically diverse, hardworking people who came to the American plains. The novel also powerfully depicts the open landscape of the prairie and the rugged lifestyle of its settlers. In 1920, H. L. Mencken, a famous literary critic and essayist, wrote:

I know of no novel that makes the remote folk of the western farmlands more real than My Ántonia makes them, and I know of none that makes them seem better worth knowing.

The primary focus of the novel is Ántonia Shimerda, Jim's friend since childhood. Cather based the character of Ántonia on an actual friend, Annie Sadilek, whom she knew when they both lived on the Nebraskan frontier. Cather described her friend to a book reviewer in 1921 as "one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains." She gives these same qualities to her fictional character.

Through Jim Burden, Cather expresses her affection for the people and landscape of her own childhood and for people like Ántonia, who represent the immigrant pioneer spirit of the West. Cather tells of their triumphs and tragedies in a quiet understated fashion. She wrote:

[My Ántonia] is just the other side of the rug,

the pattern that is not supposed to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern. I just used it the way I thought absolutely true.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The novel is set mainly in the Nebraska Divide, a rural farming area in southern Nebraska, and in Black Hawk, a town just east of the Divide. Cather grew up in this area and based the fictional town of Black Hawk on the real town of Red Cloud, which sits on the Republican River. Another setting described in the novel is Lincoln, Nebraska, where narrator Jim Burden attends school for a brief period.

The novel begins in the late 1880s and covers a period of about thirty years of the narrator's life. This was an eventful time in the actual history of Nebraska. In 1862 Congress passed the first Homestead Act, which granted 160 acres of free land in the West to anyone at least twenty-one years old who promised to settle it. The concept of providing free land to hardworking settlers was first suggested by western pioneers who were struggling to build farms on undeveloped land. They argued that, because the land was worthless until developed, Congress should give them parcels of land as a reward for helping to improve the country. Close to a million people requested homestead applications between 1863 and 1890. More farms were created in this time period than any other in U.S. history. The Homestead Act was also a key factor in the United States' expansion westward.

The Homestead Act created opportunities for many struggling American citizens and immigrants to the United States. Between 1881 and 1920, southern and eastern Europeans, including Bohemians, were part of a major immigration movement to the United States. Many of these immigrants, like the Shimerdas in *My Ántonia*, came to the United States to take advantage of available prairie land.

In 1865 the Union Pacific Railroad began building its line farther into Nebraska territory.

They advertised Nebraska farmland in the East as well as in Europe. From 1869 to 1879 Kansas and Nebraska attracted a large number of settlers. Between 1874 and 1877, however, swarms of grasshoppers invaded the area and damaged much of the crops. Many settlers left

their farms and returned east. Drought, bad credit policies, and low prices on agricultural products caused further distress to Nebraska farmers. In *My Ántonia*, Cather captures the hardships facing pioneers as they tried to build new lives in unfamiliar territory.

Did You Know?

Ántonia was born in Bohemia, an area that is now part of the western section of the Czech Republic in eastern Europe. She and her family would have lived in Bohemia when it was ruled by the Catholic Hapsburg family. This family gained control of the region in 1526, was overthrown by Bohemian Protestants in 1618, and then regained power in 1620. They ruled for almost 400 years.

As part of the Hapsburg Empire, Bohemia lost most of its religious and political freedom. In 1848 Bohemian people tried to revolt but were unsuccessful. Bohemia became part of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. After World War II, the republic was taken over by Communist forces. All private property was seized and the government ruled the lives of all Czechoslovakians. In November of 1989, the Communist regime was overthrown and Vaclav Havel, a former playwright, was elected

president. In 1992, when Czechoslovakia was divided into the countries of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Bohemia became part of the Czech Republic.

Ántonia's homeland has a rich history of cultural and artistic tradition. The first university north of the Alps was established in Prague in 1348. Several Czech writers, including Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera, have greatly contributed to not only their own literary tradition but to world literature as well. World-famous composers such as Antonin Dvorak and Bedrich Smetana have incorporated their country's traditional folk music into their major compositions. Baroque architecture figures prominently in the Czech Republic, and cubistic architecture is unique to Prague. The Bohemian area is also well known for its glassblowers and their intricately wrought crystal.

Before You Read

My Ántonia Introduction and Book 1

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What people and places from your childhood do you remember most clearly? Why did they leave such a strong impression on you?

