

My Antonia



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLA CATHER

Willa Cather was born into a large farming family in rural Virginia. In 1883, when Cather was ten years old, her family relocated to Red Cloud, Nebraska. She attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she paid her way by working for the Nebraska State Journal, and later moved to Pittsburgh to teach high school English. In 1906 she moved to New York City to work for McClure's Magazine, but began to write full-time in 1912. In her lifetime, Cather published 12 novels and many short stories, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1922 for her novel *One of Ours*. A fiercely private person, Cather never married. Her most significant relationships were with women, most notably the editor Edith Lewis, with whom she lived in New York City from 1912 until her death in 1947.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When *My Ántonia* was published, its story of American prairie life captured the imagination of an American public that was exhausted by World War I. Cather's readers looked to literature as an escape from wartime politics and were proud of the United States' new post-war position as a global power. *My Ántonia* also appealed to progressives who were interested in social and economic issues because the novel explored women's strength and adaptability, and also brought attention to the hardships of immigrant life in the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the early 20th century, writers were concerned about the growing industrialization of American society. They felt a sense of disillusionment and a nostalgia for simpler days. *My Ántonia*, set in rural Nebraska, captures this longing, and can be compared to such works as Sherwood Anderson's [Winesburg, Ohio](#) (1919), Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) and Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920). All of these works explore the mainstream desire of the time to abandon the city and live a more wholesome life out West in a small town.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *My Ántonia* (pronounced with the accent on the first syllable)
- **When Written:** 1916–1918
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1918
- **Literary Period:** Modernism

- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** Black Hawk, Nebraska in the 1880s
- **Climax:** When Ántonia starts attending the town dances, she asserts her independence by quitting her job with the Harlings and isolates herself from the Harlings and the Burdens.
- **Antagonist:** Ántonia. Although not a typical antagonist, her separation from Jim influences the course of his life. Minor antagonists: Wick Cutter; the winter.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Prairie Life: *My Ántonia*, the last of Cather's "prairie trilogy" of novels, is heavily autobiographical. Like Cather, Jim moves from Virginia to Nebraska at the age of ten, to a place heavily populated by Eastern European immigrants. The fictional Black Hawk, with its sod houses and bee bush, is largely based on Red Cloud, the Nebraska town where Cather lived. Throughout her life, Cather felt a great homesickness for her childhood years in Nebraska. Memories of the West fueled her writing throughout her career.

Willa the Tomboy: As a college student, Cather dressed as a tomboy and sometimes used the name "William." Most of her novels are written from the point of view of a male character. Though she never declared her sexual orientation, it has been a topic of debate among scholars.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the late 1880s, recently orphaned Jim Burden leaves his home in Virginia to live with his grandparents in rural Nebraska. On the same train is 13-year-old Ántonia Shimerda, an immigrant from Bohemia, whose family is buying the land next to the Burdens. Ten-year-old Jim feels immediately at home on the **prairie**. He quickly settles into his new life with Jake Marpole and Otto Fuchs, the farm hands, and his loving grandparents.

The Burdens soon befriend the Shimerda family, and Jim and Ántonia bond over their love of the land. Ántonia learns English eagerly under Jim's tutelage, although her parents are more hesitant to adapt to American life. Mr. Shimerda, frail and homesick, finds the adjustment to farm life especially difficult. His one solace is his friendship with Pavel and Peter, Russian farmers whose language is similar to the Shimerdas'. But when Pavel dies suddenly, Peter leaves to find a job in railway construction. Mr. Shimerda, having lost his one outside connection to his native culture, sinks into loneliness and

depression. He is unable to provide properly for his family. When winter arrives, Jim's grandparents discover that the Shimerdas do not have enough clothing or food to survive the winter. They do their best to help, but when Christmas snow traps them in their homes, the Shimerdas are trapped without hearty food or gifts. When the snow melts, Jim's grandparents invite the Shimerdas to their home, but the visit goes poorly. Mrs. Shimerda is angry and envious, and Mr. Shimerda is saddened, reminded of his cozy village in Bohemia.

In January, two days after Jim's birthday, Mr. Shimerda commits suicide in his family's barn. A recently arrived Bohemian man named Anton Jelinek comes from Black Hawk to help bury Mr. Shimerda. Mrs. Shimerda demands that they dig the **grave** at the corner of their land, where the roads will cross when they are built.

When spring arrives, *Ántonia* insists on working in the fields alongside her brother Ambrosch, and is unable to go to school with Jim. They see less of each other, and Jim longs for their old friendship.

When Jim turns 13, his grandparents decide to move to town so Jim can be closer to school. Not long afterward, the Burdens' neighbors, the Harlings, hire *Ántonia* as their housekeeper. Jim renews his old friendship with *Ántonia*, until she befriends other girls and starts dancing every night in the town pavilion. When she gains a reputation with the local boys, Mr. Harling fires her, and *Ántonia* goes to work for a moneylender named Wick Cutter. Jim sneaks out to the dances with *Ántonia*, until his grandmother finds out and stops him from going. He becomes lonely, and longs for his childhood on the prairie. *Ántonia* rejects his romantic advances, and tells him she cannot think of him as anything other than a younger brother.

When Wick Cutter attempts to rape *Ántonia*, she quits her job and starts working at the local hotel instead. Jim, meanwhile, graduates from high school. He makes one last trip to the prairie with *Ántonia*, where they reminisce about years past. They see the image of a **plough** magnified by the **setting sun**, and recognize it as a symbol of the end their time together.

Jim moves to Lincoln to attend college. One of *Ántonia*'s friends, Lena Lingard, takes a job in Lincoln as a dressmaker, and she and Jim begin dating. But Jim cannot stop loving *Ántonia*. Eventually he transfers to Harvard and moves to Boston.

After college, Jim returns to Black Hawk to visit his grandparents before he begins law school. He learns that *Ántonia* has had a child but is not married. He goes to see her and finally admits his love for her. But *Ántonia* disregards his confession, and Jim leaves to go back to Boston.

Jim does not see *Ántonia* again for 20 years. He marries and becomes a successful lawyer in New York City. When he finally visits *Ántonia* again, she is working on a farm with her husband, Anton Cuzak, also a Bohemian immigrant. They have 11

children. Memories of his childhood with *Ántonia* overwhelm Jim, but he leaves Nebraska satisfied that he and *Ántonia* will always be bound together by the past.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jim Burden - The protagonist of *My Ántonia* and the narrator of most of the novel. Orphaned at the age of ten, he comes to live with his grandparents on the Nebraska prairie. Jim is reflective, studious, and a "romantic." He feels deeply connected to the land. He isolates himself from boys his own age, preferring the friendship of the older immigrant girls. He later becomes a successful lawyer in New York City, but can never forget his childhood friend, *Ántonia*, whom he elevates in his mind to an almost mythical status.

Ántonia Shimerda - A Bohemian immigrant and Jim's closest friend, *Ántonia* comes to the prairie when she is 13. She is lively and intelligent, but struggles to remain optimistic while enduring the many hardships of poverty. Still, Jim describes her as having a youthful "vigour" and identifies her with light. Like Jim, *Ántonia* feels a deep attachment to the prairie, and she works in the fields with the men when her father dies. But when she moves to town to work as a housekeeper, she becomes interested in clothing and dancing, and gains a reputation for being "easy." Although Jim loves her, *Ántonia* can never view him as more than a younger brother. She becomes a single mother in her early twenties, but later moves back to the farm, marries Anton Cuzak, and raises 11 children.

Lena Lingard - *Ántonia*'s friend in Black Hawk and one of the "hired girls." She becomes Jim's girlfriend when they reunite in Lincoln while Jim is in college. While Jim loves *Ántonia* with a pure, childlike love, his attraction to Lena is sexual. A Norwegian immigrant, Lena aspires to earn money, success, and independence, and refuses to marry. She is sophisticated and fashionable, and she becomes a successful dressmaker in Lincoln. Lena later moves to San Francisco with Tiny Soderball.

Emmaline Burden - Jim's paternal grandmother. She is 55 years old when Jim comes to live with her. A devout Christian, she acts as a maternal figure for Jim and also tries to look after the Shimerdas during their first winter. She has wrinkled brown skin and black hair, and is deeply concerned with Jim's education.

Otto Fuchs - An Austrian man who works on the Burden's farm, Otto's previous jobs include cowboy, stage-driver, and miner. Jim describes Otto as just having "stepped out of the pages of Jesse James." He is lively and ferocious, but good-hearted, and he looks after Jim. When the Burdens move to town, he leaves to go back to the "wild West".

Mr. Shimerda - *Ántonia*'s father. A tapestry weaver from

Bohemia, he is not suited to the harsh climate and hard physical labor of the farm. He becomes depressed, homesick, and frail, and is found dead in his barn during his family's first winter in Nebraska. It's unclear if his death was a suicide or a murder.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator - An unnamed fictional character. One of Jim's childhood acquaintances, the narrator provides the introduction to the novel. Jim gives him the manuscript of *My Ántonia*.

Josiah Burden - Jim's paternal grandfather. A devout Protestant farmer, he becomes a deacon when the Burdens move to town. He has a snow-white beard and blue eyes. He is quiet and wise, and not demonstrative with his affection. Jim describes him as having a great sense of "personal dignity."

Jake Marpole - An illiterate farmhand on Jim's parent's farm in Virginia, Jake moves West with Jim to Nebraska. He has a faithful and trusting disposition. He leaves with Otto when the Burdens move to town.

Mrs. Shimerda - Ántonia's mother. Mrs. Shimerda is angry about her family's poverty and jealous of the Burdens' comparative wealth. Jim thinks she is rude and grasping.

Yulka Shimerda - Ántonia's younger sister.

Ambrosch Shimerda - Ántonia's older brother. He runs the farm after Mr. Shimerda dies, and "sells" Ántonia out to various jobs on the prairie and then in town. Jim dislikes Ambrosch.

Peter and Pavel - Russian settlers who befriend Ántonia and Jim, but who are haunted by a selfish and fatal action they committed in Russia years earlier. When Pavel dies, Peter leaves to work in a railway construction camp.

Mr. Harling - A shrewd businessman who lives next door to the Burdens in Black Hawk. He makes Ántonia leave her job as his housekeeper when she refuses to stop dancing.

Mrs. Harling - Mr. Harling's wife. A square-looking, energetic woman, she grows fond of Ántonia, but defers to her husband and allows Ántonia to leave.

Tiny Soderball - One of Ántonia's friends in Black Hawk. She works as a waitress at the hotel, but later leaves Nebraska and becomes rich prospecting in the Alaskan gold rush. When Jim meets her many years later in California, he finds her a bit cold.

Frances Harling - The Harlings' oldest daughter. She is a wise and intelligent businesswoman whom Jim deeply respects.

