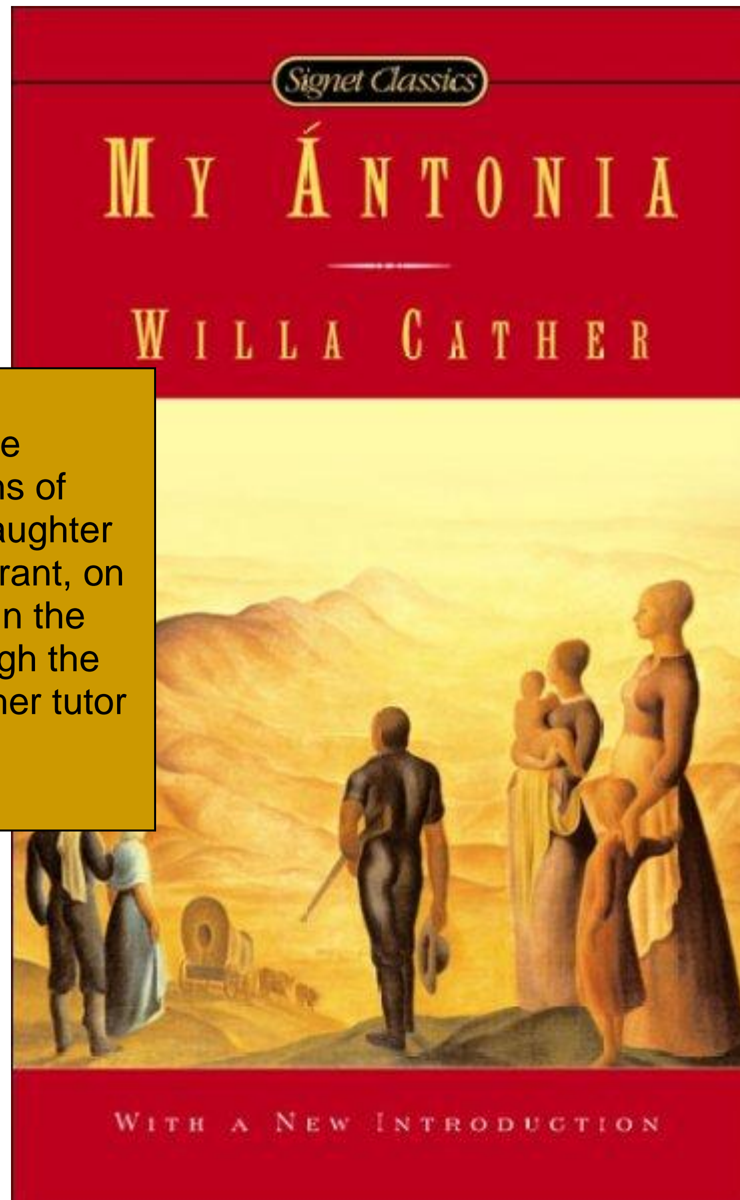
Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



This classic tells of the struggles and triumphs of Antonia Shimerda, daughter of a Bohemian immigrant, on the Nebraska prairie in the 1880s, as seen through the eyes of Jim Burden, her tutor and admirer.

About the author

Willa Cather was probably born in Virginia in 1873, although her parents did not register the date, and it is probably incorrectly given on her tombstone. Because she is so famous for her Nebraska novels, many people assume she was born there, but Willa Cather was about nine years old when her family moved to a small Nebraska frontier town called Red Cloud that was populated by immigrant Swedes, Bohemians,

Germans, Poles, Czechs, and Russians. The oldest of seven children, she was educated at home, studied with a Latin neighbor, and read the English classics in the evening. By the time she went to the University of Nebraska in 1891–where she began by wearing boy's clothes and cut her hair close to her head–she had decided to be a writer.

After graduation she worked for a Lincoln, Nebraska, newspaper, then moved to Pittsburgh and finally to New York City. There she joined *McClure's* magazine, a popular muckraking periodical that encouraged the writing of new young authors. After meeting the author Sarah Orne Jewett, she decided to quit journalism and devote herself full time to fiction. Her first novel*, Alexander's Bridge*, appeared in serial form in McClure's in 1912. But her place in American literature was established with her first Nebraska novel, *O Pioneers!,* published in 1913, which was followed by her most famous pioneer novel, *My Antonia*, in 1918. In 1922 she won the Pulitzer Prize for one of her lesser-known books. *One of Ours. Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), her masterpiece, and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) also celebrated the pioneer spirit, but in the Southwest and French Canada. Her other novels include *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935). Willa Cather died in 1947.

Source: Random House/Vintage

Willa Sibert Cather was born December 7, 1873, near Winchester, Virginia. When she was about ten years old her family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, where many of her novels and short stories are set. "I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything," she told an interviewer many years later. "It was a kind of erasure of personality."

Following her education at the University of Nebraska, where she at first studied medicine, Cather became a newspaperwoman and teacher in Pittsburgh. In 1906, she moved to New York City to work as an editor on *McClure's Magazine.* She eventually left journalism to devote herself to writing fiction full time. Her novels include *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *One of Ours* (1922), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Death Comes For the Archbishop* (1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940).

Willa Cather died on April 24, 1947, in New York City.

Reviews

500 Great Books by Women: A Reader's Guide
My Antonia is set in Nebraska at a time when "there was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." Through the eyes of young Jim Burden, the reader sees the land which rolls "as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping." The people who live here are immigrants - the blue-eyed Burdens, the tragic Russian brothers, Norwegian Lena Lingard with her violet eyes and determination never to marry, and most importantly, Bohemian Antonia Shimerda. Their stories stand out like framed portraits against the backdrop of the prairie and remind us how many different countries make up the United States. Warm as the perfect summer, Jim's memories tell of the land and of Antonia, a girl who works the fields like a man and who hears the songs of old Bohemian women in the cries of a cricket. In Antonia, Willa Cather portrays one of the great women of literature - strong, capable, and honest. My Antonia is a book to read to children to show them what women can be, or to read - and remind – yourself.

School Library Journal
In Jim Burden's accounting of his life with, and without, Antonia Shimerda, listeners are transported to the hardscrabble Nebraska prairie and the rural immigrant experience. When Jim first sees the Shimerda family, immigrants from Bohemia, disembarking from the same train that is taking him West to live with his grandparents, he has no idea the impact they will have on his life. Nostalgically, he remembers the good and bad times they had on their respective farms and creates his portrait of Antonia, an independent and tough survivor.

The Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature
Novel by Willa Cather, published in 1918. Her best-known work, it honors the immigrant settlers of the American plains. Narrated by the protagonist's lifelong friend, Jim Burden, the novel recounts the history of Antonia Shimerda, the daughter of Bohemian immigrants who settled on the Nebraska frontier. The book contains a number of poetic passages about the disappearing frontier and the spirit and courage of frontier people. Many critics consider *My Antonia* to be Cather's finest achievement.