Journal

In your journal, write about a memorable person or place from your childhood. Describe the person or place in detail. What importance does the person or place have to you today?

Setting a Purpose

Read to learn about a person and a place that leave a lasting impression on a boy.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In the settling of frontier land, immigrant families often faced greater challenges than U.S.-born settlers. Because many immigrants left their countries under difficult circumstances, they often did not have a great deal of money with which to begin their new lives. Once in the United States, some struggled with a language barrier that made meeting people and conducting business difficult. Many immigrants also experienced prejudice against their customs and religious practices. Some U.S.-born settlers were resentful of having to compete with immigrants for land or work.

Rural Nebraska

Setting, particularly the landscape surrounding Jim's grandparents' farm, plays a crucial role in the development of *My Ántonia*. Cather takes great care in detailing the natural environment that surrounds her characters. For example, to illustrate the movement of prairie grass, she writes, "I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping. . . ." As you read, notice how the setting reflects the characters and influences their moods.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

alight [ə līt'] *v.* to step down from

clemency [klem'ən sē] *n.* mercy; forgiveness

decorum [di kôr əm] *n.* formality; etiquette

imminent [im'ə nənt] *adj.* ready to happen

interminable [in tur'mi nə bəl] *adj.* endless

laconically [lə kon'ik lē] *adv.* abruptly; quickly

magnanimity [mag'nə nim'ə tē] *n.* generosity

meritorious [mer'ə tôr'ē əs] *adj.* noble

portentous [pôr ten'təs] *adj.* threatening

sullied [sul'ēd] *adj.* tarnished

undulating [un'jə lāt'ing] *adj.* having a wavy outline or appearance

Active Reading

My Ántonia Introduction and Book 1

Throughout the novel, the characters are sensitive to the change of seasons. On the chart below, record important events and activities that mark each season of Jim's first year on his grandparents' farm. Then review your chart and think about how each event relates to the particular mood suggested by each sea-

①. Autumn

- * harvest season
- * Jim gets to know the farm
- *
- *
- *

②. Winter

③. Spring

④. Summer

Responding

My Ántonia Introduction and Book 1

Personal Response

Which events did you find the most memorable? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why does young Jim come to Nebraska to live? Describe Jim's first impressions of the Nebraska prairie. How does the prairie make him feel?

2. Contrast the ways of life of the Burden family and the Shimerda family. Why does Mrs. Shimerda resent the Burdens at times?

3. What happens to Ántonia's father? Describe Mr. Shimerda's character and his relationship with Ántonia.

4. Many of the people in the prairie community have emigrated to the United States. What cultural differences make it difficult for them to understand each other and get along? What common bonds bring them together as a community?

Responding

My *Antonia* Introduction and Book 1

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

5. How would you describe the friendship between Jim and *Antonia*? In what ways do they benefit each other?

6. Recall your response to the **Focus Activity**, remembering how people and places affected you when you were a child. Then name the people and events from this section you expect will have the greatest impact on Jim. Explain your choice.

Literature and Writing

Character Analysis

Through Jim's descriptions, readers understand that *Antonia* is a character who is high-spirited, proud, and generous. Write an analysis of Cather's portrayal of *Antonia*. In which situations does *Antonia* show each of these traits? What other traits does she display?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Cather uses figures of speech such as **simile**, **metaphor**, and **personification** throughout the novel. Similes and metaphors are types of comparisons. Similes contain the "comparing words" *like*, *than*, or *as*. Metaphors do not. Personification refers to the technique of giving human qualities to something that is not human. The following passage contains examples of all three:

The road ran about like a wild thing, avoiding the deep draws, crossing them where they were wide and shallow. And all along it . . . the sunflowers grew . . . They made a gold ribbon across the prairie.

With your group, identify and discuss the three figures of speech in the passage. Then look through Book 1 to find other examples. Discuss how Cather uses this language to convey setting.

Science Connection

The characters hear coyotes in the distance and encounter rattlesnakes, prairie dogs, and owls. What other wildlife is native to the prairie? What plants grow there? Use the Internet or library resources to research the prairie. Present your findings in a brief oral report to your class.



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Before You Read

My Ántonia Books 2 and 3

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What life changes and learning experiences do you expect to have as you move toward adulthood?

Share Ideas

With a partner, predict learning experiences and changes that are likely to occur as people grow older. Think about how activities and surroundings will change as well.