Charley Harling - The Harlings' son. Charley is three years older than Jim, and leaves Black Hawk to attend the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

Samson "Blind" d'Arnault - A blind African-American pianist who comes to play at the Boys' Home hotel.

Peter Krajiek - A miserly old immigrant, Krajiek is Mrs. Shimerda's distant cousin. He sells his land to the Shimerdas for

much too high a price.

Wick Cutter - A cruel moneylender in Black Hawk. Ántonia works for him for a while, but quits after he tries to rape her. At the end of the novel, Cutter commits suicide after murdering his wife.

Larry Donovan - Ántonia's fiancé and a passenger conductor on the railway. He gets Ántonia pregnant, but when they run out of money, he refuses to marry her and abandons her.

Anton Cuzak - Ántonia's husband and a Bohemian immigrant. Jim describes him as a short "crumpled little man," but says Cuzak carries himself with "an air of jaunty liveliness" and is a good husband and father.

Gaston Cleric - A Latin professor at Jim's university in Lincoln, Nebraska. Cleric persuades Jim to transfer to Harvard, but dies from pneumonia soon afterward.

The Widow Steavens - The woman who rents the Burdens' farm when they move to Black Hawk. She tells Jim the story of Ántonia's failed engagement to Larry Donovan.

Anton Jelinek - A handsome Bohemian man who comes from Black Hawk to help bury Mr. Shimerda. Ántonia later marries his cousin.

Mr. Ordinsky - A Polish violin teacher who lives in the apartment across from Lena Lingard in Lincoln.

The Vannis - Traveling Italian dance teachers who set up a dancing pavilion in Black Hawk.

Sylvester Lovett - A banker's son who falls in love with Lena Lingard, but decides to marry someone of his own, higher class.

Mrs. Cutter - The wife of Wick Cutter and a "terrible shrew" of a woman.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

In 1862, the United States government urged colonization of Nebraska and other territories by creating The Homestead Act, which stated that any person who was an American citizen, or had declared his intention to become one, could claim 160 acres of government land. Some Eastern Americans, like Jim's grandparents, simply moved west, while others, like the Shimerdas, came all the way from Europe to try their luck at farming the Nebraska prairie. Both groups were in search of a better life, and, as depicted in *My Ántonia*, both can be considered immigrants in that they

suffer the trials of a new and unfamiliar life. But while both Jim and *Ántonia* encounter loneliness and homesickness for the lands they left behind, in *My Ántonia* the foreign-born immigrants experience the greater struggle. They face extreme poverty, the barriers of not speaking the English language, and the challenge of cultural and religious differences. In many ways, Cather's novel is the story of these immigrants' acclimation to the American Midwest, as seen through Jim's eyes.



FRIENDSHIP

In the mid to late 1800s on the American prairie, friendship with neighbors was important to every family's survival and wellbeing. Neighbors provided both a social outlet and the physical help necessary for survival. The Burdens befriend the Shimerdas, the Shimerdas befriend Peter and Pavel, and Jim befriends Jake and Otto. Yet it's Jim's friendship with *Ántonia*, with its many ups and downs, that is central to *My Ántonia*. The novel begins with their pure and simple childhood friendship, and follows their many separations and reunions as they grow up. Through it all, both characters remain loyal to the memories of their childhood, and in doing so they preserve an allegiance to each other.



THE PRAIRIE

My Ántonia is the last of three novels that make up Cather's "prairie trilogy." In *My Ántonia*, Jim personifies the landscape to such an extent that the prairie can even be considered a character—and one with a complex personality. The prairie functions as an essential means of survival for farmers like the Burdens and the Shimerdas, because it provides food to consume and to sell. But, at times, it can also be dangerous. Jim, for example, becomes sick during the harsh winter, and one summer he is almost killed by a rattlesnake. Still, both Jim and *Ántonia* form a lifelong connection to the prairie, and as adults they associate it with a simpler, purer life. They are fascinated by its vivid colors, seasonal changes, and vast openness. Jim's and *Ántonia*'s moods often depend on the "moods" of the land. During his first winter in town, for example, Jim becomes lonely and depressed. And when she tells the story of the tramp who killed himself, *Ántonia* is disturbed not by his suicide but by the fact that he killed himself in summertime, when everyone is supposed to be happy.



THE PAST

Jim and the other characters in *My Ántonia* struggle between living in the present and remembering the past. They share a common longing for the years and places left behind. To Jim, the past represents the lost innocence of his childhood, while to immigrants like the

Shimerdas, the past means the friendlier, more familiar villages they left behind in Europe. In Book I, the Shimerdas and other immigrant characters cling to the traditions, people, and places of the "old country." Mr. Shimerda never overcomes his homesickness for Bohemia, and Peter and Pavel cannot escape the dark secrets of their youth in Russia. But the past also functions as a kind of spiritual sustenance. Jim, for example, holds dear the memories of his childhood friendship with *Ántonia*. And *Ántonia* eventually moves back to the prairie, where her father's grave reminds her of her last years with him.



INNOCENCE AND MATURITY

On the prairie, Jim and *Ántonia*'s friendship is uncomplicated by the experiences and prejudices of adulthood. Though they come from different backgrounds and social classes and are members of the opposite sex, they are too young for these differences to matter. But even though Jim clings to the simplicities of youth, he can't stop time's advance and the maturity it brings.

Jim and *Ántonia*'s move from the prairie into town signifies their first steps toward adulthood, and as they mature they grow farther apart. Both characters struggle with the emotional, physical, and sexual changes of adolescence. For *Ántonia*, the death of her father, the social complexities of town life, and an unexpected pregnancy force her into an early maturity. On the other hand, Jim's entrance into adulthood comes largely when he leaves Black Hawk for college. It is only when he moves to Lincoln (the capital of Nebraska) and has his first serious relationship with a woman, Lena, that Jim begins to view his childhood friendship with *Ántonia* as the purest, most uncomplicated love one person can have for another.



GENDER

In late 19th century America, gender roles were strictly defined. Men were meant to act as providers, and women were meant to marry and care for the family. During his childhood, Jim believes strongly in these roles and looks up to working men like Otto and his grandfather, Jake. He tries desperately to earn *Ántonia*'s respect by following their examples. *Ántonia*, however, does not want to conform to the typical female role. On the prairie, after her father dies, she insists on working in the fields with the men. After *Ántonia* moves to town, Jim is surprised when she forms female friendships and discovers dancing, fancy clothing, and etiquette. He is even more surprised when she laughs off his romantic advances.

Only when Jim moves to Lincoln for college does he really begin to question traditional gender roles. He dates independent women like Lena and comes to respect Lena for her ambition. He begins to look back on *Ántonia*'s love for the fields and flirtatious behavior in town not as conflicting, but as

different aspects of her personality. Eventually, *Ántonia* finds a compromise of gender roles when she becomes a mother but continues working in the fields alongside her husband. Jim, who grows into a liberal-minded New Yorker, sees this lifestyle as perfectly suited to *Ántonia*.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE PRAIRIE

The prairie symbolizes many things in *My Ántonia*.

To immigrants, the vast size of the **prairie** suggests both the opportunity for a new life and the overwhelming fear that goes with trying to create a new life. The prairie also symbolizes progress and a lost past: as the prairie is developed, its old, winding roads are replaced by straight ones, and the tall grasses are burned down to make room for farmland. Later, when Jim leaves Nebraska, the prairie symbolizes Jim's friendship with *Ántonia* and his nostalgia for his childhood.



MR. SHIMERDA'S GRAVE

When Mr. Shimerda dies, he is buried in the prairie on what later becomes a crossroads. Jim says of his

gravesite, "in all that country it was the spot most dear to me" because when all of the land has been cleared for farming, this "island" where two roads meet is the only place where the tall prairie grass still grows undisturbed. The gravesite is a remnant of the prairie in its purest form, and it symbolizes *Ántonia*'s and Jim's longing for the past.



THE PLOUGH

The **plough**, a symbol of the farm work the Shimerdas and the Burdens do on the **prairie**,

symbolizes man's "beautiful and harmonious" connection to the land. At the end of Book 2, before Jim leaves Black Hawk for college, he sees a plough silhouetted in the circle of the red sun setting behind it. The sky quickly grows dark, and the plough disappears from view. This image suggests Jim's impending separation from *Ántonia*—while *Ántonia* remains on the prairie, Jim leaves for good. The change also foreshadows the changes that the development of farming will inflict on the natural prairie landscape.



LIGHT

In *My Ántonia*, light symbolizes change. A vivid description of light prefaces every major change

that occurs in the novel. When Jim first meets *Ántonia*, for example, he describes her glowing cheeks and her eyes as "like the sun", and for the rest of their lives, he associates her with warmth and vigor. One of his most vivid memories of *Ántonia* is reading with her "in the magical light of the late afternoon." In contrast, at end of Book 1—as Jim's and *Ántonia*'s childhoods on the prairie come to an end—the two friends sit on the roof and watch the lightning of a loud and "electric" thunderstorm. At the end of the novel, after Jim leaves *Ántonia* for the last time, he stands alone on the prairie roads in "the slanting sunlight" and reflects on the "incommunicable" past he shared with *Ántonia*.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet Classics edition of *My Ántonia* published in 2014.

Introduction Quotes

☞ 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator - (speaker), Jim Burden, *Ántonia* Shimerda

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

An unnamed narrator has introduced his old friend James Burden, known as Jim. Both men now live in New York, though they grew up together in Nebraska. The narrator has recalled running into Jim on a train to Iowa, and in this passage states that their conversation was dominated by "a central figure"—*Ántonia*. It is clear from the moment *Ántonia* is introduced that she will have a vital, even mystical significance within the novel. The narrator admits that, to him and to Jim, she represented "the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." Even before the reader knows *Ántonia*'s name, it is obvious that she is an extraordinary person. Furthermore, the narrator's framing of *Ántonia* as symbolic of his childhood establishes *Ántonia*'s connection both to nature and the past.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

The novel is now being narrated by Jim, who has described his journey to Black Hawk following the death of his parents. Jim recalls the moment he first encountered *Ántonia* on the train and overheard her describing Black Hawk in broken English. In this passage, Jim remembers his own first impression of Black Hawk. It is night, and there is neither moonlight nor any natural features such as creeks or trees—"nothing but land." In some ways, this is a rather intimidating, desolate picture, and suggests that the prairie is not inviting to outsiders.

