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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life, and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates, by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *My Ántonia* makes about the following:

Memory

How is Jim a nostalgic, romantic, and idealistic narrator? Does this make him an unreliable storyteller?

What does Jim mean by the final line of the novel: “Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past”?

The Taming of the Land

By the novel’s end, the land is fenced. The once virgin land is filled with roads, houses, and train tracks. What does this suggest about the way humans affect the environment?

How is the Nebraskan land both the novel’s most significant symbol as well as a major theme? Does the development of the land parallel the development of Ántonia Shimerda?

The Immigrant Experience in America

The heroism of the settlers is evident by their determination to create a new and better life for their families. How do the women especially contribute to make such a life possible?

How is this novel a story about the building of a specific Nebraskan community? Then, how does it transcend Nebraska to become a story about the making of America, and of what it means to be American?

Happiness

An important moment of the novel occurs when Jim says, “That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.” What does this mean?

According to Jim’s definition, which characters in the novel end up happy? Is he one of them?



Homework

Have students read Handout Three in this guide. Ask them to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due the next class period.