Setting a Purpose

Read to learn about the changes, new experiences, and mistakes that affect the lives of Jim and Ántonia as they grow older.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In this section, Jim's Latin homework introduces him to the work of Virgil, a poet who lived in ancient Rome. Virgil wrote **pastoral** poems that idealize and celebrate rural environments. Literary works that are pastoral often contrast the innocence and simplicity of country life with the corruption of urban environments. Jim is reading *Georgics*, a work that deals with issues of farming and rural life in Italy. He finds two quotations from the selection particularly moving. As you read, think about why Jim finds these ideas moving and why the work of Virgil is thematically fitting for this novel.

Repetition

Though *My Ántonia* is a collection of memories that do not follow a conventional plotline, Cather ties the events of the novel together in a variety of ways. One method is her use of repetition. For example, in this section, images of nature and farming move the narrator and Ántonia to reflect on their pasts and repeat stories about what happened. There is also repetition of characters that are important to the theme. As you read this section, pay attention to how Cather reintroduces Mr. Shimerda to the story through the characters of Jim and Ántonia. Then think about why Cather brings Ántonia's father back into the story.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

affable [af'ə bəl] *adj.* pleasant

assiduously [ə sij'ōō əs lē] *adv.* steadily; industriously

entreat [en trēt'] *v.* to ask; to request

hectoringly [hek'tər ing lē] *adv.* in an intimidating, tormenting manner

incongruous [in kong'grōō əs] *adj.* not consistent; absurd

parsimonious [pär'sə mō'nē əs] *adj.* stingy; extremely careful with money or resources

piquant [pē'kənt] *adj.* charming; savory

repose [ri pōz'] *n.* calm

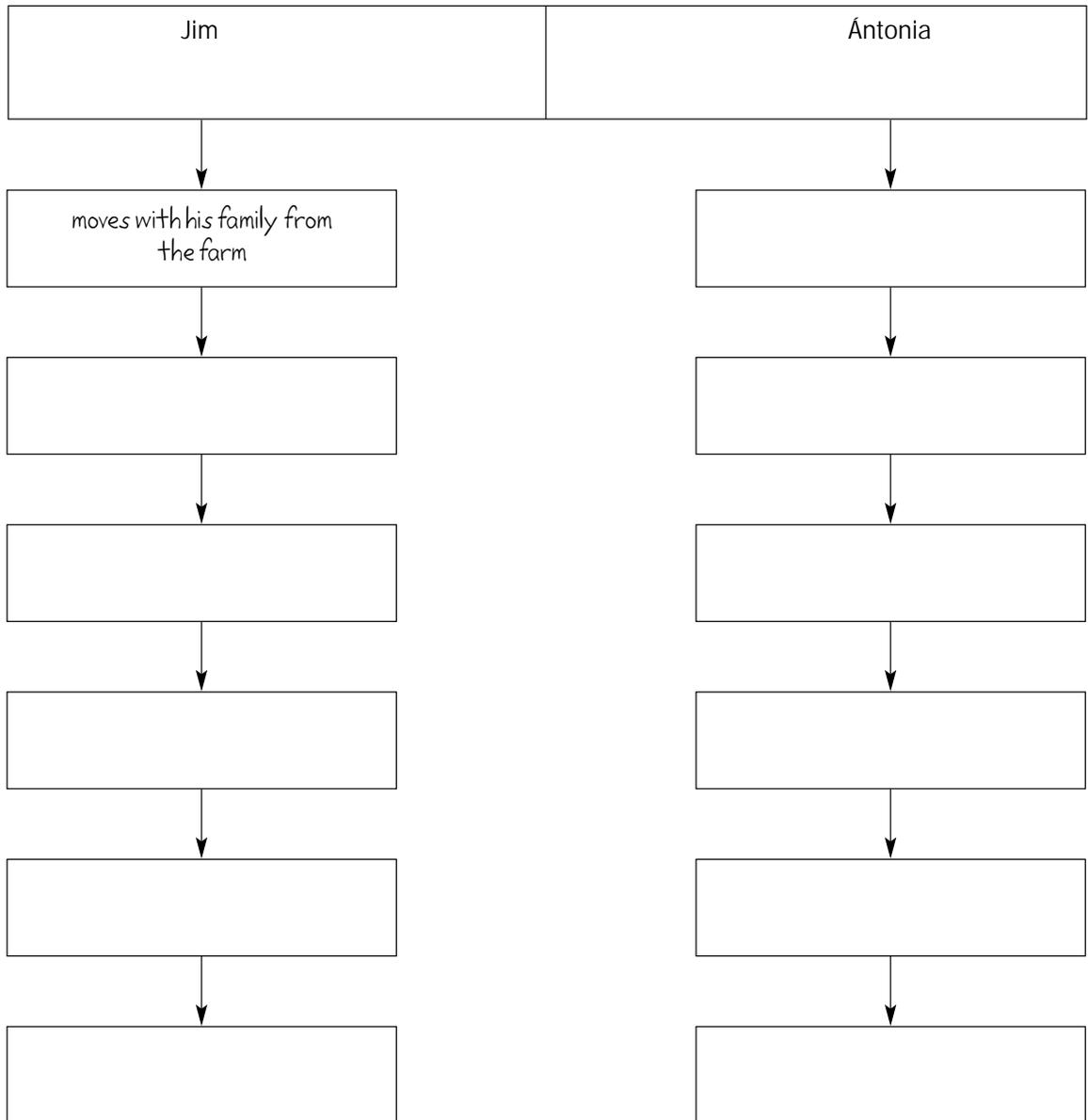
reproach [ri prōch'] *n.* criticism; abuse