Literary Criticism

Modernist memory; or, the being of Americans

This was the road over which Antonia and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rambling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand.

I had the sense of having come home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is.
Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918)

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IT IS TEMPTING to describe what Jim Burden, the narrator of Cather's novel, experiences here as memory. But in fact it seems more like repetition: he hears the wagons and is again overcome. Up to this point *My Antonia* consists chiefly of Jim's memories, but his reunion with himself in this final paragraph depends on repeating, rather than representing in memory, his early experiences. "If we never arrived anywhere," Jim says of the wagon ride from Black Hawk, "it did not matter. Between the earth and the sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be." (1) A few days after the wagon ride, while lying in his grandmother's garden, Jim also feels perfect contentment: "I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more" (MA 20). What Jim seems to experience here--if "experience" is even the right word--is Being. "Part of something entire," "dissolved into something complete and great" (MA 20), he has no concern for the past or the future. In fact, thus complete, the moment having become like eternity, he has no past or future at all, which perhaps explains why he neglected his prayers that night in the wagon--why pray to God when you have become like God? (2)

To remember, however, is to represent other moments. Remembering is precisely the condition of not being completely in the moment. So when Jim comes home to himself at the end of the novel, he does so not by remembering the feelings of that night--how could he?--but by repeating them. In a sense he undertakes consciously and voluntarily behavior that Sigmund Freud describes as compulsive. For Freud, however, the patient who is "obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience" would be better off "remembering it as something belonging to the past." (3) Remembering is better because it involves an awareness of the difference between present and past and therefore--herein lies the cure--of the difference between the remembering self and the remembered self. Repetition is precisely the absence of this sort of difference. Jim's goal is repetition. He comes home to himself by overcoming the difference between past and present--coming home is this overcoming--which is why the novel's primary narrative mode of recounting the past, remembering, necessarily produces a problem for him. In memory, Jim can only observe past selves. As Freud's contemporary, the psychologist Eduoard Claparede, puts it, a past self can only be remembered

> from the outside, in the same way that I represent other individuals to myself. My past self is thus, psychologically, distinct from my present self, but it is ... an emptied and

> objectivized self, which I continue to feel at a distance from my
> true self which lives in the present. (4)

The problem is that Jim's memories re-create through representation the very distance he wants to overcome by remembering. That is why towards the end of the novel he adopts a relation to his past that is not mediated, or not only mediated, by memory's representations. He treats his memories as objects in themselves and conceives of the ideal relation to the past as one not of representation but of touch ("The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand"). Although *My Antonia* is not usually regarded as a modernist novel, I will argue that Jim's attitude towards representation (his preference for, in Freud's phrase, "contemporary experience") is typical of the style of more overtly modernist works like Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), Paul Strand's photograph, "Wall Street" (1915), Frank Stella's aluminum stripe paintings (1960), and Cather's own later novels: *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). (5) Moreover, because Cather conceptualizes the problem of memory in terms of representation in *My Antonia*, the novel demonstrates how for American modernists experiments with form--which I'll describe as efforts to bypass representation--are simultaneously efforts to realize a peculiarly American ideal of identity. The novel also demonstrates why that ideal is so often emblematized by racial bodies. If, for example, Jim must touch the past in order to live it again, Blind d'Arnault, the Negro singer who visits Black Hawk during Jim's adolescence, just lives it. As Jim imagines it, d'Arnault has no need of memory because he embodies his past by virtue of his race. My Antonia thus suggests that what we might call the identitarian aims of formal experimentation in American modernist texts make the emphasis on race, which is characteristic of so much of this literature, almost inevitable.

Antonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, commits suicide early in the first book of *My Antonia*, having recently emigrated with his family from Bohemia. Jim knows that "it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda," and this knowledge informs the rest of his recollection (MA 81). References to Mr. Shimerda's grave recur throughout the novel, and even in the final paragraphs of the novel, when Jim stands looking at the old road to the Burden homestead, he is in terrain ("the long red grass still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks" [MA 273]) that resembles Mr. Shimerda's burial plot ("that unplowed patch at the crossing of the roads" where "the tall red grass had never been cut" [MA 239]). This resemblance emphasizes that Jim, who is also a modern immigrant, having left Nebraska to pursue a career in the East as a railroad executive, has not succumbed to homesickness. He has survived the dislocations of American modernity--emblematized in Mr. Shimerda's fate--by treating his memories in a way that allows him simultaneously to preserve and to escape the past. In the final book, he writes:

> Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did

> not fade--that grew stronger with time. In my memory there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: Antonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Antonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; Antonia coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line. (MA 260-261).

"The old woodcuts of one's first primer" do not represent a remembered past: they are "pictures" in an aesthetic and not a documentary sense. Like woodcuts, Jim's memories tend to occasion new experiences rather than recalling old ones, as in the passage I began with: "I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be overcome again by that obliterating strangeness" (MA 273). Here Jim experiences directly what he had formerly remembered: he does not remember hearing the wagons, he hears them and is overcome. At this moment there is no difference between past and present, and hence no cause for homesickness.

Yet his homecoming is not only a matter of hearing the wagons again. He says, "the feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand" (MA 273). (6) Here Jim does not experience those same feelings again. Instead, the original feelings of being "erased, blotted out" on the ride to the Burden homestead are themselves erased and blotted out as he experiences them in a qualitatively different mode (MA 13). He imagines the past not as something temporally distant, to be recalled, but as something spatially proximate, to be touched. His memories still mediate his relation to the past, but not by representing the past. Rather, they mediate the past materially, much as, for example, Tom Outland's pots do in Cather's later novel, *The Professor's House* (1925). Visiting the St. Peter family for the first time, Tom gives Mrs. St. Peter an "earthen water jar" he had found on the Blue Mesa. (7) "He showed her a coating of black on the underside of the jar." He remarks: "That's not from the firing. See, I can scratch it off. It's soot, from when it was on the cook-fire last--and that was before Columbus landed, I guess. Nothing makes those people seem so real to me as their old pots, with the fire black on them" (PH 101). The pot brings past and present together: Tom scratches the soot off as if the underside had been blackened just a moment before. Indeed, the sublimity of Tom's experience on the Mesa consists in precisely this sense of the past's proximity. Similarly, at the end of *My Antonia*, Jim conceives of time as space. By touching his memories in the way he would touch an object, he remembers his past not as Claparede says he must, "from the outside," but rather in the first person in the present. This mode of remembering--if it can even be called remembering--supplies a relation to the past that is not, properly speaking, a relation at all, but an identity.