Jim's statement that the land doesn't resemble "a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" depicts the prairie as a blank slate, both literally and figuratively. Not only is the land uncultivated, it also serves as an empty space onto which the pioneers project their hopes and dreams for the future. The lack of light is also significant, as the "light" of Jim's childhood will originate in his friendship with *Ántonia*.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has described his new life in Black Hawk, which is calm and pleasant. At one point, his grandmother takes him into the garden to dig potatoes, and after she leaves he remains lying under the sun, reflecting on his happiness about being in nature. Jim imagines that when people die, they "become a part of something entire," and this idea of unity with natural forces pleases him. His thoughts illustrate the sacred status of the natural world within the novel. Indeed, although the characters are Christian, Jim's words depict a kind of pagan spirituality based around respect and reverence of nature.

In contrast to one version of the American immigrant narrative, Jim does not seek individual success or glory—rather, he admits "I did not want to be anything anymore." This statement reflects a general theme in the novel, that living harmoniously within the natural world encourages people to adopt a kind of peaceful selflessness.

Book 1, Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ This was enough for *Ántonia*. She liked me better from that time on, and she never took a supercilious air with me again. I had killed a big snake – I was now a big fellow.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has confessed that although he liked *Ántonia*, it bothered him that she would speak to him in a superior tone because she was older. He recalls an occasion when he and *Ántonia* decided to dig into the prairie-dog holes, only to be attacked by a rattlesnake. Jim kills the snake with a spade, impressing *Ántonia*; in this passage, Jim announces that "she never took a supercilious air with me again." On one level, this story reflects the kind of innocent dynamics of power and courage that dominate childhood friendships. Despite the danger the snake poses, Jim frames the whole episode as an "adventure," one of many pleasant memories from his and *Ántonia*'s shared past.

On the other hand, the story of the snake also evokes more complicated, somber themes. Part of the reason why Jim objects to *Ántonia* treating him as an inferior is because, although younger, he is male and she is female. He considers *Ántonia*'s precocious confidence as a violation of the proper dynamic of gender, and is pleased when he is

able to assert his own masculine power through the bold act of killing the snake. This act foreshadows Jim's later attempts to romantically win over *Ántonia*, which remain unsuccessful. *Ántonia* sees Jim as a younger brother figure, a dynamic that, despite sustained effort, Jim is never able to change.

Book 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ I never forgot the strange taste; though it was many years before I knew that those little brown shavings, which the Shimerdas had brought so far and treasured so jealously, were dried mushrooms. They had been gathered, probably, in some deep Bohemian forest...

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda, Mr. Shimerda, Mrs. Shimerda, Yulka Shimerda, Ambrosch Shimerda

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has described the Shimerda's poverty, which was so terrible that during one winter they are forced to share a single overcoat and subsist on prairie-dogs. When Jim and his grandmother bring the Shimerdas food, Mrs. Shimerda gives them some brown shavings in return; the shavings taste strange, and later Jim realizes they must have been dried mushrooms brought from Bohemia. This passage emphasizes the way in which an item as simple as dried mushrooms can take on huge and complex significance within the drama of immigrant and pioneer life.

By offering the mushrooms to Jim and his grandmother, Mrs. Shimerda refuses to accept the role of a charity recipient. This refusal is made more moving by the fact that the mushrooms are clearly significant to the Shimerdas, considering they brought them all the way to America from Bohemia. At the same time, this significance does not necessarily translate to Jim's grandmother, who finds the mushrooms suspicious and thus simply throws them away. This contrast highlights the way in which the past takes on vastly different meanings to different people. Objects and memories that some people "treasure so jealously" are completely meaningless to others.

Book 1, Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ The road from the north curved a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me."

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), Mr. Shimerda

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Shimerda's funeral has taken place, and his body has been buried on a corner of the Shimerda's land. Jim remarks that years later, roads were built at that point, and the grave becomes the only site at which the grass isn't mowed. Jim describes his strong emotional attachment to the spot, claiming that it became the place he most loved in the entire prairie. This statement is at first a little surprising, as we would likely expect the grave to be a sad reminder of Mr. Shimerda's suffering and misfortune. However, Jim's description of the grave's natural beauty shows that the tragedy of Mr. Shimerda's death has created a new source of joy, by preserving a small section of land in its untamed state.

Book 1, Chapter 19 Quotes

☝ "Why aren't you always nice like this, Tony?" "How nice?"

"Why, just like this; like yourself. Why do you all the time try to be like Ambrosch?"

She put her arms under her head and lay back, looking up at the sky. "If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us."

Related Characters: Jim Burden, *Ántonia* Shimerda (speaker), Ambrosch Shimerda

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

School is out for summer, and Jim and *Ántonia* have been spending more time together. One night, while they sit on a roof to watch a lightning storm, Jim asks why *Ántonia* isn't always "nice like this." *Ántonia* replies that life is different for her family than for Jim, and this is why she behaves as she does. *Ántonia*'s response shows that she has understood that there is a division between herself and Jim—a division born out of economic disparities, and that will widen as they grow older.

Her prediction that "things... will be hard for us" is correct: while Jim eventually goes to college, then law school, and becomes a successful professional in New York, *Ántonia* lives a much more difficult life, getting pregnant out of wedlock before getting married and having eleven children. Jim, on the other hand, remains romantically hopeful about his and *Ántonia*'s relationship, idealizing their bond as more simple and innocent than is really the case. This passage raises the question of whether *Ántonia*'s romantic rejection of Jim is entirely because she sees him as a younger brother, or if she perhaps also makes the decision due to her awareness of the class differences between them.

Book 2, Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ Yet the summer which was to change everything was coming nearer every day. When boys and girls are growing up, life can't stand still, not even in the quietest of country towns; and they have to grow up, whether they will or no. That is what their elders are always forgetting.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has stated that he and the Harling children were never happier than in the first weeks of spring, when they helped Mrs. Harling and *Ántonia* garden after the end of winter. However, this idyllic scene is overshadowed by the coming summer, which Jim hints will "change everything." His description of the way that time moves for young people further emphasizes the idea that the coming events will prompt a loss of innocence. Indeed, Jim's words highlight a subtle connection between the innocence of children and the innocence of "the quietest of country towns"; like the land itself, children begin life in a natural, simple state, yet as adulthood approaches this existence is complicated in the same way that the land is developed and industrialized by the pioneers.

Book 2, Chapter 9 Quotes

☝ If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard's grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), Lena Lingard

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

At the dances, Jim has noticed that the young men tend to be attracted to the immigrant girls; he has theorized that this is because their struggle makes them more energetic and vigorous. However, the immigrant girls are also openly "pitied" and looked down upon. Jim observes that the fact that Lena Lingard's grandfather was a respected clergyman in Norway is meaningless; now that she is in America, she is simply seen as an uneducated, "ignorant" outsider. Jim's understanding of the complicated, contradictory dynamics between the "foreigners" and Black Hawk townspeople highlights the nonsensical and hypocritical nature of the townspeople's attitudes. Note that the dismissal of immigrants as "ignorant people who couldn't speak English" has survived as a central part of anti-immigrant discourse even in the present.

Book 2, Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has spent the whole summer studying for college, except for one occasion when *Ántonia*, Lena, and his other friends invite him to pick elderflowers. He reminisces

with *Ántonia* about the past, and that evening they watch as the setting sun gloriously frames a plough that has been left in the field. This is one of many moments in the novel where the natural landscape reflects the social experiences and emotions of the characters. The young people picking elderflowers are overwhelmed by feelings of fondness for the prairie, symbolized by the magnificent warmth of the sun.

At the same time, this is a turning point in the novel, and the setting sun represents the end of Jim and *Ántonia*'s childhood together. Once the sun sets, the prairie will no longer be filled with light, just as Jim's life without *Ántonia* is devoid of the metaphorical light she brings to him. The fact that the plough is "magnified" such that it becomes "heroic in size" points to the fact that this seemingly simple moment is filled with grand significance for the characters who witness it.

☞ Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below us were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Jim, *Ántonia*, Lena, and their friends have all been picking elderflowers, and that evening they watch the sunset cast light dramatically behind a plough that has been left in the field. The sun's light magnifies the impression of the plough, and the friends feel that the sight is especially meaningful. When the sun sets, however, the plough sinks "back to its own littleness." The fleeting nature of the moment highlights the speedy passage of time and the transience of youth. Indeed, Jim's observation that "even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared" illustrates how quickly and suddenly eras of life can pass. Just at the moment when the friends recognize the meaning of the plough as symbolizing the end of their childhood, the sun sets and the entire scene disappears.

Book 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ I knew that I should never be a scholar. I could never lose myself for long among impersonal things. Mental excitement was apt to send me with a rush back to my own naked land and the figures scattered upon it.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has begun college in Lincoln, where he studies Latin with an inspiring young scholar and stays during the summer in order to take a course in Greek. However, even as he finds success and pleasure in his studies, he admits that he "should never be a scholar," as he feels too attached to the landscape and people of his homeland. This confession illuminates the complicated effects of social class and mobility. Unlike many other members of the Black Hawk community, Jim has the opportunity to move to the city and attend college—a realization of the American dream. However, he feels inescapably tied to the simple, rural existence he left back home, suggesting that there is something almost magically appealing about the prairie that cannot be found in urban life.

Book 4, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ I was bitterly disappointed in her [*Ántonia*]. I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity, while Lena Lingard, for whom people had always foretold trouble, was now the leading dressmaker of Lincoln, much respected in Black Hawk.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda, Lena Lingard

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

The summer after finishing college and before he begins studying at Harvard Law School, Jim returns to Black Hawk. Here, he learns that *Ántonia* is pregnant, and that her fiancée has deserted her; meanwhile, Lena Lingard is incredibly successful, "the leading dressmaker in Lincoln." The disparity between the two girls' fates highlights how

dramatically the lives of people who grew up together can diverge. Indeed, Jim points to the unpredictability of the course of life when he mentions that "people had always foretold trouble" for Lena. This further proves the ignorance of people's judgments and expectations of recent immigrants.

Jim's feelings about *Ántonia's* fate, meanwhile, seem overly harsh and unforgiving. He claims to be disappointed not *for* *Ántonia*, but "*in* her." Instead of resenting *Ántonia's* fiancée for abandoning her or the community for judging her, Jim states that he "could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity." It is possible to interpret this statement as emerging from Jim's longstanding admiration of *Ántonia*; perhaps because she is older than him, he cannot bear to see her in a weak and vulnerable position. On the other hand, the harshness with which he judges *Ántonia* is also related to her gender. Although the fact that *Ántonia* is pregnant out of wedlock is at least as much her fiancée's fault as her own, during the time women's sexuality was heavily controlled and women were harshly judged for promiscuity—as is demonstrated by the way people treat *Ántonia*.

Book 4, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ "After the winter begun she [*Ántonia*] wore a man's long overcoat and boots, and a man's felt hat with a wide brim."

