

# 2

## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

Although life on the prairie was difficult for all pioneers in the late 19th century, European immigrants experienced even more challenges than their American neighbors. Use this lesson to focus upon the similarities and differences between the experiences of the Burdens and Shimerdas. For example, the Burdens' house is the only wooden house on the Divide, except for the Norwegian settlement. At first the Shimerdas do not even have the typical sod house, and they have no garden or tools. As the first Bohemian family to come to Nebraska, they are often cheated financially because they cannot speak English. Mrs. Shimerda later says they never would have survived their first winter without the kindness of the Burdens.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD, Track Two. Ask students to take notes as they listen.

Copy Handouts One and Two from the back of this guide, as well as “Willa Cather’s Nebraska” (pp. 7-8) from the Reader’s Guide. Break your class into groups and ask them to describe specific ways this historical knowledge enhances their understanding of *My Ántonia*.

### Writing Exercise

Does life in Black Hawk feel anything like the town in which you were raised? What are the most distinctive similarities or differences?

### Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book One, Chapters 8-16 (pp. 43-91).

Interview an older family member, asking them about your family’s history. When did your family first come to America? Why did they leave their homeland? Gather some songs, stories, or recipes from your family’s native country.