unmollified [un mol'ə fīd'] *adj.* unsoothed; agitated

Active Reading

My Ántonia Books 2 and 3

In this section, both Jim and Ántonia experience many changes. Their surroundings change, they have new experiences, and eventually their lives go in two different directions. As you read, note these changes and experiences in the graphic organizer below. Use as many boxes as you need.



Responding

My Antonia Books 2 and 3

Personal Response

How do you feel about the different paths taken by Jim and Antonia? Do you want them to see each other again? Why or why not?

Review your response to the **Focus Activity**. What particular life changes do Jim and Antonia experience in this section?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Who are the “hired girls”? How are they different from other people in *Black Hawk*?

2. What happens to Jim when he spends the night at Wick Cutter’s home? Why does he refuse to speak to Antonia after the incident?

3. Describe the character of Lena Lingard. In what ways is she different from Antonia in terms of her values and her relationship with Jim?

Responding

My *Antonia* Books 2 and 3

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In your opinion, why does Cather temporarily shift the focus from *Antonia* and devote a section of the novel to Lena Lingard?

5. Jim says of the immigrant girls who work in Black Hawk, "If there were no girls like them in the world, then there would be no poetry." Explain his statement.

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Tone

At the end of "Hired Girls," Jim joins *Antonia* and her friends for a picnic. While looking out across the country and watching the sun set, they see what Jim describes as a "curious thing": the sun begins setting behind a plow that has been left alone in a field. Its dark image stands out against the redness of the sun. Jim calls it "heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun." Write an analysis of why Cather included this image in the novel. How might this symbol relate to a theme in the novel or to *Antonia's* state of mind at the end of this section?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

At the end of Chapter 2 of Book 3 the Virgil quotation that first appears at the beginning of the novel, '*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*' (The best days are the first to flee), reappears. In your group, discuss why this quotation is placed at this point in the novel. Think about what questions the repetition of this phrase raises. To whom or what do you think the quotation is referring at this point in the novel? What does the quotation mean to you? Do you agree with its sentiment? Why or why not?

Performing

Work in a pair or a small group to create a dramatization of your favorite scene in this section. In preparing your dramatization, assign parts, including the part of the narrator, and decide how you can most effectively perform each scene. For passages in which Cather does not use dialogue but has Jim describe what is being said, consider creating your own dialogue based on your understanding of the characters.

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Before You Read

My Ántonia Books 4 and 5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What images come to mind when you think of the word *pioneer*?

Web It

Create a concept web for the word *pioneer*. On the lines extending from the word, list people, events, and images that come to mind. Think about what values and qualities a true pioneer must have.