Related Characters: The Widow Steavens (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

The Widow Steavens has been telling Jim the details of what happened to *Ántonia*. *Ántonia's* fiancée Larry, who had been fired from his job, ran away with her dowry money, leaving *Ántonia* pregnant, alone, and penniless. As a result, she began working in the fields and dressing like a man. This fact shows both the extent of *Ántonia's* destitution and the unusual strength of her character. Although *Ántonia* has been exploited and oppressed because of her gender, she refuses to wallow in her troubles, and instead subverts the strict gender roles placed on her by dressing like a man and earning her own money. Note that this decision reflects Willa Cather's own life—Cather never married, made her own money as an author, and during college wore men's clothes.

Book 4, Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ As I went back alone over that familiar road, I could almost believe that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has gone to see *Ántonia* at the Shimerda's farm, where she looks thin and worn down. They have a warm, pleasant conversation, and as Jim goes to leave, *Ántonia* tells him that his presence remains with her on the prairie, just as her father's does. As Jim walks away, he imagines a boy and girl running alongside him—the ghosts (or "shadows," continuing the novel's imagery of light) of his and *Ántonia's* childhood selves. This image emphasizes the way in which the past remains part of the present. Just as *Ántonia* feels Jim's lingering presence in the prairie, so does Jim imagine that he is accompanied by the "shadows" of himself and *Ántonia* when they were young. This description suggests that even though human life is transient, traces of it remain within the enduring natural landscape.

Book 5, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has avoided going to see *Ántonia* for 20 years, fearing how it would feel to see her as an old woman. When he finally returns to see her, they at first don't recognize each other. In this passage, Jim describes her as "a battered old woman," but adds that she still possesses the same vigor that emanates from her ability to find "meaning in the common things." Jim's words illustrate the way in which the past can live on within the present--although she has been worn out by a life of hard work and struggle, *Ántonia*'s personality remains the same, and this is reflected in her physicality.

Jim's description also highlights *Ántonia*'s deep and fundamental connection to the land. The source of *Ántonia*'s warmth and vitality can be found in her association with natural processes like planting and harvesting. Unlike humans, the natural landscape works in a cyclical motion, and thus never gets old in the way that people do.

☛ In my memory there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: *Ántonia* kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; *Ántonia* in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; *Ántonia* coming in with her work-team along the evening sky.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has met *Ántonia*'s children, and *Ántonia* has shown him photographs she keeps of when they were young. That night, Jim sleeps next to *Ántonia*'s children and brings to mind memories of *Ántonia*, which appear like "old woodcuts" in his mind. In each memory, *Ántonia* is slightly different, both in terms of the situation she is in and her stage of development. Each image involves a feature of the natural

landscape: in the first, the pony and snake, in the second, the snowstorm, and in the third, the evening sky. Taken together, they trace *Ántonia*'s growing maturity as she is faced with increasingly difficult challenges in life. However, they also depict her as strong and resilient in the face of these challenges.

The final image of *Ántonia* walking home from work "along the evening sky" is reminiscent of the moment when Jim, *Ántonia*, and their friends watch the sunset behind the plough. Both memories illuminate the passing of time against the cyclical monotony of agricultural work. While Jim's memories of *Ántonia*--like her life--are finite, the land these memories are situated within possesses an enduring, eternal power.

Book 5, Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ 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.

Related Characters: Jim Burden (speaker), *Ántonia* Shimerda

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

Jim has left *Ántonia*'s farm, promising to return soon. He takes the train to Black Hawk, only to find that most of his old friends are not there, having died or moved away. He watches the sunset and reflects on the fact that, although "fortune" has led him and *Ántonia* to live vastly different lives, they are inevitably bound together by "the precious, the incommunicable past." These thoughts highlight the way in which the past, present, and future are implicated in one another. Although they could not have known it at the time, Jim and *Ántonia*'s futures were "predetermined" by small moments in their childhood. At the same time, it is their shared history that still connects them to each other many decades later.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

An unnamed narrator begins the novel. He says he grew up with Jim, the story's protagonist, in Nebraska. Now they both live in New York, but do not see each other often. Jim is a lawyer for a railroad and travels often. Jim is married, the narrator says, but does not get along well with his wife, who leads her own life as a socialite, independent of Jim.

The introduction is a "frame" that presents the novel as a series of memories from Jim's point of view. The frame also introduces Jim as a practical and successful lawyer who lacks love and connection in his life.



The narrator says he ran into Jim again last summer on a train in Iowa. Jim kept bringing up *Ántonia*, an immigrant Bohemian girl whom they knew in Nebraska when they were young. Months later, Jim brings the narrator a manuscript he has written, called *Ántonia*. But in the narrator's office Jim changes the title to *My Ántonia*, which is the story that follows.

*The narrator reveals that Jim is actually a romantic figure who can't let go of his past. Jim places the word "my" before *Ántonia*'s name because although his portrayal of *Ántonia* may not be accurate, it is the way he remembers her.*



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 1

Ten-year-old Jim Burden, the novel's narrator and protagonist, begins his story on a train from Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains to Black Hawk, Nebraska. He is traveling with Jake Marpole, a slightly older "mountain boy" who worked on Jim's father's farm. Jim's parents have recently died, and Jim and Jake are moving West to live with Jim's grandparents.

Jim is like an immigrant, moving from the more developed and mountainous "old country" of Virginia to the unfamiliar, flat "new land" of the Nebraska prairie. His parents' deaths force him out of the childhood he knows.



During the journey, the conductor mentions to Jim that in the "immigrant car" ahead of him there is a European family from "across the water." In the family, a bright young girl is chattering in broken English about Black Hawk. The conductor says she is the only one in the family who knows any English. Jim later recognizes this girl as *Ántonia*.

Ántonia's excited chattering reveals her youthful fearlessness and spunk. Her ability to speak English shows she's a quick learner. The scene suggests that she'll be able to adapt to the new country more easily than the rest of her family.



The train arrives in Black Hawk at night. As Jim and Jake exit the train, Jim sees what must be the family, huddled on the platform, the youngest girl clinging to her mother's skirt.

The darkness reflects the family's and Jim's anxiety. Though their heritages differ, they're all strangers in a new land.



Otto Fuchs, Jim's grandfather's hired man, meets the boys at the station in a wagon to bring them to Jim's grandparents' farm. Before he falls asleep during the ride to his grandparents' farm, Jim sees the Nebraska **prairie** for the first time. He feels "blotted out" by the wide-open spaces and the huge open sky unobstructed by mountains. He wonders if the spirits of his parents will be able to find him here, but decides not to say his prayers that night because he feels that "what would be would be."

Jim at first feels overwhelmed by the vast and unfamiliar prairie landscape. But his decision not to pray shows he already has a feeling that on the prairie, nature seems to take the proper course. In a sense, he surrenders himself to the prairie.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 2

Jim's grandmother wakes him the following afternoon. He is confused by the layout of the house, with the living room and bedrooms on the ground floor and the kitchen and dining room in the basement. Still, he is comforted by his grandmother's warmth and affection, and by the smells of supper.

Jim's confusion in the house shows his continued foreignness to the prairie and prairie life. Yet it's also clear to him already that his grandparents will offer him familial support, and that he'll be comfortable here.



Otto tells Jim his grandparents have bought him a pony, and tells Jim he will show him how to rope a steer the next day. When Jim's grandfather comes home, he calls Jake, Otto, and Jim for prayers and then reads them several Psalms. Jim is awed by his grandfather's "sympathetic" voice, and the quiet dignity and wisdom with which he reads.

Jim's life won't just be comfortable—it'll be exciting. After one day he gets a pony and learns to rope steers! The way Jim's grandfather reads the Psalms establishes him as kind, wise, pious, and virtuous, though also a bit distant.



The next morning, Jim explores the farm and sees the windmill, cornfields, and pig-yards. He learns that his grandparents' house is the only wooden house in the area. The others are made of sod. His grandmother takes him to the garden to dig potatoes. He stays after she leaves and he lies in the garden under the **sun**. He realizes that he feels "entirely happy."

The Burdens' wooden house reveals that they are more wealthy than their immigrant neighbors. Jim's transition to prairie life is quick—as the image of him lying in the garden under the sun implies, he already feels a part of the land.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 3

That Sunday Otto Fuchs drives Jim and his grandmother to bring bread and provisions to the immigrant family they met on the train—their new neighbors, the Shimerdas. Jim's grandmother tells him that another of their neighbors, Peter Krajiek, a distant relative of Mrs. Shimerda, sold the Shimerda's his homestead, but badly overcharged them for a house that can barely withstand the harsh Nebraska winters. Jim also learns that in the "old country" Mr. Shimerda had been a tapestry weaver and a fiddler, but is now old and frail.

Here it becomes clear that Jim's new life on the prairie will differ greatly from the Shimerdas' life. Jim lives in a comfortable house and is taken care of. In contrast, the Shimerdas live in a house not fit for the prairie winter, and lack the skills, language, and knowledge needed to build a better life. The friendship and support of their neighbors will be key to their survival.



When they arrive at the Shimerdas' home, they find a sod "cave" dug out among rough red hills. They meet the Shimerdas and their children, Ambrosch, the eldest son, *Ántonia*, the pretty middle child, and Yulka, the youngest. Jim notices how *Ántonia* has cheeks that "glow" and eyes "like the sun," while Mr. Shimerda has soft white hands and a face "like ashes."

As the adults talk and Mrs. Shimerda complains about the poorly built home they have purchased, Jim and *Ántonia* go outside. *Ántonia* takes Jim to the creek and asks him to teach her the words for "blue sky" and "eyes." When they arrive back at the dugout, Mr. Shimerda, in broken English, begs Jim to teach *Ántonia* the language.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 4

As Jim settles into his new home, he begins to run errands for the Burdens and rides his pony, Dude, twice a week to the post office. He is captivated by the land—the sunflower-bordered roads, the copper cornfields, and the occasional elm trees. In the evening, he and *Ántonia* watch the burrowing owls fly to their underground nests.

Although Mrs. Shimerda grumbles about it, every afternoon Jim gives *Ántonia* reading lessons. *Ántonia* eagerly learns to cook from Jim's grandmother, and, in return, teaches her how to make a "sour, ashy-grey bread" that is new to the Burdens.

In those first weeks, the Shimerdas isolate themselves and avoid town because *Krajiek* tells them they will be cheated out of their money there. The Shimerdas dislike *Krajiek*, but they feed him and house him because he's the only one who knows their language.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 5

Mr. Shimerda eventually befriends two Russian neighbors, Pavel and Peter, whom others in the region had avoided because they were rough-mannered and spoke an unintelligible language. A few months after the Shimerdas' arrival, *Ántonia* takes Jim to visit the Russians. Only Peter is home. Jim is surprised to find him "hospitable and jolly." Peter, thrilled by the company, shows them his garden, entertains them with a harmonica, and gives them gifts of cucumbers and milk. Jim has only eaten cucumbers raw before, but *Ántonia* assures him that cucumbers cooked in milk are delicious.