Jim views photographs of himself as if they were woodcuts. Visiting Antonia after a twenty-year absence, he participates in the family ritual of looking through

photographs. "They produced a photograph taken just before I went away to college; a tall youth in a straw hat and striped trousers trying to look easy and jaunty" (MA 260). (8) Jim looks at this photograph of himself as a stranger would--for its immediate visual content? It is true that he recognizes the scene as an event in his life, and to this degree acknowledges the chronological link with his past self. But he resolutely refuses the experiential link, replacing remembered experience (the feeling of going away to college, presented in the third person) with immediate visual experience (the look of the tall youth, experienced in the first person). Jim thus reads photographs the way he treats his memories, as objects from--rather than representations of--the past.

In objectifying his memories, Jim abandons what we might call his realism for a mode of representation more characteristic of modernism. In the "Introduction" Jim says he wants to present Antonia "in a direct way" (MA 5). His method of doing so--telling her story by telling his story--may appear indirect, but it actually serves his initially realist aim of accurate portraiture, since as he says, "It's through myself that I knew and felt her" (MA 5). But in the final book, as we've seen, his memories are no longer representational. Cather carefully emphasizes Jim's commitment to this modernist form of representation in the "Introduction" when she reports Jim's decision to change his title from "Antonia" to "My Antonia" (MA 6). Here "Antonia" literally disappears into "My Antonia." Critics invariably reverse this disappearance in reading the end of the novel according to the representational values operative in the beginning--thereby turning *My Antonia*, a modernist text, into Antonia, a realist text--and then object to Jim's abandonment of his initial focus. Deborah Lambert, for instance, argues that the novel is a "betrayal of female independence" because Antonia "becomes an idea and disappears under symbolic weight." (10) But the fact that Antonia "disappears" is entirely consistent with the title, which could be said to reflect the novel's thematization of its own mode of representation, a thematization that occurs also in the title of the final book, "Cuzak's Boys." "Why not `Antonia's Children'?" Joseph Urgo asks, adding that the title is "a kind of erasure for Antonia." (11) This erasure, evident in the titles of both the final book and the novel, reflects Jim's modernist strategy for avoiding Mr. Shimerda's fate.

Mr. Shimerda is buried in the southwest corner of the Shimerda property, a place destined to be a crossroads in a country where roads follow section lines. The location of the gravesite suggests not only that Mr. Shimerda will continue traveling (since suicides are unquiet spirits) but also that traveling the American road requires abandoning memories, sometimes in the most graphic way possible, by dying. Yet Jim is also convinced that Mr. Shimerda dies from homesickness, from holding on to his memories too longingly. Cather thus interprets the migratory movements made possible by the transportation networks of America's new urban industrial order as a defining feature of American citizenship and, simultaneously, a threat to the integrity of the self. To move from your home is to risk being buried in the road like Mr. Shimerda--American but not yourself. Conversely, to remember your home after moving is to risk

being consumed by homesickness, also like Mr. Shimerda--yourself but not American. *My Antonia* identifies a dilemma, either horn of which appears to be fatal.

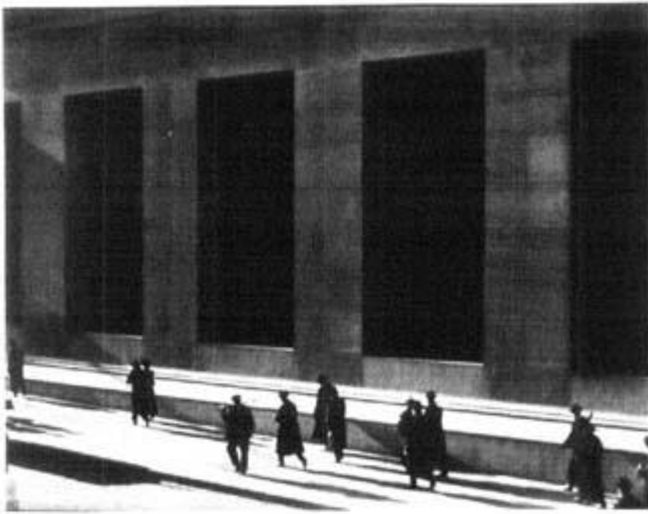

Fig. 1. Paul Strand, "Wall Street," New York, 1915. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The dilemma is a familiar one in accounts of American citizenship. In his poem, "The Sleepers," for example, Walt Whitman imagines the unity of the nation to depend on the uniformity of people who are asleep. (12) "The blind sleep, and the deaf and dumb sleep," he writes. (13) "I swear they are averaged now--one is no better than the other / The night and sleep have liken'd them and restored them" (LG 431). As Philip Fisher notes, Whitman imagines the nation "through the optics of sleep" in order to "accomplish politically what Descartes had done for matter: abolish the differences of stone and leaf, mountain and house to reach the abstract fact of simple location, mass, and movement." ("SS" 71). Sleep, he says, "cancels all differences, all identities" ("SS" 71). People are equal because identical. Yet the idea of having a self that is identical to every other self seems equivalent to having no self at all, a fact registered in the very condition--sleep--through which Whitman would achieve national unity. He can imagine the country as a democratic whole only by imagining its citizens to be unconscious. (14) We might say, then, that the ideal image of American citizenship--becoming part of a uniform mass public--is paradoxically its own reductio ad absurdum, for it entails abandoning a unique self.

Mr. Shimerda is Cather's emblem of this reductio: he has achieved citizenship perhaps, but at the cost of identity. He sleeps, emblematically, at the crossroads. The road, insofar as it seems to make people the same, levels difference. But Jim, who is Mr. Shimerda's immigrant double, leaving home and crisscrossing the country as a corporate railroad lawyer, maintains his difference and preserves his waking identity by objectifying his memories, thus finding a home in homelessness without succumbing to homesickness.

Jim's strategy is characteristic of American modernism's response to a world in which space was increasingly experienced as time. The railroad, for example, made travel time the typical measure of distance between cities. This literal transformation found its figurative emblem in the creation of standard time zones in 1883. Before then, as Allen Trachtenberg notes, cities and towns had set local time by the sun: noon "was when the sun stood directly overhead: never exactly the same moment from place to place or from week to week." (15) But a national railroad network, in requiring national coordination of time, destroyed local time. Hart Crane describes the railroad network in The Bridge in terms of this loss. The telegraph and the tram are "keen instruments" that "bind town to town and dream to ticking dream." (16) Ticking together on standardized time, individual dreams fuse into national identity. (17) Crane's word for the nationalist function of these keen instruments--"bind"--registers the cost of national unity by doubling as a description of its method: these networks bind together by binding up. Crane thus reverses one aspect of Whitman's imagination of national unity, namely, that the conditions of nationality restore the self ("the night and sleep have liken'd them and restore them" [LG 431]). For him, by contrast, towns and people are constrained and limited in being connected and thereby likened. It is only by getting off the train, for instance, that the hoboes, a few lines earlier in *The Bridge*, are restored to themselves. They stand watching the converging taillights of the 20th Century Limited.