Setting a Purpose

Book 4 of the novel is called “The Pioneer Woman’s Story.” Read through to the end of the novel to understand why Cather entitles Book 4 in this manner.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

My Ántonia has been labeled by critics as both **elegiac** and **nostalgic**. An elegy is a sad poem that laments death or loss. Nostalgia is a longing for one’s home or past. Characters throughout the novel refer to their pasts, both to celebrate and to express regret or resentment. Their pasts either draw them back or make them want to move forward. For example, Jim and Ántonia are continually looking back at their happy childhood experiences and wondering if they can ever find that happiness again, while Lena Lingard’s unhappy memories of farming motivate her to change her way of life completely. Ántonia clings to her Bohemian heritage, while other immigrant workers try to adopt the language and customs of the United States. After finishing the novel, think about whether the novel is more an elegiac or a nostalgic literary work.

Characterization

Writers use specific techniques to create characters. These include direct description, showing characters’ behavior, showing how others react to characters, and showing characters’ thoughts. Writers use these methods not only to give readers insight into individuals, but sometimes to characterize groups of people. In this section, Cather uses many interesting details to characterize the Cuzak family, particularly the Cuzak children. As you read, notice Cather’s techniques of characterization, and draw conclusions about the family.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

acquisitive [ə kwiz’ə tiv] *adj.* greedy; eager to obtain

brandish [bran’dish] *v.* to wave in a showy manner

conformation [kon’ fôr mǎ’shən] *n.* shape or structure

droll [drōl] *adj.* amusing; odd

duplicity [dōō plis’ə tē] *n.* craftiness; deception

irrelevant [i rel’ə vǎnt] *adj.* inappropriate

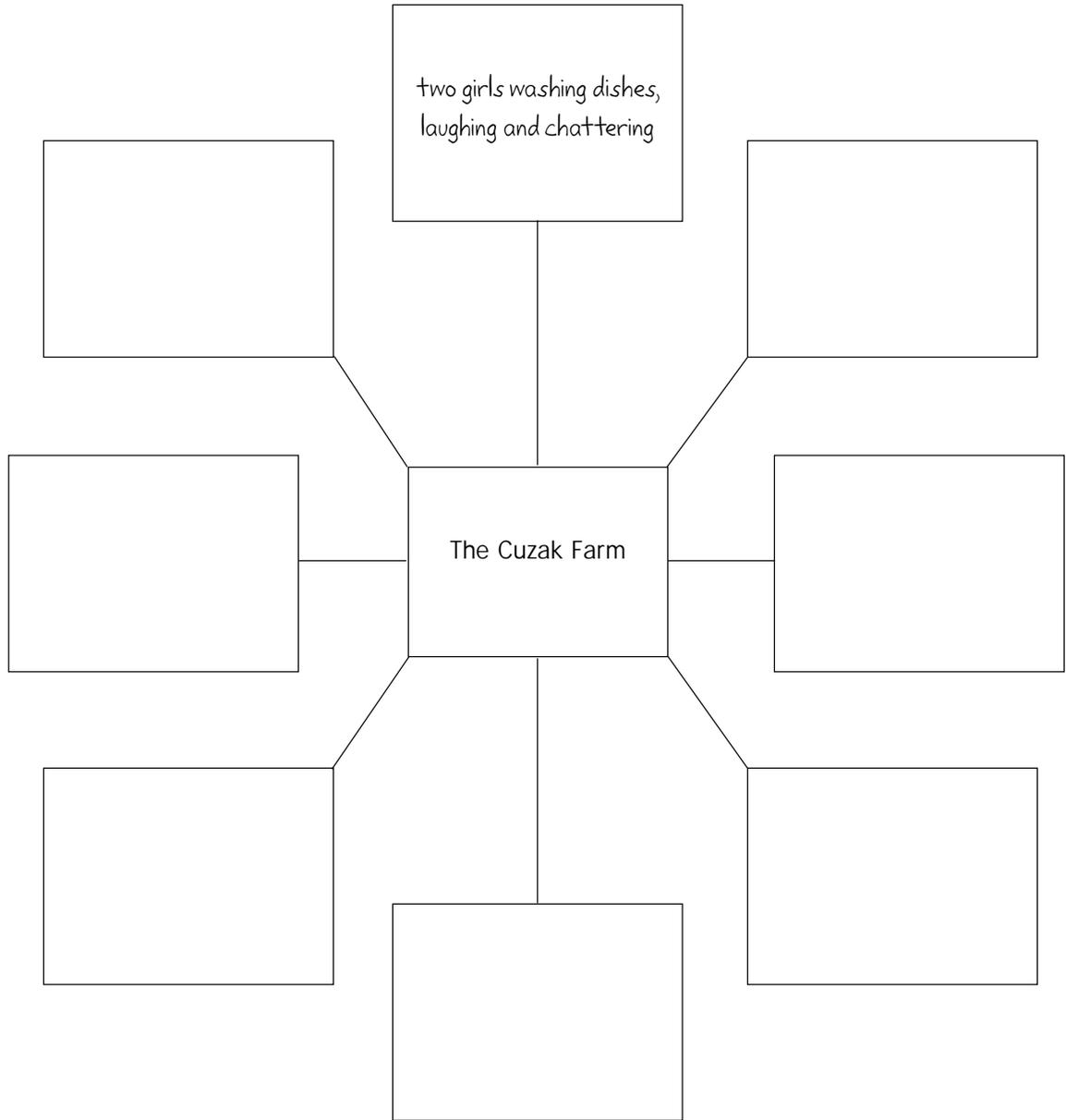
jaunty [jôn’tē] *adj.* lively; robust

unabashed [un’ə basht’] *adj.* open; outspoken

Active Reading

My Antonia Books 4 and 5

When Jim visits *Antonía* and her family at the end of this section, he is moved by what he sees. In the graphic organizer below, list the words and images that characterize the Cuzak family and their life on their farm. Choose the images that Jim finds most appealing.



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Responding

My Ántonia Books 4 and 5

Personal Response

When you reached the end of the novel, how did you feel about Ántonia and Jim?

Think about your response to the **Focus Activity**. Does the character of Ántonia reflect any of the words and ideas you recorded in your web? Explain.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. When Jim first returns to Nebraska after being at Harvard, what does he learn about Ántonia? Why does Jim feel bitterness when Mrs. Harling says “poor Ántonia”?

2. What is Ántonia’s response to the idea of raising her child by herself? What does her response reveal about her character?

3. Describe Ántonia’s life with her family at the end of the novel. How does her family life affect Jim?