*Mr. Shimerda's soft hands suggest he's not accustomed to hard outdoor farm labor. Jim associates *Ántonia* with light and compares Mr. Shimerda to ashes—Mr. Shimerda represents the past, while *Ántonia* represents the future.*



*Ántonia's desire to go outside shows that, like Jim, she has come to love the landscape. They build a pure friendship based on their love of the land. In her desire to learn English, *Ántonia* shows her eagerness to adapt to her new life.*



*Jim's love for the prairie landscape is profound—he considers the prairie a sacred place. In watching the owls, Jim and *Ántonia* show their connection to the land, which forms the basis of their friendship.*



*Mrs. Shimerda is hesitant to accept the ways of the "new world." *Ántonia* is eager to learn a new language and style of cooking, but doesn't forget the traditions of the "old country."*



*As immigrants, the Shimerdas are isolated by language and culture, making it easy for *Krajiek* to manipulate and control them.*



*Until now, Jim has been *Ántonia's* guide to the prairie and American life. In this chapter, their roles reverse—*Ántonia* introduces Jim to immigrant culture on the prairie. Jim's surprise at Peter's friendly hospitality shows that he, like other English speakers on the prairie, is somewhat suspicious of the immigrants. Yet *Ántonia's* friendship and his natural openness helps Jim overcome his suspicions.*



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 6

Weeks pass, and Jim's friendship with *Ántonia* continues to develop. In what he describes as "the magical **light** of the late afternoon", he and "Tony" (*Ántonia*) have their reading lessons and watch the badgers and the rabbits play. One afternoon, *Ántonia* picks up a frail, feebly chirping grasshopper that brings tears to her eyes because it reminds her of an old woman from her village who would sing songs to the children.

Just then, Jim and *Ántonia* see Mr. Shimerda walking toward them. He has shot three rabbits, but he seems sad, and *Ántonia* tells Jim that her father is not well. Mr. Shimerda tells Jim he will give Jim his gun someday. Jim is surprised at the Shimerda family's willingness to give away all they have to others.

Jim's nickname for Ántonia shows that their friendship has deepened. Ántonia's sadness over the insect's song reflects her greater dilemma—she is caught between her love for the prairie and nostalgia for the past. The grasshopper and the sinking sun symbolize the fragility and fleeting nature of life.



Mr. Shimerda is a tragic fragile character who can be compared to the grasshopper. But, just as the grasshopper would still chirp for Ántonia and Jim despite its frailty, Mr. Shimerda remains generous and loving.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 7

Jim and *Ántonia* visit Peter to borrow a spade. On the way home, they decide to dig into the prairie-dog holes to see how deep they are. Jim is less comfortable in *Ántonia's* presence than usual—he feels that she's been acting superior to him because she's older. While they're digging, a rattlesnake attacks them. Jim acts quickly and kills the snake by hitting it with the spade. *Ántonia* is awed by this display of courage and brags about Jim's bravery when she gets home. She never again treats him as inferior.

This episode underscores the age and gender difference between Ántonia and Jim. Jim desperately wants the respect he feels he deserves as a man. When he and Ántonia are children, he can earn this respect through a simple display of courage. As they grow up, their age and gender differences won't be so easy to overcome.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 8

That autumn, *Ántonia* tells Jim that Peter is worried about the growing interest on his mortgage debt to his creditor, Wick Cutter. He manages to pay some of it, but then Pavel is badly injured while lifting timber.

Mr. Shimerda, *Ántonia*, and Jim stay at Pavel's bedside. Aware that he is dying, Pavel confesses to *Ántonia*, Jim, and Mr. Shimerda that when he and Peter were younger, they were groomsmen at a wedding in Russia. After the wedding, the wedding party left the bride's village in sledges and traveled through the snow to the groom's village. On the way the sledges were attacked by wolves. Terrified, Pavel pushed the groom and his bride off the sledge to lighten the load and escape the wolves. Peter and Pavel were chased from their village because of their shameful actions. Eventually they came to America, but bad luck followed them and they had to change jobs and move to different cities several times before they decided to try farming.

Cutter's exploitation of immigrants Peter and Pavel mirrors Krajiek's exploitation of the Shimerdas.



Pavel and Peter's difficulty making their way in America shows the hardships of the immigrant experience. Pavel's story also shows how the past can haunt you, despite every effort you make to create a new life. In other words, the past is something that you carry with you and can't escape, whether your memories are happy or terrible, or a mix of both.



Pavel dies soon after. Peter sells everything and takes a job as a cook in a railway construction camp far away from Black Hawk. Before he leaves, he eats all the melons he has grown on his farm. Antonia and Jim vow never to disclose Peter and Pavel's secret. Mr. Shimerda is depressed without Peter.

Peter's eating of the melons represents the pride he has taken in his work. Eating the melons also served as a way to mourn Pavel, who is buried in the prairie. Keeping Pavel's secret shows his allegiance to Pavel, and to immigrants in general.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 9

Winter arrives, beautiful but bitterly cold. After the first snowfall, Jim rides to the Shimerdas' house on a sleigh Otto has built for him. He takes Antonia and Yulka on a ride, but they become very cold because they do not have warm enough clothes. Jim lends them some of his clothing.

Antonia and Yulka's lack of warm clothes is a sign of their poverty and suggests they will have a difficult winter.



Although Jim is also growing colder on the sleigh ride, he is too proud to show it. When he brings Antonia and Yulka home he refuses to warm himself by their fire. The next day he comes down with "quinsy," an infection of the tonsils.

It's important to Jim to play the masculine role and refuse to admit weakness. He learns the hard way that the land he loves can also be dangerous.



Stuck inside for two weeks, Jim eagerly awaits the return of the men from the fields each night. He admires how resilient and hardworking Jake, Otto and his grandfather are, and that they never complain.

Strong capable men serve as Jim's role models. He tries to live up to their masculine ideal in his interactions with Antonia.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 10

Jim does not see Antonia for weeks. One night, the Burdens learn that the Shimerdas are taking turns wearing their one overcoat and are eating prairie-dogs to survive the winter. Jim, Jake, and his grandmother take a basket of food over to the Shimerdas. When they arrive, Mrs. Shimerda cries and accuses them of being poor neighbors. When Jake and Jim carry in the food, Mrs. Shimerda cries harder.

Mrs. Shimerda's initial response to the Burden's shows she's ashamed of her poverty and jealous of the Burden's lifestyle. Yet her intense crying when Jim and Jake bring in the food shows just how desperately she and the Shimerda's need the Burdens in order to survive.



Mr. Shimerda is embarrassed by his family's poverty, and says that in Bohemia they had a lot of money. He also tells them about his plans to build their house up into a log cabin. Before they leave, Mrs. Shimerda gives Jim's grandmother some strange brown shavings that she says are for eating.

The Shimerdas are ashamed of their poverty because they weren't always poor. Still, they plan to improve their standing in their new life. Mrs. Shimerda's gift shows her gratitude toward the Burdens.



To Jim's grandmother, it's obvious that the Shimerdas are suffering because they haven't properly prepared for the winter by storing food or making clothing. On the way home, she tells Jim she thinks the Shimerdas may not have the common sense necessary to survive on the prairie.

Jim's grandmother's view of the Shimerdas is a bit unfair. She expects them to understand the necessities of prairie life as she does, but they do not have her experience, or any experience, living on the prairie.



Jim's grandmother is suspicious of the shavings Mrs. Shimerda gave them, so she throws them in the fire when she gets home. But before she does, Jim tastes a few. Many years later, Jim realizes that the shavings were dried mushrooms, which the Shimerdas had carried all the way from the forests of Bohemia.

Though she treats them kindly, Jim's grandmother distrusts the Shimerdas. Jim is more accepting and tastes the "shavings." Only in adulthood does Jim realize the sentimental value that these mushrooms must have held for the Shimerdas.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 11

The week before Christmas, a heavy snowfall makes the roads impassable. Rather than do their Christmas shopping in town, the Burdens have a homemade "country Christmas." Jim's grandmother bakes gingerbread and Jim makes picture books for Ántonia and Yulka from magazine clippings and cards he brought to Nebraska from his "old country" of Virginia. Jake brings the presents to the Shimerdas on horseback.

Jim sees Virginia as another country entirely and considers himself an immigrant. Although he doesn't seem to realize it, his "immigrant" experience is completely unlike the Shimerdas'. Though stranded in their house, the Burdens have the resources for a comfortable holiday, while the Shimerdas suffer.



When Jake returns home, he brings a little cedar Christmas tree he has cut down as a present for Jim. The Burdens decorate the tree with paper doll figures Otto's mother has sent him from Austria over the years. As the narrator, Jim says the paper dolls are his fondest memory of the holiday.

Jim recognizes his first holiday as a fusion of two cultural traditions. His observation shows how the prairie, like America itself, served as a "melting pot" of various immigrant cultures.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 12

On Christmas morning the Burdens eat waffles and play dominos. Otto writes a letter to his mother in Austria, but he has been gone so long that he struggles to remember the language.

Otto is an immigrant. Yet unlike Mr. Shimerda, who can't let go of his past, Otto has almost forgotten the language and traditions of his homeland.



Mr. Shimerda comes to visit the Burdens to thank them for the presents. As they sit in front of the stove, Jim notices that the warmth and security of their house seem "completely to take possession" of Mr. Shimerda.

The warm and friendly house is comforting to Mr. Shimerda because it reminds him of his old comfortable life in Bohemia.



Before he leaves, Mr. Shimerda kneels before the tree and crosses himself. Jim knows his grandfather is uncomfortable with other people's religions, but his grandfather quietly tolerates Mr. Shimerda's prayers and later tells Jim, "The prayers of all good people are good."

The Burdens are Protestant, and the Shimerdas are Catholic. This difference bothers Jim's grandfather, but not Jim. Jim's tolerance reflects the younger generations' ideals of acceptance and multiculturalism.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 13

There is good weather after Christmas, and *Ántonia* brings Mrs. Shimerda to visit the Burdens for the first time. But Mrs. Shimerda is angry and jealous of the Burdens' nice house, and rudely asks Jim's grandmother for one of her pots. Jim's grandmother gives it to her. Jim thinks Mrs. Shimerda is selfish, but his grandmother tells him in confidence that it's hard for a mother to see her children wanting for things.

Jim snaps at *Ántonia* when she complains that Mr. Shimerda is sick. He tells her, "People who don't like this country ought to stay home." *Ántonia* responds that Mr. Shimerda only came to America because Mrs. Shimerda wanted good husbands for her and Yulka and opportunity for Ambrosch. She adds that Ambrosch will be very successful one day. Jim thinks Ambrosch is surly, and is disgusted that he is considered the most important person in the Shimerdas' family.