> So the 20th Century--so
> whizzed the Limited--roared by and left
> three men, still hungry on the tracks, ploddingly
> watching the tail lights wizen and converge, slipping
> gimleted and neatly out of sight. (B 62)

John Stilgoe points out that although the "metropolitan corridor" was "the most traveled of American environments," it was also "the least known"--except by hoboes. (18) "Passengers in high speed luxury trams, and commuters in locals chugging along at forty miles an hour, moved too hastily to realize accurately the new environment through which they rode" (MC 15). Crucially, Crane chooses to focalize the departing train through hoboes: "three men, still hungry on the tracks." And because his syntax blurs the distinction between the train and the century, the hoboes might be said to watch the disappearance of the twentieth century--indeed, of industrial modernity itself--in watching the disappearance of the 20th Century Limited. This disappearance, in both senses, coincides exactly with the hoboes' experience of the local specificity of the "new environment" Stilgoe describes, or, as Crane says later, the world beneath "whistles, wires and steam" (B 64). The intensely local character of this world is suggested by Crane's precise rendering of the wizening taillights. By contrast, the metropolitan corridor experienced by train passengers is thoroughly national, constituted in Crane's description by the "signboard" (B 62), the advertisements flashing past the train windows:

"RADIO ROARS IN EVERY HOME WE HAVE THE NORTHPOLE / WALLSTREET AND VIRGINBIRTH WITHOUT STONES OR / WIRES OR EVEN RUNning brooks connecting ears" (B 62). In getting off the tram and experiencing the metropolitan corridor as a local environment, the hoboes do not read the "running brook" of national ad copy; their ears are not connected. Instead, they hear actual running brooks, as they occur in local environments. They count "the river's minute by the far brook's year" (B 64); their clock is set to the local time measured before such distant "tributaries" become part of the single national flow of the mechanical river, the railroad (B 68).

Yet Crane calls even these tributaries "grimed," suggesting that the opposition between local experience (the brook) and national culture (the river) is untenable (B 68). Evidently, running brooks are themselves part of the mechanical river, hence "grimed," which is to say that the experience of the local as reproduced in an image ("the tail lights wizen and converge, slip- / ping gimleted and neatly out of sight") is not an untainted tributary but, as Crane says, a "tribute"; not the local itself but a memorialization of the local (B 68). Thus even if Crane's hoboes seem to witness the disappearance of American modernity in the disappearance of the 20th Century Limited, the image of its disappearance in fact prevents it from disappearing entirely. Crane's precise image ends up functioning like the advertising slogans designed to be repeated on the radio in every home: the image also repeats, duplicating the local. Rather than being beneath "whistles, wires and steam," the image, as image, turns out to be above, like the "signboard."

Yet Crane insists that the hoboes "know a body under the wide rain" of this national flow (B 66). This "body" is that of the "woman" in the poem's marginal gloss who is "with us in the dawn" and who is "the flesh our feet have moved upon" (B 57). She is the land itself, the locality, original and unrepeated, even in an image. But how, we might ask, do the hoboes know this locality? Crane says they have "dreamed beyond the print that bound her name," a dreaming he conveys or enacts most obviously in the very context of the descriptive image (B 66): "Tail lights wizen and converge, slip- / ping gimleted and neatly out of sight."

The line break in the middle of the word enables the poetry to stop the train in the very description of its disappearance. In one sense, of course, the line break contributes to the image: it suspends the action of slipping out of sight across the line break and preserves the slipping for sight. The line break literally makes the action of slipping take longer. But, in another sense, the broken word created to convey the slipping--"slip- / ping"--stops the train altogether in asserting the primacy of the materials in which the image is realized over what the image depicts. Instead of preserving modernity in an image, Crane works to erase modernity in simultaneously resisting the image. The line "ping gimleted neatly" does not describe a scene; it describes its own function: "ping," a broken word, gimlets the image of the departing train. Such brokenness or fragmentation enables the reader, like the hoboes, to evade modernity

and know a body--in this case the body of the name, the word itself, knowable as such because it no longer describes or refers to something else. (19)

Crane's treatment of the image thus resembles Jim's objectification of his memories. The aesthetic operating in both cases seems aptly described by what the photographer Paul Strand (explaining his own art) terms the use of "abstract forms to create an emotion unrelated to the objectivity as such." (20) We see his use of such forms in his famous photograph from 1915, "Wall Street" (Fig. 1).

In this photograph, the unmoving black shapes of the windows of the Morgan Bank contrast with the "objectivity" of the moving pedestrians and seem to assert their independence of the historical moment frozen in the photograph. The shapes are static, abstract forms uninvolved in the quotidian obligations animating the pedestrians. Their independence is heightened, indeed even literalized, as much as that is possible, by the verticals of the shadows, which parallel the cropped edge of the photograph. The shapes seem to refer to that edge, to the literal shape of the photograph as an object. In doing so they detach themselves not only from the historical moment depicted within the picture but also from the picture itself. They become what Michael Fried in another context calls "shape as such." (21)

The phrase is from "Shape as Form," an essay in which Fried discusses Frank Stella's aluminum stripe paintings of 1960. These paintings, which consist of 2 1/2-inch-wide stripes that "reiterate the shape of that edge until the entire picture is filled" (see Fig. 2), make "the fact that the literal shape determines the structure of the entire painting completely perspicuous" ("SF" 79).

In each painting, Fried explains,

> the stripes appear to have been generated by the framing edge, and starting there, to have taken possession of the rest of the canvas, as though the whole painting self-evidently followed from not merely the shape of the support, but its actual physical limits ("SF" 79-80).

In other words, Stella seeks to eliminate illusion. The stripe paintings, according to Fried, "represent the most unequivocal and conflictless acknowledgment of literal shape in the history of modernism" (88). This is not to say, of course, that the painting becomes wholly literal, only that such acknowledgment makes "explicit" the "dependence of depicted on literal shape" ("SF" 88). (22)

No less than Stella, Strand wants to eliminate illusion by referring to the edge of the photograph. Indeed, the representational context in his photo actually makes his emphasis on literal shape more intense than Stella's by including the dimension of

time. The shadowed windows do not merely refer to the photograph itself by lining up with the vertical edge. In lining up they stand in contrast to the historical moment of the pedestrians and thus also refer to the photograph in the moment of viewing, to the continuous present in which that object exists. The shapes of the windows contribute to the pathos of the photo by emphasizing through contrast the relentless flow of time. The captured moment is irrevocably past; the pedestrians, as Strand suggests in a comment on the photo, have rushed into the maw of time. (23) If this is perhaps the emotion Strand seeks to convey through abstraction, he does so, paradoxically, by attempting to transcend even abstract shape. The shapes strive for literalness.