Responding

My *Antonia* Books 4 and 5

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. When Jim sees *Antonia* for the first time after so many years, he describes her as “battered but not diminished.” What does he mean? How does her appearance reflect her character and her life?

5. In your opinion, why did Jim and *Antonia* never marry? Do you believe this would have been a logical path for their relationship? Why or why not?

Literature and Writing

Critic’s Review

Play the role of literary critic, and write a review of the final chapters of the novel. To prepare for your review, ask yourself the following questions: Am I satisfied with the reunion between Jim and *Antonia*? Do I feel that *Antonia* is fully developed as a character by the end of the novel? Does Cather use enough details to illustrate the feelings of the main characters?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

At the end of the novel, Jim talks about “what a little circle man’s experience is.” In your group, describe how Cather brings the novel full circle to demonstrate this idea. Compare the details of the landscape and the characters of the last books with details and characters of the first book.

Learning for Life

Jim leaves *Antonia*’s farm with more understanding and self-knowledge than he has had in a long time. Imagine that on his train ride back to New York he decides to make a list of goals for his life, based on his experience at the Cuzak farm. Create Jim’s list of goals. These goals can include concrete plans that he mentions, such as taking the Cuzak boys hunting, and more abstract wishes for his life, such as focusing more on the values of his youth. Include specific steps he can take toward achieving his goals.

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Letter to Frances Samland

Annie Pavelka

Before You Read

Focus Question

Think about the most significant event in your life. How could you create a short story about that event? What would make people want to read it?

Background

Willa Cather distilled much of her early life into her novels and short stories. This reading tells about the origins of *My Ántonia*. It includes a letter from Cather's friend, Annie Pavelka, who was the role model for Ántonia Shimerda in *My Ántonia*.

Responding to the Reading

1. After reading the letter, what impression do you have of its author? Why?

2. How does Pavelka describe her father and his death? What clue does the description give you about Pavelka's outlook on life?

3. **Making Connections** Based on Pavelka's letter, compare and contrast Pavelka's life with that of Ántonia Shimerda. Can you see similarities? Explain.

Write A Short Story

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short story about someone from your past. Develop the character into someone who is either strong, wise, sad, or funny.

from *The House on Mango Street*

Sandra Cisneros

Before You Read

Focus Question

Imagine what it is like to move to another country where people speak a language different from your own. What cultural barriers might you experience? How would you overcome them?