Jim's failure to understand this situation shows his immaturity and lack of understanding about the differences between his experience and that of the Shimerda's. His grandmother's kind gesture shows a maturity gained with age.



*Jim's simplistic understanding of why immigrants come to America reveals his immaturity. He dislikes Ambrosch mainly because he finds it unfair that Ambrosch has greater opportunities than *Ántonia* just because he is male. *Ántonia* seems much less bothered and accepts the situation as just the way things are.*



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 14

Two days after Jim's birthday, he wakes up to find his grandparents, Otto, and Jake in the kitchen, with Ambrosch asleep on a bench behind the stove. Otto explains that the night before, Mr. Shimerda had dressed in clean clothes, hung up his coat, and shot himself in his barn. Jake believes that Krajiek actually murdered Mr. Shimerda, because there was an axe by the body that fit a gash in Mr. Shimerda's head, but Otto and Jim's grandmother convince him otherwise. Jim's grandparents are furious that Mr. Shimerda would abandon his family.

Otto goes to Black Hawk to get the priest and the coroner, and Jim's grandparents go to bring food to the Shimerdas.

After sitting quietly for a while and praying, Ambrosch leaves to return to his family's farm. Alone on the farm, Jim feels "considerable power and authority." He feeds the hens and the cat.

With his chores done, Jim sits down to read. He wonders if Mr. Shimerda's spirit is in the room with him, since Mr. Shimerda liked the Burdens' house so much better than his own. He knows homesickness killed Mr. Shimerda.

When the adults return that night, they tell Jim that a **lighted lantern** has been kept over Mr. Shimerda's body until the priest arrives to bless the dead.

Mr. Shimerda's death is the climax of Book I. His suicide, though awful, is an unsurprising outcome of his depression and struggles adapting to prairie life (though the question of whether Mr. Shimerda was murdered is never completely resolved). The Burdens are furious with Mr. Shimerda because the father is supposed to support his family.



Neighbors on the prairie help each other in times of tragedy.



With everyone else gone, Jim is left in charge of the farm. He feels like a grown and powerful man.



While Jim's grandparents are angry at Mr. Shimerda, Jim understands Mr. Shimerda's distress over missing a distant place and a lost past.



Here light symbolizes transition. The Shimerdas hope the light will aid in Mr. Shimerda's soul ascending to heaven.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 15

The next day Otto returns from town, bringing with him a handsome young Bohemian man named Anton Jelinek. Jim immediately likes Anton's "bright" eyes and cheeks and warm personality. Anton says he had wanted to visit the Shimerdas months ago, but he had been hired to husk corn and then had been going to school to learn English.

Anton, a Catholic like the Shimerdas, says it is very important to have a priest bless the body, but Jim's grandfather argues that Christ is the only savior a soul needs. Anton responds that he understands the Protestant beliefs, but tells a story about when he fought against the Prussians in Europe. He used to carry the holy water for a priest blessing the dead soldiers. When everyone in his camp died of cholera, only the priest and Anton survived, and this is why he believes in a priest's powers. While Jim's grandfather is still not convinced, Jim admires Anton for his "frank, manly faith."

Otto, once a cabinet-maker in Austria, makes a coffin for Mr. Shimerda while the men debate Mr. Shimerda's burial. They're not sure they can get the body through the snow to the Catholic cemetery in town, while the Norwegian church, which has the closest cemetery, won't allow Mr. Shimerda to be buried in its graveyard because he committed suicide.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 16

Mr. Shimerda's funeral occurs five days after his death, just as a new snow storm approaches. Nevertheless, neighbors from all over the region attend the funeral. Mrs. Shimerda asks Jim's grandfather to say a prayer, in English, at the funeral.

Mr. Shimerda is buried at the corner of the Shimerda's land. Jim says that years afterward, roads were built that crossed at that spot, and after all the prairie grass had been eventually cut up by farmers, the grave is the only place where the grass still grows. Jim says "in all that country it was the spot most dear to me."

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 17

Spring arrives, and the farmers set their pastures on fire so that new grass can be planted. Jim says that the lights of the fires seem to represent "the kindling that was in the air."

Jim's description of Anton's bright features is similar to his earlier description of Ántonia. Not only are their names similar, but like Ántonia, Anton is an eager student. They, not Mr. Shimerda, are the future of the immigrants in Black Hawk.



Jim's grandfather is set in his ways and refuses to accept the ideas of other religions. In contrast, Jim's open-mindedness and Anton's thoughtful consideration of Protestantism shows the sense of acceptance among the younger generation. Rather than fearing change and difference, they welcome it.



Otto must recall a skill he abandoned when he left Austria. This scene echoes his difficulty recalling the Austrian language in writing his Christmas letter (Chap. 12) and again shows the challenge of remembering old skills while learning new ones.



Despite their differences from the Shimerdas, farmers on the prairie stick together in tough times. Mrs. Shimerda's request shows she understands that her family must assimilate.



The gravesite is important to Jim because he associates his childhood with the prairie in its purest form. Just as Mr. Shimerda was nostalgic for the "old country," Jim is nostalgic for his own youth on the prairie.



Though a destructive force, the fire will eventually bring new life. By destroying the past, the light of the fire symbolizes growth, hope, and change.



The Shimerdas now have a new log house, which the Burdens and other neighbors helped them build. They also have a new windmill and chicken-house, and Jim's grandfather gave them a cow, to be paid for after the harvest. Mrs. Shimerda has also learned to speak more English.

That spring, *Ántonia* turns 15, and Jim notices she is no longer a child. She has grown tan and strong while working in the fields beside Ambrosch. He asks *Ántonia* if she would like to start going to school with him, but she says proudly that she has to work now, "like mans." But when she looks over at the "**streak of dying light**" in the sky, she starts to cry.

The Shimerdas' new life mirrors the growth of the new harvest. Like the land, they must experience death, and cut their connection to the past, before they can experience growth.



*Though *Ántonia* takes pride in working like a man, she still has her childhood desire to learn. She cries because she now has the mature understanding that family obligations will make her education impossible. Jim, whose family doesn't face the Shimerdas' struggles, doesn't realize this. The "dying light" symbolizes their friendship as their paths diverge—*Ántonia's* leads to work, and Jim's to school.*



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 18

Jim starts school and sees less of *Ántonia*. One Sunday, Jake takes him to the Shimerdas to retrieve a horse-collar Ambrosch has borrowed. But when Ambrosch hands over the collar, it is damaged. This leads to a nasty exchange between Jake and Ambrosch that ends with Jake punching Ambrosch in the head. Mrs. Shimerda and *Ántonia* are furious at Jake and Jim, while Jake advises Jim not to trust or befriend "foreigners" like the Shimerdas.

When he learns of the fight, Jim's grandfather tells Jake to go to the justice of the peace on his own accord and pay the fine for hitting Ambrosch, so that Mrs. Shimerda can't start any trouble. The Shimerdas avoid dealing with the Burdens for a number of weeks. Jim's grandfather then brings about a reconciliation by hiring Ambrosch and *Ántonia* to do some work and telling Mrs. Shimerda that she does not have to pay him for the cow. *Ántonia* and Jim resume their friendship.

*The fight between Jake and Ambrosch is a physical symbol of the tension developing between *Ántonia* and Jim as they move in their separate directions.*



Jim's grandfather knows that a family feud is senseless in the harsh world of the prairie, where everyone needs friendly neighbors. He also knows that the best way to end the feud is through money, highlighting the economic differences between the Shimerdas and the Burdens.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 19

When school is out in midsummer, Jim and *Ántonia* spend more time together. One night Jim and *Ántonia* climb to the roof to watch a distant **lightning storm**. As they watch, Jim asks *Ántonia* why she can't be "nice" all the time and instead tries so hard to be like Ambrosch. *Ántonia* responds that things will never be as easy for her or her family as they are for Jim and his family.

*Ántonia has gained an adult's awareness of class differences, which Jim does not yet understand. Jim nostalgically yearns for the simple friendship they shared in childhood, but *Ántonia* knows their differences will make this impossible.*



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 1

When Jim turns 13, his grandparents decide to move to town because they are getting too old to farm and in town Jim can go to school full-time. Jim is pleased that they buy "the first town house one passed driving in from the farm."

The location of the Burdens' new home, midway between the farm and downtown, shows they are reluctant to abandon prairie life entirely.



Rather than seeking work at another farm, Otto and Jake decide to move to the "wild West" to be silver prospectors. They leave after the Burdens move and send a postcard a few months later. Jim never hears from them again.

Otto and Jake's departure means not only the end of two friendships for Jim, but also the end of Jim's childhood. Now Jim must forge new male relationships with boys his own age.



Jim's grandfather becomes the deacon of the new Baptist Church. His grandmother holds dinners for church functions and for farmers coming into town. But Jim yearns for news of *Ántonia*. He hears Ambrosch has been hiring her out as a farmhand to other farmers, and Jim thinks Ambrosch is mistreating her.

*Although Jim's family thrives in the town, he is nostalgic for his old friendship with *Ántonia* in the prairie. Jim still believes in traditional gender roles, and does not want *Ántonia* to be treated as a man by her brother.*



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 2

Jim and his grandparents befriend their new neighbors, the Harlings, who are Norwegians. Mr. Harling is a successful grain merchant, and his family is wealthy. Charley, the son closest to Jim's age, is preparing for the Naval Academy, and the oldest daughter, Frances, is Mr. Harlings' chief clerk. Jim notes that she is never cheated in a business deal.

The Harlings are an example of an immigrant family who have overcome the initial hardships of immigrant life and built a life full of opportunities for themselves and their children. Frances is an example of strong woman.



After the Harling's cook leaves them, Jim's grandmother convinces Mrs. Harling to hire *Ántonia*. They do, and intend to pay *Ántonia* well, including an allowance for her clothing. But Ambrosch insists all *Ántonia*'s money should go directly to him.

*Although *Ántonia* has proven herself in "man's work," she still has a woman's limited rights, and must defer to her male guardian.*



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 3

Ántonia arrives at the Harlings, excited about her new job. Jim is jealous of her immediate admiration for Charley, but he is happy to see her again, and spends more time at the Harlings. But he is in awe of and intimidated by Mr. Harling, who he says dresses like "a noble" with caped overcoats and diamond rings.

With Jake and Otto gone, Mr. Harling becomes the object of Jim's fascination. He is a strong male figure who plays the role of patriarch. But he intimidates Jim because his showy macho behavior is at odds with Otto's and Jake's quiet competence.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 4

One evening that autumn, a pretty well-dressed girl arrives at the Harlings. *Ántonia* and Jim are surprised to recognize her as Lena Lingard, a Norwegian girl who used to work on one of the nearby farms and would always dress raggedly. Lena proudly tells them she has a job with a dressmaker and is renting a room of her own. She tells *Ántonia* to visit her. Jim remembers that Lena used to be "talked about" for a scandal in which a married farmer fell in love with her and the farmer's wife physically attacked her, although Lena denied ever seducing the farmer.