The pathos is that of modernity. In rushing, the pedestrians, like Crane's railroad, translate space into time. Strand uses the shapes of the windows to emphasize this modern speed and, simultaneously, to halt it. In striving to become literal, the shapes are striving to become objects, untranslated and untranslating. Strand's shapes are those of modernism--seeking objecthood in order to neutralize the modern forces of dislocation symbolized by the street, the railroad, or, to return to My Antonia, by the old road to the Burden homestead that Jim looks on while wandering north of Black Hawk at the end of the novel.

The old road is of course both the object of memory and a representation of memory itself: "On the level land the tracks had almost disappeared--were mere shadings in the grass, and a stranger would not have noticed them" (MA 273). Jim's description of the road is clearly also a description of memory.

> Wherever the road had crossed the draw, it was easy to find. The rains had made wheel-ruts and washed them so deeply that the sod had never healed over them. They looked like gashes tom by a grizzly's claws, on the slopes where the farm wagons used to lurch up out of the hollows with a pull that brought curling muscles to the smooth hips of the horses. I sat down and watched the haystacks turn rosy in the slanting sunlight. (MA 273).

Characteristically Jim emphasizes the road's appearance: the wheel-ruts "looked like gashes tom by a grizzly's claws." But he also emphasizes the materiality of the language that renders the appearance. The language thickens towards the end of this passage as alliteration becomes obtrusive: g's and s's ("gashes," "grizzly's claws"), l's ("looked like," "lurch"), h's ("hollows," "hips of the horses"), s's ("muscles," "smooth hips of the horses," "sat," "haystacks," "slanting sunlight"). Here Jim's description strives to become pure sound, to the extent such a thing is possible in a narrative, just as Strand's shapes strive for literalness. (24) The literalness of sound allows the remembered past ("the farm wagons used to lurch up out of the hollows with a pull that brought curling muscles to the smooth hips of the horses") to be adjacent to the represented present ("I sat down and watched the haystacks turn rosy in the slanting

sunlight") in the actual present of reading. For Jim, this road of memory is not for traveling, but for experiencing with the senses. Hence it cannot take him away from himself, and he is neither homeless nor homesick.

Soon after arriving in Nebraska as a child, Jim accompanies his grandmother to the garden, and despite its distance from the house and the danger from snakes, remains there by himself. He does not worry about snakes, even though his grandmother has just warned him twice, and at some length, about the danger. After she leaves, he positions himself "in the middle of the garden, where snakes could scarcely approach unseen," and promptly forgets all about them (MA 19). The idyllic experience of wholeness that follows--"I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more" (MA 20)--is made possible by that forgetting. As he says, "Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen." Indeed, he is content "like the pumpkins" because he does not think about snakes--because he does not expect anything to happen. He is an object, a body. "That is happiness," he says. Jim's adult strategies for recapturing this happiness in the garden of childhood thus necessarily involve the body. As we have seen, he objectifies his memories so as to experience them in the present with the senses. He additionally regards the body's instinctive behaviors as the means of transforming the past into present experience, as when he and Antonia visit the dog town as children, planning to "dig into one of the holes" (MA 39).

Jim is aware that "rattlesnakes were always lurking about" (MA 39). The snakes "came to pick up an easy living among the dogs and owls, which were quite defenseless against them; took possession of their comfortable houses and ate the eggs and puppies" (MA 39, 28). In fact, Jim is so conscious of the danger that even the dried sunflowers on the way, with their "brown, rattling, burry stalks" (MA 39), remind him of snakes. In this instance, he expects something to happen, and the expectation itself distances him from his earlier, idyllic experience in the garden. Worrying about snakes in effect removes him from the garden: he is not present. Since snakes have from the very beginning threatened gardens, his expectation might be said to produce the snake that he and Antonia actually encounter. As they get ready to dig, they are surprised by the "biggest snake" (MA 40) Jim has ever seen. He kills the snake instinctively, without thinking. In killing it he clearly eradicates the need to expect something; more precisely, in the very act of killing he embodies an absence of expectation, an absence that, in a certain sense, is the killing. Jim reenters the garden of childhood self-presence, at least temporarily, by acting instinctively.

"I saw his coils tighten--now he would spring, spring his length, I remembered" (MA 40-41). Jim has never encountered a snake before. How can he remember that the snake will spring? The answer, apparently, consists in what Jim later calls the "horrible unconscious memories in all warm blooded life" (MA 42). These unconscious memories serve him well. "I remembered. I ran up and dove at his head with my

spade, struck him fairly across the neck, and in a minute he was all about my feet in wavy loops (MA 41). Here the two actions of remembering and responding, discrete in the telling, seem more properly described as simultaneous: the responding is the remembering. Such memories bypass conscious thought altogether, and offer a relation to the past that promises happiness. Cather's more typical account of embodied memory takes a racial form, as in the case of Blind d'Arnault, the piano player with the "happy" face who visits Black Hawk during Jim's adolescence (MA 144).

Most of Jim's narrative of d'Arnault's visit consists in a detailed account of the musician's youth in the "Far South, on the d'Arnault plantation" (MA 145). Where does Jim get the story? Presumably from Mrs. Harling, who "had known d'Arnault for years" (MA 142). Yet the story includes elements that d'Arnault himself could not have known and therefore could not have told Mrs. Harling. When d'Arnault was a child, for instance, he would go up to the "Big House" and listen at the window when Miss Nellie d'Arnault, the mistress of the house, practiced the piano:

> If Miss d'Arnault stopped practicing for a moment and went toward the window, she saw this hideous little pickaninny, dressed in an old piece of sacking, standing in the open space between the hollyhock rows, his body rocking automatically, his blind face lifted to the sun and wearing an expression of idiotic rapture. Often she was tempted to tell Martha that the child must be kept at home, but somehow the memory of his foolish, happy face deterred her. She remembered that his sense of hearing was nearly all he had,--though it did not occur to her that he might have more of it than other children. (MA 145)

D'Arnault could not have been privy to Miss d'Arnault's thoughts. Jim's license with d'Arnault's biography not only demonstrates his racism, since he borrows stereotypes directly from the minstrel tradition in imagining d'Arnault as a "hideous little pickaninny ... his body rocking automatically ... wearing an expression of idiotic rapture." It also illustrates the function of his racism. What appeals to Jim about d'Arnault's natural ability on the piano is precisely what makes it possible for Jim to invent his biography: d'Arnault has no memory. As a child, he could "finger out passages from things Miss Nellie had been practicing, passages that were already his, that lay under the bones of his pinched, conical little skull, definite as animal desires" (MA 146). D'Arnault does not remember the passages he plays so much as he feels them. If this is memory, then it is the memory of the body, not the mind: the passages are physically part of him, "definite as animal desires." Indeed, it seems doubtful that d'Arnault has a mind, given that he has "almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool" (MA 144). And his sense of rhythm, likewise, is "a physical sense," one that causes what Jim calls a "nervous infirmity": "When he was sitting, or standing

still, he swayed back and forth incessantly, like a rocking toy. At the piano, he swayed in time to the music, and when he was not playing, his body kept up this motion, like an empty mill grinding on" (MA 147, 144).

