CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

My Ántonia

Willa Cather · *1918 · original English text*

On a burning day crossing Iowa, two friends keep returning to a Bohemian girl they knew long ago. Jim Burden then writes the story of Ántonia Shimerda—the prairie, a hard winter, a suicide, hired work in town, and a later farm that still holds her strength. The name in this text keeps its accent: Ántonia.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a pioneer girl give to a country, and to the friend who tells her story years later?

"During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had known long ago and whom both of us admired."

The introduction, before Jim's memoir

The book is Jim's account of Ántonia, not a simple romance. Nebraska is the other character: sod houses, a first winter, the Shimerdas' poverty, Mr. Shimerda's death, and later the hired girls in Black Hawk. Ántonia's later life is not a fall from a storybook; it is a hard fruitfulness. Cather's English in this hosted text (PG #19810) prints Ántonia with the accent, and the Virgil epigraph Optima dies … prima fugit. Quote this page. A fine novel for a wide band of older readers, with a suicide and a later assault to be taught with care.

KEY CHARACTERS

Ántonia Shimerda
The Bohemian girl who becomes the book's central figure; this text prints the accent.

Jim Burden
The narrator, who arrives as a boy and writes the memoir years later.

the Shimerdas and the Burdens
Two immigrant and settler households on the same prairie, in very different comfort.

the hired girls of Black Hawk
Ántonia's companions in town, whose roads test what the country offers a poor girl.

A BOHEMIAN GIRL

> *"During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had known long ago and whom both of us admired."*
>
> The introduction

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Name, and a Journey

THE INTRODUCTION AND THE ARRIVAL

A burning day in Iowa, a remembered Bohemian girl, and then Jim's coming as a boy to his grandparents' prairie. The Shimerdas arrive too, poorer, and next door in a wider sense.

- The introduction's sentence is exact, including 'Bohemian girl.'
- The name is Ántonia in this text (accent on the A).
- The Virgil epigraph stands at the front: Optima dies … prima fugit.

> *"During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had known long ago and whom both of us admired."*
>
> The introduction

02

The First Winter

THE SHIMERDAS ON THE PRAIRIE

Sod, hunger, language, and a father's homesickness. Mr. Shimerda's death is the first deep shadow. The country is beautiful and does not save him.

- Teach the suicide with gravity; it is a grief, not a device.
- Jim's grandparents' kindness is part of the book's measure of a place.
- The prairie is not an empty backdrop.

03

Town, and the Hired Girls

BLACK HAWK

Jim goes into town; Ántonia works in other people's kitchens. Dances, reputation, and the different roads open to a hired girl and to a boy who can still go to school.

- The 'hired girls' chapters are social history and character at once.
- Ántonia's pride in work is not a fall from the earlier prairie.
- A later assault must be taught with care, not skipped and not lingered on as spectacle.

04

Years, and a Return

THE LATER BOOKS

Jim goes away to school and to a life elsewhere. He comes back to find Ántonia on a farm, with a family, not as the girl of the first winter and not as a ruin.

- The return is the book's test of memory against a living woman.
- Cather will not make this a hidden romance fulfilled late.
- The land and the children are the form her life has taken.

05

What the Country Receives

THE CLOSE

The memoir ends in a recognition: Ántonia has remained a central figure, and the country has received something from hearts like hers. The book is Jim's, and it is hers.

- Keep the accent and the spelling of this edition when you quote.
- The frame's admiration is earned, not a soft haze.
- A Midwestern novel of immigration, work, grief, and fruitfulness, for a wide older band.

The Prairie · Memory · Work and Fruitfulness · Immigration · A Central Figure

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is Willa Cather's original English (Project Gutenberg #19810). The name is printed Ántonia (accent). The Virgil epigraph is "Optima dies … prima fugit." Quote this page, not a later reprint's typography.
2. The book includes a father's suicide and, later, an assault. Teach both with gravity. It is a memoir of a friend and a country, not a hidden romance.
3. Do not quote only the introduction; the prairie winter and the later farm are the body of the book.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #19810, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/my-antonia/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.