Times are changing, and finding a good husband is no longer the goal of women everywhere. Lena represents the "new woman." While Ántonia tried to emulate men through physical work, Lena shows her how to enjoy the pleasures of a man's lifestyle—she dresses well, is promiscuous, has asserted her independence, and lives on her own.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 5

Jim sees Lena often downtown. She says she is thrilled to live in town, and tells him about her friend Tiny Soderball, who works at the Boys' Home hotel as a waitress. One afternoon in December, Jim sees Lena helping her little brother buy Christmas gifts for their family. After her brother leaves, Lena cries a little and tells Jim she still gets homesick sometimes.

Although she has embraced town life, even the fiery and independent Lena shows a nostalgia for her childhood on the prairie.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 6

That winter, Jim spends many evenings at the Harlings, playing games and listening to *Ántonia's* stories. One night, *Ántonia* tells a story about a tramp who wandered into the farm she was working at the year before and jumped into the threshing machine, killing himself. *Ántonia* wonders why he would kill himself in summer, when everything is good.

Ántonia is not disturbed by the tramp's suicide but by the season in which it occurs. Although she is happy in town, the prairie will always be home to her, and she cannot comprehend that someone could feel otherwise.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 7

The only break in the long winter occurs in March, when Blind d'Arnault, a Negro pianist, comes to Black Hawk. The townspeople gather at the Boys' Home hotel to listen. The scene is electric, and at one point d'Arnault senses the tapping of dancing feet in a room next to the parlor where he is playing. The door between the two rooms is opened, revealing *Ántonia*, Lena and Tiny dancing to the music. Though at first the girls are shocked to be discovered, the men in the hall convince the girls to come in and dance with them.

*The discovery of the girls dancing is their debut as grown women in the town. No longer just girls, now they dance with men, a metaphor for their social and sexual maturity. This is also the first time Jim sees *Ántonia* with Lena and Tiny. Just as Jim had to make new friends among his peers when he moved into town, *Ántonia* has made friends with the other "hired girls" (immigrant girls hired to work for wealthier, established families).*



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 8

That June, three Italians named the Vannis come to Black Hawk from Kansas City to teach dancing. They set up a temporary dancing pavilion in town, and a dancing frenzy ensues. *Ántonia* and the other "hired girls" love the pavilion, which is, as Jim notes, "a place where the girls could wear their new dresses, and where one could laugh aloud without being reproached." They dance freely with the sons of wealthier families.

Inside the pavilion, the class differences between native-born Americans and immigrants that have characterized the novel are cast aside for the first time. The immigrant girls take advantage of this freedom to socialize with wealthy young men.

**BOOK 2, CHAPTER 9**

Jim notices how all the young men are attracted to the hired immigrant girls, who continue to dance every night. Jim thinks the sacrifices and struggles the girls have had to endure make them more beautiful and energetic than the "refined" town girls. Jim, looking back as an adult, observes that the immigrants' work ethic has in fact made them the most prosperous families in the area.

Jim's liberal views on equality between the classes are progressive, ahead of his time. His ideas are supported by future events, as the immigrants earn their success through hard work while the "refined" and privileged upper class works less diligently and lose their power.



Sylvester Lovett, the son of a banker, becomes infatuated with Lena. Jim hopes that if Sylvester marries Lena it will help rid the townspeople of their prejudices toward the immigrants. But when Sylvester's infatuation causes him to slip up at work, he decides to marry a well-to-do widow in town instead. Jim is furious at him.

The brief anecdote of Sylvester and Lena shows that despite the dances, prejudice against the poorer immigrant classes still exists in Black Hawk. Though he loves Lena, Sylvester is too embarrassed to marry her because she's an immigrant.

**BOOK 2, CHAPTER 10**

*Ántonia's dancing gains her many admirers. Eager to get to the dances every night, she becomes irresponsible at work. One Saturday a man who is engaged to another girl tries to kiss *Ántonia* at her front door. Although *Ántonia* rebuffs him, Mr. Harling comes outside and tells *Ántonia* she is getting a reputation for being "easy," and if she wants to dance she cannot work in his house anymore. Though Mrs. Harling begs her not to, *Ántonia* quits her job and goes to work for Wick Cutter's family.*

*Ántonia's departure from the Harlings' house is a turning point in Jim and *Ántonia's* relationship. Now a physical distance separates her and Jim. Though by asserting her independence, *Ántonia* shows she's no longer a naïve girl controlled by her brother, it's clear to Jim she is making the wrong decision by working for the Cutters.*

**BOOK 2, CHAPTER 11**

Jim says that the Cutters are disliked by nearly everyone in Black Hawk. Wick Cutter is a moneylender who preys on farmers, tricking them into accepting loans they can't afford. Cutter also constantly argues with his wife, Mrs. Cutter, a "terrifying" shrew of a woman.

*Through his interactions with Peter and Pavel, Wick Cutter has shown a tendency to take advantage of immigrants like *Ántonia*.*



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 12

After she leaves the Harlings, *Ántonia* begins to care about nothing except dancing and fun. She spends all her free time sewing, and then wearing, new clothes with other hired girls.

With *Ántonia* no longer living next door to him, Jim is restless, and tired of socializing with the wealthier families. Looking for something to do, he visits the drugstore, train depot, and cigar factory. He even visits a saloon operated by Anton Jelinek. But Anton, who respects Jim's grandfather and knows that he wouldn't want Jim to go to a saloon, asks Jim to leave. Jim also starts to hear rumors that people around town are discussing his behavior.

Jim starts sneaking out at night to attend the Fireman's Hall, where the immigrants gather to dance. One night Jim walks *Ántonia* home from the dance and tries to kiss her. She reprimands him. When he tells her that Lena lets him kiss her, she tells him not to make a fool of himself, since he will soon be going away to school to make something of himself. Jim knows that *Ántonia* will always think of him as a kid, and wishes he could have dreams about *Ántonia* like the dreams he has about Lena.

As she grows up, Ántonia explores her sexuality. It's not clear whether she is actually having sex, but she is clearly enjoying the attention she gets.



Jim's restlessness foreshadows his departure from Nebraska. But he isn't restless because he wants more adventure in his life. Instead, he craves relationships with the immigrant classes as he had on the prairie. But Black Hawk society disapproves of this sort of mingling.



*Now sexually mature, Jim wants more than just friendship with *Ántonia*. Yet, just as she understood that Jim could get an education while she could not, *Ántonia* now understands that the different options available to them would make any romantic relationship between them impossible. Since he idealizes immigrants and craves a connection with them, Jim doesn't understand this.*



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 13

When Jim's grandmother discovers he has been sneaking out to the Fireman's Hall, she gets upset and Jim stops going to the dances. As a result, he is lonelier than ever. One spring evening he meets Frances Harling, and she scolds Jim for imagining "a kind of glamour" in the country girls like *Ántonia*. She tells Jim he is too much of a "romantic."

At his graduation, Jim gives a speech that is very well received. His grandparents and the Harlings congratulate him. Afterward, he sees *Ántonia* on the street, and she tells him how proud she is of him, words that "pull on his heartstrings."

Frances doesn't dislike the country girls because they are poor, as other townspeople do. But she knows they are also not the idealized women Jim thinks they are, and that getting entangled with them will hurt both them and him.



*Jim has reached a turning point in his life and knows he will leave Black Hawk for college. He is nostalgic for his friendship with *Ántonia*, but he understands that they are not meant to have a future together.*



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 14

That summer Jim spends all his time inside studying, preparing for university. He only takes a break from studying when *Ántonia*, Lena, and their friends invite him to the river to pick elder flowers. Jim arrives early and realizes how much he's missed the vivid colors of the **prairie**.

*As Book 2 nears its end, Jim and *Ántonia* return to the prairie where they first met. Their trip represents one last fleeting attempt to hold onto their childhoods and reclaim the past before Jim leaves.*



Ántonia arrives before the other girls, and she and Jim talk about old times. She notices a flower and cries, she says, because she is homesick for the old country and her father. When the other girls arrive, they discuss the differences between the country and the town, and Lena says she is going to make enough money to get her mother out of the sod house and into a wooden one.

Ántonia expresses her homesickness for Bohemia to disguise the nostalgia she feels for her old life with Jim on the prairie. Lena's comment about money shows that the girls know they have grown up and recognize their adult responsibilities, like caring for their aging parents.



That evening, as the **sun** is setting, Jim, Ántonia and the other girls see a black figure on the **prairie** magnified by the red sun sinking behind it. They realize that the figure is a **plough** left in the field that is now "exactly contained within the circle of the disk." But the sun sets, the sky quickly grows dark, and the plough disappears from view.

The plough's disappearance with the setting sun symbolizes the end of Jim's and Ántonia's childhoods. Just as they make one last trip to the prairie, the plough (a symbol of prairie life) becomes magnified for a brief moment before vanishing.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 15

In August the Cutters go to Omaha for a few days, leaving Ántonia behind to watch the house. Ántonia visits Jim and his grandparents, worried because Mr. Cutter left a great deal of silver in the house and told her not to leave the house or have any friends sleep over.

Ántonia may have shown her independence by leaving the Harlings, but as a domestic servant she either has to obey her employers or be fired.



Jim's grandmother decides Jim should sleep in the Cutters' house in Ántonia's place. On his third night in the house, he wakes to find Mr. Cutter in Ántonia's room—Cutter had ditched his wife and returned home alone, hoping to have his way with Ántonia. Jim hits Cutter and runs home. The next day, Jim's grandmother goes with Ántonia to the Cutters house so she can quit and take her belongings.

After the idyllic scenes of the previous chapter when Ántonia and Jim recall their simpler life as friends on the prairie, real life now intrudes. Ántonia has become a sexual object not just to boys her own age, but to men—a fact she must live with and can't escape.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 1

Jim attends university at Lincoln (the capital of Nebraska) and begins to study Latin under a young instructor named Gaston Cleric. He rents a room on the edge of town near the **prairie** and stays in Lincoln his first summer to take a course in Greek.

Though Jim moves away from Black Hawk, he still tries to maintain a connection to the prairie.



Jim calls this first year at university a time of "mental awakening." For a while, his past seems less important to him. But he knows he will never be a scholar, because he has too much of a connection to the "naked land and the figures scattered upon it."

Though Jim is a talented academic, he finds it impossible to escape from the pull that both the prairie and his own past have on him.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 2

One March evening during his sophomore year, Jim and Cleric read a passage from Virgil about "patria," which Cleric tells Jim is not meant to mean "country," as it is usually translated, but instead refers to the little rural neighborhood where Virgil was born.