Jim's reduction of d'Arnault's mind to his body, while grotesque, nonetheless expresses an ideal of artistic production that echoes other accounts at the time. For instance, Albert C. Barnes, in an essay from Alaine Locke's 1925 collection, *The New Negro*, ascribes the value of "Negro art" to the "the psychological complexion of the Negro as he inherited it from his primitive ancestors." (25) For Barnes this inheritance, though "psychological," is thoroughly unconscious, since "the Negro is a poet by birth" and carries his inherited poetry "with him always and everywhere; he lives it in the field, the shop, the factory" ("NA" 20). The "white man," by contrast, does not enjoy this sort of "harmony"; "his art and his life are no longer one and the same"; "many centuries of civilization have attentuated his original gifts" ("NA" 20). Hence art for him is "a thing apart"; it must be thought ("NA" 20). The white man's relation to the primitive past, "his original gifts," is conscious and representational ("NA" 20). But the Negro's relation to the past is unconscious, since he is "a poet by birth;" it is therefore strictly speaking not a relation at all, but an identity. The poetry the Negro inherits is continuously present in the poetry of unconscious "daily habits" ("NA" 20). Jim's figurative decapitation of Blind d'Arnault could thus be regarded as a literal interpretation of this ideal of racial unconsciousness. A series of recent critics have identified this ideal as a central feature of modernism, and this claim makes sense in Cather's case particularly. (26) The identity of art and life (or past and present) that Jim imagines in the racial body is precisely what modernists like Crane and Strand seek to enact formally in poetry and photography. Indeed, the identitarian aims of modernist formal experimentation make the move to race in modernist texts almost inevitable and, consequently, widespread. Cather's later novels, generally regarded as modernist, display Jim's same interest in a self-presence founded in race.

In *A Lost Lady* (1923), for instance, Captain Forrester, the great railroad builder, discusses his "philosophy" at a dinner party and concludes "with a sort of grunt. Something forbidding had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians." (27) He explains his philosophy. "What you think of and dream for day by day, in spite of yourself, so to speak--you will get. You will accomplish what you dream of most" (LL 44). This remark implies that dreaming is the mental cause of the accomplished fact. He refines, or revises, this point when his wife asks, "And why? That's the most interesting part of it" (LL 44). The Captain replies, "a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean, is already an accomplished fact" (LL 44). It is an accomplished fact not because desire of this intensity inevitably secures its object--this reading underestimates the force of "already"--but because fact and dream are identical. Forrester's philosophy thus eliminates what seems essential about dreaming--that it happens in the mind, that it happens prior to the state of affairs that it envisions, and that it has some causal role in accomplishing that state of affairs.

Dreaming in the way Forrester means is not a mental phenomenon at all. Towards the end of the novel Forrester suffers a stroke that should be understood as equivalent to Jim's decapitation of d'Arnault. It ensures the reduction of mind to body, and hence the identity of thought and action idealized in his philosophy and racialized in his foreshadowing grunt. This same modernist logic of racialized primitivism prompts Tom Outland in *The Professor's House* to imagine that he has Indian ancestors.

Tom, having just returned from Washington in his failed attempt to interest the U.S. government in an archaeological expedition to the Blue Mesa ruins, learns that Roddy has sold the artifacts they recovered from Cliff City to a German antiquities collector, and reproaches Roddy: "I'm not so poor that I have to sell the pots and pans that belonged to my poor grandmothers a thousand years ago" (PH 219). His anger over the sale seems to stem partly from the recognition that his own interest in scholarly translation of the artifacts, or even his sense of the "adventure" of the discovery, resembles Roddy's commercial translation (PH 226). After Roddy leaves the mesa, for instance, Tom admits that what he had "felt for this place ... had formerly been mixed up with other motives" (PH 227). But now that those motives "were gone," he says, "I had my happiness unalloyed" (PH 227). The purity of his new relation to the mesa, and in particular to the original inhabitants of Cliff City, consists in replacing his written interpretation of them ("every night after supper I sat down at the kitchen table and wrote up an account of the day's work") with an imagined blood relation (PH 189). As his remark to Roddy indicates, Tom now thinks of the Indians as his "ancestors" (PH 219). Crucially, however, he does not begin to think of them as such until after the sale of the artifacts. It is as if Tom recognized that his relation to the Indians must bypass all forms of interpretation, translation, or representation so as not to be the equivalent of Roddy's commercial--and, formerly, his own scholarly--translation. (28) Thus not only does he lose interest in his "diary," leaving it walled up in the Eagle's Nest where he left it before going to Washington, he also must stop thinking about his "grandmothers" (PH 227,219). Significantly, the short final chapter of "Tom Outland's Story," following Roddy's departure, includes not a single reference to Tom's ancestors. Tom seems to forget about his grandmothers, an erasure equivalent to Jim's erasure of Antonia at the end of *My Antonia*.

Tom can forget because his new relation to the past bypasses representation. He is his past, at least according to his imaginary genealogy. Though his relation to the past resembles Jim's at the end of *My Antonia*, there is an important difference. Jim overcomes his loss of the child's being by objectifying his memories as an adult, but on the Mesa Tom has become like the child Jim was--a pumpkin under the sun, totally present to himself: "I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything instead of having lost everything. Up there alone, a close neighbor to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way" (PH 227). Tom does not objectify his memories, as Jim does in hearing the wagons again and touching his feelings; instead, like Blind d'Arnault, he embodies the past. He has eliminated the need for memories altogether,

replacing a representational self-relation with one that is not a relation at all, but an identity. With Indian grandmothers, Tom lives his past.

But *The Professor's House* is less Tom's story than it is Godfrey St. Peter's, the Professor of the tide, who teaches history at a small college in the Midwest, and who, when Tom dies in the First World War, begins editing his Blue Mesa diary for publication. This writing task, like the Professor's more properly historical work (the eight volumes of Spanish Adventurers in North America), involves putting things in perspective.

