

## Summer 2008 Reading – PreAP English II

### *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather

“ . . . she still had that something which fires the imagination . . . by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things.”

Welcome to your summer reading assignment for PreAP English II. The requirements are the reading of *My Antonia* and writing an essay. The essay is due the first full day of class in August. You also are to take a short comprehension test during the first week of classes. The conflicts in this novel relate to American History as well as literature. Discussions of the type of struggle expressed in your writing assignment might take place in an American History class, too. You can purchase the novel at the Sabre, in your local bookstores, or online at Amazon.com.

#### The Novel at a Glance

**Setting:** “My Antonia” occurs in Nebraska in the 1880's through the early 1900's. The novel covers about thirty years, from the two main characters' childhood to their middle age.

**Point of View:** The first person narrator is Jim Burden.

**Protagonist:** Ántonia Shimerda is the main character whose life and experiences are remembered by Jim Burden.

**Conflicts:** A general conflict in Book 1 is people vs. their environment. In Book 2, the conflict is country values vs. town values. In Book 3, the struggle is internal, Jim's desire to succeed academically vs. his need to be free. In Book 4, the primary conflict is Antonia vs. Larry Donovan (representing good vs. evil). In Book 5, we meet the characters after the passage of twenty years.

**Themes:** Human values are more important than material values. Remembering the past is important for understanding the present and future. The values of earlier times are worth remembering and preserving. The human spirit triumphs over adversity.

**Of Special Note:** Cather based the character of Antonia on a real person that she knew when she was growing up in Nebraska. Cather portrayed the triumph of the human spirit and of the enduring power of love and friendship.

**Background:** The great wave of Czech (Bohemian) immigration to the United States came as a result of famine and revolution in the 1840s. In 1862, the U.S. Congress passed the Homestead Act, which gave a 160-acre plot of land to anyone, who lived and worked on it for five years. In the 1880s and 1890s, thousands of immigrants came to the prairie states of Iowa, Kansas, the Dakotas, and Nebraska to stake their claim to the free land. Many immigrants were cultured, well-educated people who, like Mr. Shimerda in *My Antonia*, found life in the New World incredibly difficult.

## Post Reading Written Assignment

The standards for grading are content, development of thought, and grammar mechanics (complete sentences, usage, agreement, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation).

Choose one of the topics below as a prompt to write 150-200 words:

1. The outstanding element of this novel is setting. How is the setting critical to the novel? Write an essay with details from the novel on how the events in the plot, including the conflicts, develop and depend on the setting. In your paper discuss what characteristics make a strong or weak setting, what type of setting is found in *My Antonia*, and substantiate your choice, strong or weak, with details from the novel.
2. The setting of *My Antonia* focuses on the frontier life of the prairie. With specific details from this novel give several reasons and examples how *My Antonia* is an excellent adjunct to a course in U.S. history.
3. Write a compare and contrast essay on one of the following topics:
  - A. Compare and contrast Willa Cather's vision of pioneer life to other fictional accounts or historical accounts of frontier life.
  - B. Compare and contrast pioneering in different parts of North America.
  - C. Another topic for contrast and comparison is for you to write about Willa Cather's characters and their experiences in the pioneer setting with the experiences of Native Americans in the same general geographical area during the same time period.
4. Write an immigrant's journal entry including specific events in the novel with your character's journal entry detailing his or her response to the occurrence. "A Day in the Life of . . ."
5. Research and dramatize the experiences of an unwilling immigrant, a slave, rail worker, indentured servant, or captive.
6. At what point in the story might Jim have changed the course of his life by taking a decisive action? Write the new scene and the new ending of the novel.
7. Cather revealed in this novel her opinions on academic life, rural living, and families with many children. Support Cather's opinions on these topics with detailed specifics from the novel and why you agree or disagree with Cather's thoughts.