Jim feels a connection to Virgil's nostalgia for his hometown. Jim realizes that his own memories will always be rooted in Black Hawk and the nearby prairie, which are his "patria."



That same night, Lena appears at Jim's door. She explains that she has opened a dressmaking shop in Lincoln and is finally able to build her mother a house. Jim asks about Ántonia, and Lena tells him Ántonia is working as a housekeeper at the hotel in Black Hawk and is engaged to Larry Donovan. Jim and Lena make plans to see each other again.

Though Lena and Ántonia are both immigrants, they are very different. Ántonia is content becoming a wife, but Lena is ambitious and wants independence, which she can only get through success and wealth.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 3

Lena and Jim go to the theater often that spring, although Lena insists on paying for her own seat. Lena loves the glamour of the theater, with its champagne, sterling silver dishware, and roses.

By paying for her seat, Lena shows her independence. She loves the glitz of the theater because she grew up glamourless and poor.



At the theater, Jim feels "like a man" with Lena. When Jim and Lena see a performance of Dumas's *Camille*, Jim sympathizes with the young character Armand, who falls in love with the older Marguerite, who is dying of tuberculosis. Both he and Lena are moved to tears. Jim drops off Lena at home, then wanders the rainy streets pondering the relationship between Armand and Marguerite.

Jim no longer feels the social restrictions placed upon him and Lena in Black Hawk. Yet Jim is moved by the play because Marguerite, who is out of Armand's reach, reminds him of Ántonia, whom he still loves.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 4

Lena's success in dressmaking grows, and Jim begins to visit her for dinner. He notices that there is some tension between Lena's landlord and Mr. Ordinsky, a Polish violin teacher who lives across the hall. He realizes that both of these older men have crushes on Lena. One day, Mr. Ordinsky corners Jim and questions him about his intentions regarding Lena. Jim responds that a woman like Lena who supports herself should be able to have guests without being talked about.

Jim's prediction that the young immigrant women will become successful is coming true in Lena. Whereas Jim used to believe in traditional gender roles, now Jim's views are more progressive, as he defends Lena's right to her independence.



As the semester comes to an end, Cleric tells Jim that he was offered a position at Harvard, and suggests that Jim accompany him. Jim receives permission to go from his grandfather and decides to go. He is sad to leave Nebraska. When he tells Lena of his decision, she is also sad, but encourages him to go. She adds that she loves being single and will never marry.

Jim's goodbye to Lena is also a goodbye to the Midwest and the prairie. Lena's forward-thinking views on women make her crave independence. Though Jim and Lena seem to love each other, neither seems capable of feeling a truly deep connection.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 1

The summer after finishing college and before entering Harvard Law School, Jim visits his grandparents in Black Hawk. While there, Jim visits with old friends and learns that *Ántonia's* fiancé Larry, a train conductor, got her pregnant and then abandoned her. The news deeply upsets and angers Jim.

Jim mentions Tiny Soderball, who moved to Seattle to open a boarding-house, then followed the gold rush to Alaska, where she was deeded a claim by a dying Swedish gold-seeker, which made her fortune. She eventually moved to San Francisco with Lena. Years later, Jim ran into Tiny—she was very rich, but also cold and unfeeling.

Jim's time at Harvard passes quickly—the novel's focus is not on Jim's life in the East, but his connection to Nebraska and the prairie. Once again, Jim deplors the unfair treatment of immigrant women.



*Jim holds up Tiny as a contrast to *Ántonia*. Tiny has ambition, without love of a place or past, which leaves her successful but cold. Like Jim, *Ántonia* loves a place, which saps her ambition but gives her a past and a connection to the land.*



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 2

When Jim takes his grandparents to have their photograph taken a few days later, he notices a picture of *Ántonia's* baby on the wall. Jim later visits Mrs. Harling and asks her to give him more details about how *Ántonia* is doing. Mrs. Harling advises Jim to go see the Widow Steavens, who is *Ántonia's* close friend and rents the Burdens' old farm.

*Photography offers a way to preserve the past. But for Jim, his dearest recollections only exist in his mind. These memories tie him to the prairie, and to *Ántonia*.*



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 3

Jim goes to visit the Widow Steavens, who tells Jim *Ántonia's* story. *Ántonia* was preparing for her wedding when she got a letter from Larry saying that his train route had been changed, and that they would have to live in Denver. Though unhappy about leaving Black Hawk, *Ántonia* went to Denver to be with Larry. Before she left, Ambrosch gave her \$300 for a dowry, which he had saved from her wages earned by working on other people's farms.

Ántonia wrote to tell her family that she had arrived safely in Denver. No further word came from her, however, until many weeks later when she suddenly showed up in Black Hawk, unmarried and upset. Larry had lied about his train changing routes. In fact, he had been fired, and used *Ántonia* for her dowry, then ran off to Mexico when the money ran out.

Ántonia immediately began working in the fields and started wearing a man's baggy coat, boots, and hat. Because she wore these clothes, no one, including her family, realized she was pregnant until she gave birth to a baby girl, who is now two years old.

*Jim questioned why Ambrosch hired *Ántonia* out to other farms. He did not understand that Ambrosch needed to build a dowry for *Ántonia* in order to help her find a husband, a necessity for a poor immigrant woman.*



*Larry takes advantage of *Ántonia*, exploiting her for her dowry. Whether by choice or by fate, *Ántonia* cannot leave the prairie. She is bound to Nebraska.*



Ántonia wears men's clothes and resumes her work in the fields to disguise her pregnancy and the embarrassment she endured as a woman.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 4

The next day, Jim goes to see *Ántonia* at the Shimerda's farm. She is thinner and looks "worked down." They sit near **Mr. Shimerda's burial plot**, and Jim tells *Ántonia* how he plans to practice law in New York City and that Cleric has recently died. She responds that she would rather live "where all the ground is friendly."

Jim then tells *Ántonia* that he thinks of her more often than anyone else, and that she is a part of him. She responds that she will always remember him and will tell her daughter about their youth together. They walk home, and Jim wishes he could be a little boy again.

Jim and Ántonia shared a love of the prairie, but Jim allowed himself to be diverted into a life of "success," as it would be defined by the "refined" people of Black Hawk. Ántonia stayed true to her love—the land.



Jim has a lucrative career ahead of him as a lawyer. But it's his past, the prairie, and Ántonia, that he loves. But he loves all three in an idealized static way, wishing things could be as they were when he was a boy, instead of loving them in the present.



BOOK 5, CHAPTER 1

Jim avoids going back to see *Ántonia* for 20 years, afraid to find her "aged and broken." In those years, he hears bits of gossip, so he knows that she has married a man named Cuzak, a cousin of Anton Jelinek, moved back to the **prairie**, and now has 11 children. At one point, he hears from Tiny, who describes *Ántonia's* husband as not having "much force," adding that *Ántonia* had a hard life. Eventually he runs into Lena during one of his many business trips. She persuades him to go see *Ántonia*.

Jim stops in Nebraska on the way back from his business trip. When he arrives at the Cuzak farm, *Ántonia* doesn't recognize Jim at first. When she finally realizes it is him, she is thrilled. For his part, Jim describes her as "battered but not diminished" and as still having the same youthful vigor he always loved about *Ántonia*.

Antonia introduces Jim to all of her 11 children. The children take Jim to see their "fruit cave," an underground room where they keep their large store of preserves.

Ántonia shows Jim the apple orchard. She tells Jim that she and her husband planted all the trees, and that she loves them "as if they were people."

Jim has a vision of the perfect prairie and of a perfect Ántonia. By trying to preserve these visions, Jim avoids returning to or growing alongside the things that he loves. He is rootless, as his many business trips suggest. To Tiny, a husband without "force" and a "hard life" sound terrible, but perhaps those things don't bother Ántonia.



Ántonia does not recognize Jim because he has changed, even though he wanted to keep things the same. But while Ántonia has been changed by hard times, she has kept her youthful vigor because she has kept growing and changing, just like the land.



When they first arrived, the Shimerdas didn't know how to store food. Ántonia has now become adept at prairie life.



Ántonia is able to fulfill her spiritual bond with the land through her farming.



Ántonia shows Jim old photographs of her wedding day, including photos of Ambrosch and Lena. Then she shows Jim one of himself, with Jake and Otto, and one of Jim just before college. That night, Jim sleeps with Ántonia's boys in the haymow. Three "snapshots" of Ántonia stand out in his mind—when he killed the snake; standing by her father's grave; and coming in from the fields.

Ántonia has kept the past alive through photographs, and has shared these photographs with her family. These memories inspire Jim to see the Ántonia he loved from his childhood in the day mother and matriarch she has become. He sees her for her changing evolving self.



BOOK 5, CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Ántonia's husband, Cuzak, comes home from town with his oldest son. Though Cuzak is far from a handsome man, Jim notices that he and Ántonia have a marriage of "easy friendliness."

Cuzak is, as Tiny described him, without "force." But his life seems grounded, full of love and friendship.



During dinner, Cuzak and his boys tell Jim how Wick Cutter had killed his wife and then shot himself, making sure to wait long enough so that his hated wife's family would not inherit his money.

The story of Wick is like a parody of people who value money and success over land, love, friendship, and everything else. The result is emptiness.



After dinner, Jim walks with Cuzak outside and asks about his life. Cuzak admits that when he first came to Nebraska he terribly missed his old life in Bohemia and Vienna. But Ántonia's love, warmth, and tireless effort helped him build a life and a family in Nebraska, and so he has no regrets.

Cuzak in many ways was similar to Jim, desperately missing his home. But through Ántonia, Cuzak was able to put down roots in Nebraska and create a new home.



BOOK 5, CHAPTER 3

Jim leaves Ántonia's farm the next day, promising to return soon to visit Ántonia, Cuzak, and their children, and then to return regularly after that to hunt with them and just to "tramp around."

Through Ántonia and her family, Jim has reconnected with the prairie—not the prairie of his youth but the living prairie of the present.



Jim takes the train to Black Hawk, but finds that most of his old friends have died or moved away. He walks out of town into the country, where he accidentally comes upon the remnants of the old road that used to run out from town to the farms on the prairie. He sits down, watching the haystacks glow as the sun sets, and realizes that even though he and Ántonia have separated, they are bound together by "the incommunicable past."

In finding the road out to the farm Jim literally comes full circle. That road took him away from his childhood into town, and then into the wider world. Now, reconnected with Ántonia, he has reconnected with his past and in the process found his way home again.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Sprow, Victoria. "My Antonia." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Jul 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Sprow, Victoria. "My Antonia." LitCharts LLC, July 22, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/my-antonia>.

To cite any of the quotes from *My Antonia* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. Signet Classics. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. New York: Signet Classics. 2014.