> The bother was that he must write an introduction. The diary covered only about six months of the boy's life, a summer he spent on the Blue Mesa, and in it there was almost nothing about Tom himself. To mean anything, it must be prefaced by a sketch of Outland, and some account of his later life and achievements. (PH 150)

The Professor's House includes a "sketch of Outland" of course, but Tom narrates it. St. Peter never writes his introduction. The novel's sketch, "Tom Outland's Story," certainly fills in details of Tom's life. But what St. Peter says of Tom's "plain account" in the diary--"To mean anything, it must be prefaced"--applies equally to "Tom Outland's Story" (PH 238). If in the diary Tom uses words "sparingly" ("the adjectives were purely descriptive, relating to form and color" [PH 238]), on the mesa he rejects words altogether in order to see things "whole" and to feel "happiness" (PH 226). St. Peter's observation about Tom's stories generally--that "there were no shadows" (PH 105)--is thus true of "Tom Outland's story"; and although the Professor fails to write his introduction, that failure itself adds shadows to Tom's story and, as the subject of the final book, supplies a perspective on Tom's modernism. The reason St. Peter cannot write, after all, is that thinking about Tom sets him to thinking about "the person he was in the beginning," before "the chain of events which had happened to him" (PH 240). He is unable to become that person again. Rather than ending with Tom's feeling of having "found everything," then, the novel concludes with St. Peter's near asphyxiation and sense of having "let something go" (PH 258).

While working on the introduction to Tom's diary, St. Peter is overcome with gas after failing asleep in his study--the wind has blown the stove out and the window shut. Tom's "scientific work" during college included the discovery of a "gas" (PH 118); and it is as if this gas--or, indeed, the other "gas" he discovered, the thin atmosphere up close to the sun on Blue Mesa ("the world above the world" [PH 217])--had invaded St. Peter's study in the form of Tom's story. For the story has recalled for St. Peter the self of his own childhood: "original, unmodifed," (PH 239), "primitive" (PH 241), "solitary" (PH 241). This self has "recognitions" (PH 241):

> When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails, when the seven pine trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: "That is right." Coming upon a curly root that thrust itself across his path, he said: "That is it." When the maple-leaves along the street began to turn yellow and waxy, and were soft to the touch,--like the skin on old faces,--he said: "That is true; it is time." (PH 241)

This self resembles Captain Forrester after his stroke. Indeed, such primitive being seems uncomfortably close to unconsciousness and death recall what Jim says of his experience in his Grandmother's garden: "perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire" (MA 20). The other side of presence is obliteration. In this respect the threat of St. Peter's "accidental extinction" (PH 258) articulates the cost of self-presence, just as his survival (when Augusta saves him from the gas) articulates the cost of life. It is the "secondary social man" (PH 240) who survives, the one created by circumstance and subject to change; and at the end of the novel St. Peter feels "the ground under his feet" and awaits the return of his family with "fortitude" (PH 258). The Professor feels he has "let something go," but for readers of the novel that something is not exactly gone: rather, the narrative of his relinquishment puts it in perspective.

Source: Webb, Jeff. "Modernist memory; or, the being of Americans." Criticism 44.3 (2002): 227+. Literature Resource Center. http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books

Discussion Questions *Source: http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780679741879&view=rg*

1. The first narrator in *My Antonia* is an unnamed speaker who grew up with Jim Burden and meets him years later on a train. Jim tells his story in response to this mysterious figure, who disappears from the novel as soon as the Introduction is over. How does this first narrator's disappearance foreshadow other withdrawals within this novel, which at times resembles a series of departures? Why might Cather have chosen to frame her narrative in this fashion?

2. When Jim arrives in Nebraska, he sees "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." [11-12] Yet at the novel's end that landscape is differentiated. It has direction and color--red grass, blue sky, dun-shaded bluffs. We are reminded of the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and of God's parting of the heavens from the earth. To what extent is *My Antonia* an American Genesis? What are its agents of creation and differentiation?

3. Just as *My Antonia's* setting is initially raw and featureless, its narrative at first seems haphazard: "'I didn't arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people's Antonia's name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn't any form.'" [6] Is Burden's description really accurate? Although the narrative proceeds chronologically, its structure is unconventional, as Antonia is present in only three of the five sections and much of her story unfolds via exposition. What effect does Cather produce by telling her story in this fashion?

4. One of the greatest difficulties facing the Shimerdas and other immigrant families is that posed by their lack of English, which seals them off from all but the most forthcoming of their neighbors. Yet even American-born arrivals to Nebraska find themselves set apart. As the narrator notes in the Introduction, "no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said." [3] What is the nature of this freemasonry? What experiences do the inhabitants of this world share that are alien--and perhaps incommunicable--to people raised elsewhere? Does the shared experience of the novel's pioneers end up counting for more than their linguistic and ethnic differences?

5. What is it that makes Mr. Shimerda unable to adapt to his new home and ultimately drives him to suicide? Is he simply too refined--too rooted in Europe--to endure the harshness and solitude of the prairie? Before we jump to too easy a conclusion, we might consider the fact that the novel's other suicide, Wick Cutter, is a crass, upwardly mobile small-town entrepreneur. What do these two deaths suggest about the prerequisites for surviving in Cather's world?

6. From their first meeting, when Jim begins to teach Antonia English, he serves as her instructor and occasional guardian. Yet he also seems in awe of Antonia. What is it that makes her superior to him? What does she possess that Jim doesn't? What makes her difference so desirable?

7. At times Jim's feelings towards Antonia suggest romantic infatuation, yet their relationship remains chaste. Nor does Jim ever become sexually involved with the alluring--and more available--Lena Lingard. Curiously, Antonia appears to disapprove of their flirtation. And, whether he is conscious of it or not, Jim seems wedded to the idea of Tony as a sexual innocent. Following the failed assault by Wick Cutter, "I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness." [186] How do you account for these characters' ambivalent and at times squeamish attitude toward sexuality? In what ways do they change when they marry and--in Antonia's case--bear children?

8. Just as it is possible to read Lena Lingard as Antonia's sensual twin, one can see the entire novel as consisting of doubles and repetitions. Antonia has two brothers, the industrious and amoral Ambrosch and the sweet-natured, mentally incompetent Marek.

Wick Cutter's suicide echoes that of Mr. Shimerda. Even minor anecdotes have a way of mirroring each other. Just as the Russians Peter and Pavel are stigmatized because they threw a bride to a pursuing wolf pack, the hired hand Otto is burdened by an act of generosity on his voyage over to America, when the woman he is escorting ends up giving birth to triplets. Where else in the novel do events and characters mirror each other? What is the effect of this symmetry and its variations?