Background

In these brief readings, contemporary Latina poet and short-story writer Sandra Cisneros draws four quick sketches of present-day immigrants in the United States. Notice how she skillfully shows the emotions of the characters in only a few words.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why does the woman in “No Speak English” cry when her baby learns the commercial jingle? What does her reaction suggest about her ability to adjust to life in the United States?

2. How does Esperanza in “My Name” feel about her name? What does the name represent to her?

3. In your own words, what is the narrator saying in the first and last paragraphs of “Those Who Don’t”? Why do you think the narrator ended with the statement “That is how it goes and goes”?

4. **Making Connections** In “Geraldo No Last Name,” many factors alienate Geraldo from the surrounding culture. What factors might have caused *Ántonia* and her family to feel alienated in Cather’s novel?

Learning for Life

With a partner, list resources that would help a newly arrived immigrant. What might the government or private businesses do to increase the chances of success for these individuals? Think about education, work, and social activities. Write a brochure listing helpful resources for newcomers to the United States.

McNamara Interview / Bonacorsi Interview

June Namias

Before You Read

Focus Question

What hopes and dreams may have been common to the different groups of people immigrating to the United States in the early 1900s?

Background

June Namias has taught history and social studies and writes for educational journals as well as poetry magazines. This reading describes the experiences of three immigrants who arrived in the United States from Ireland and Italy, respectively, in the early 1900s. Their lives in the cities and jobs in the factories provide an interesting contrast to the lives of the Bohemian farming immigrants in *My Ántonia*.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why did the immigrants in these interviews leave their home countries? What difficulties did they encounter when they arrived in the United States?

2. In your opinion, should the workers in the Lawrence mills have gone on strike? Explain your answer.

3. Do you think the immigrants in this reading found the dream they were looking for when they came to the United States? Why or why not?

4. **Making Connections** The immigrants in this reading discuss some of the discrimination they experienced. In your opinion, did the immigrant farmers in *My Ántonia* experience any discrimination? Explain.

Literature Groups

Divide your group into two teams. Have each team draw up a list of pros and cons for immigrating to the city or the country at the turn of the century. Assign one team the city and the other team the country. Debate the issue.

Willa Cather Talks of Work

Willa Cather

F. H.
Eleanor Hinman

Before You Read

Focus Question

What character traits will be necessary for you to succeed in your future career? What experiences have contributed to your building those character traits?

Background

This reading contains two personal interviews with Cather. In the first interview, from the August 10, 1913, edition of the *Philadelphia Reporter*, she discusses her favorite authors. In the second interview, from the November 6, 1921, edition of the *Lincoln Sunday Star*, she discusses early life on the Nebraska prairie, the immigrants who lived there, her writing, and the ideas behind *My Ántonia*.

Responding to the Readings

1. How did Willa Cather feel about her Bohemian and Scandinavian neighbors in Nebraska?

2. What writer does Cather admire and mention often? Why? What evidence of this author's influence do you see in Cather's work?

3. Why did Willa Cather choose to make the narrator of *My Ántonia* a young man? In your opinion, was this choice a good one?

4. **Making Connections** Based on what you have read, how might you summarize Cather's philosophy of writing?

Writing a Letter

Write a letter to a young writer as if you were Willa Cather. Try to give the same kind of advice she might give.

Atop the Mound

William Least Heat-Moon

Before You Read

Focus Question

If you could live anywhere, would you choose to live in the city or in the country? Why?

Background

Author William Least Heat-Moon is best known for his books about the U.S. countryside. He has traveled throughout the United States, interviewing small-town Americans and exploring the land. In “Atop the Mound,” from his book *PrairyErth*, he reminisces about his time in Kansas and his experiences hiking across the plains.

Responding to the Reading

1. According to the author, why is it inadvisable to keep “your eye on a far goal” when walking across the prairie?

2. What does the author especially like about the prairie?

3. **Making Connections** Compare Jim Burden’s first impressions of the prairie with those of William Least Heat-Moon. What do their descriptions have in common?

Learning for life

Imagine that you work for a travel agency that specializes in arranging hiking trips across the prairie. With a partner, create a short commercial persuading people to buy your Nebraska or Kansas “Prairie Get-Away” vacation package. Use details from *My Ántonia* or the selection from *PrairyErth* to make people want to take the trip. Then videotape your commercial and play it for your classmates, or stage a live performance. Be sure that your commercial includes enticing visuals.