9. In one of her essays, Willa Cather observed, "I have not much faith in women in fiction." [cited in Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives*. New York, Vintage, 1991, p. 12] Yet in Antonia Cather has created a genuinely heroic woman. What perceived defects in earlier fictional heroines might Cather be trying to redeem in this novel? Do her female characters seem nobler, better, or more deeply felt than their male counterparts? In spite of this, why might Cather have chosen to make *My Antonia'* s narrator a man?

10. For her epigraph Cather uses a quote from Virgil: *Optima dies...prima fugit*: "The best days are the first to pass." How is this idea borne out within *My Antonia*? In what ways can the novel's early days, with their scenes of poverty, hunger and loss, be described as the best? What does Jim, the novel's presiding consciousness, lose in the process of growing up? Does Antonia lose it as well? How is this notion of lost happiness connected to Jim's observation: "That is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great"?

11. Although *My Antonia* is elegiac in its tone--and has been used in high school curricula to convey a conservative view of the American past--it is also notable for its striking realism about gender and culture. Not only does the novel have a female protagonist who prevails in spite of male betrayal and abuse (and two secondary female characters who prosper without ever marrying), it also portrays the early frontier as a multicultural quilt in which Bohemians, Swedes, Austrians, and a blind African-American retain their ethnic identities without dissolving in the American melting pot. Significantly, at the novel's end Antonia has reverted to speaking Bohemian with her husband and children. How important are these themes to the novel's overall vision? Do they accurately reflect the history of the western frontier?

Multimedia

***Return to the Prairie to Revisit 'My Antonia'* (Radio Broadcast)**
http://www.npr.org/2011/05/02/133811309/return-to-the-prairie-to-revisit-my-antonia
A discussion of the novel on NPR.

Further Reading

O Pioneers by Willa Cather

http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1015265
(Call number: Fiction Cather)
Willa Cather's second novel tells the story of an immigrant family's struggle to save their Nebraska farm. Cather's placement of a strong and capable woman at the center of the story, her realistic depiction of life on the midwestern prairie, and her vivid portrayal of the immigrant experience at the turn of the century make *O Pioneers!* a true American classic.

The Taming of the West: A Photographic Perspective by David R. Phillips
http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1053649
(Call number: 978.02 Ph)
Collection of photographs chronicling the development of the Western Frontier.

Pioneer children on the journey West by Emmy E. Werner
http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1100636
(Call number: 978.02 We)
Between 1841 and 1865, some forty thousand children participated in the great overland journeys from the banks of the Missouri River to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. In this engaging book, Emmy Werner gives 120 of these young emigrants, ranging from ages four to seventeen, a chance to tell the stories of their journeys west. Incorporating primary materials in the form of diaries, letters, journals, and reminiscences that are by turns humorous and heartrending, the author tells a timeless tale of human resilience. For six months or more, the young travelers traversed two thousand miles of uncharted prairies, deserts, and mountain ranges.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Willa Cather Foundation Website
http://www.willacather.org/
The Willa Cather Foundation invites you to experience the life, times, and work of Willa Cather. Here, you can tour her home, read her work, visit her beloved Opera House, and shop the largest collection of books by and about Cather. Visit us regularly for news on conferences, publications, and information about the ongoing restoration and preservation of the largest living memorial to an author in the country, in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Read-Alikes

Bohemian Girl by Terese Svoboda
http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1393707
(Call number: Fiction Svoboda)
Young Harriet's father sells her as a slave to settle his gambling debt with an eccentric Indian—and her story is just beginning. Part Huck Finn, part *True Grit*, Harriet's story of

her encounter with the dark and brutal history of the American West is a true original. When she escapes the strange mound-building obsession of her Pawnee captor, Harriet sets off on a trek to find her father, only to meet with ever-stranger characters and situations along the way. She befriends a Jewish prairie peddler, escapes with a chanteuse, is imprisoned in a stockade and rescued by a Civil War balloonist, and becomes an accidental shopkeeper and the surrogate mother to an abandoned child, while abetting the escape of runaway slaves.

The Night Journal by Elizabeth Crook
http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1259765
(Call number: Fiction Crook)
A brilliantly imagined, lavish, and transporting novel of a young woman's search for the truth about her family's mythic past Meg Mabry has spent her life with her back turned to her legendary family legacy. In the 1890s her great-grandmother Hannah Bass composed starkly revealing diaries of her life on the southwestern frontier, first as a Harvey Girl at the glamorous Montezuma Resort in New Mexico and later as the wife of brilliant, and often-absent, railway engineer Eliott Bass. A generation later, Hannah's daughter, Claudia Bass, renowned historian known to all as Bassie, staked her academic career and reputation on these vibrant accounts, editing and publishing them to great acclaim. Thanks to the journals and to the industry Bassie created around them, Hannah would forever be one of the most romantic and famous figures of southwestern history.

The Diary of Mattie Spenser by Sandra Dallas
http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1122741
(Call number: Fiction Dallas)
No one is more surprised than Mattie Spenser herself when Luke Spenser, considered the great catch of their small Iowa town, asks her to marry him. Less than a month later, they are off in a covered wagon to build a home on the Colorado frontier. Mattie's only company is a slightly mysterious husband and her private journal, where she records the joys and frustrations not just of frontier life, but also of a new marriage to a handsome but distant stranger. As she and Luke make life together on the harsh and beautiful plains, Mattie learns some bitter truths about her husband and the girl he left behind and finds love where she least expects it. Dramatic and suspenseful, this is an unforgettable story of hardship, friendship and survival.

***An Ordinary Woman: A Dramatized Biography of Nancy Kelsey* by** Cecelia Holland
http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1152256
(Call number: Fiction Holland)
In *An Ordinary Woman*, Holland gives us an intimate portrait of a remarkable woman who played a crucial role in the settlement of the West--Nancy Kelsey, the courageous young pioneer who was the first American woman to set foot in California. Drawing

upon Nancy's own accounts of her harrowing journey, as well as the writings of those who traveled with her, Cecelia Holland has crafted a stunning biography of this amazing woman that is filled with all of the action, passion, danger, and determination that have made her historical novels bestsellers around the world. Married at the age of fifteen to Ben Kelsey, a restless young Scotch-Irish pioneer who eked out a meager living on the Missouri frontier, Nancy Roberts Kelsey was a strong and capable woman who could milk a cow, skin a deer, make hew own clothes, plant a field, drive a team of oxen, and shoot a rifle. The child pioneers, bred to courage and risk, she had grown up in the wilderness only a few miles from the great Missouri River that was, in 1838, the border of the settled United States. But when the lure of a new life on the farthest edge of the frontier beckoned to Ben Kelsey, Nancy was determined to be at his side.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extra!

Many people first read "*My Antonia*" during secondary school or college courses, then reread it as adults. What other books have members of the book group read first as children or adolescents and then reread as adults?

Ann Arbor District Library