In 1883, the young Willa Cather was plucked from her comfortable home in Virginia and dropped into the prairies of Nebraska, an experience that terrified, but exhilarated her and became the force behind all of her great novels - *O Pioneers!*; *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *One of Ours*. She wrote about her experiences in Red Cloud, Nebraska and her work now serves as a way of understanding the history and the culture of pioneer life. In this unit, students will learn to read literature with an eye toward understanding history and then create their own historical fiction. Immigrant students can also use the opportunity to examine and write about their own pioneering ways as they learn about new customs in a completely foreign culture.

**PREPARATION**

**Grade Level:**
High School – 9th through 12th grade

**Time Allotment:**
7 to 10 class periods (depending on the teacher’s decision to show the 1995 film version of the book and on the number of in-class writing sessions)

**Subject Matter:**
English, American Literature, History, American Culture, Immigration, Religion, Pioneer Life, Gender Issues, Geography

**Learning Objectives:**
Students will be able to:
- Understand the social and cultural aspects of the frontier and pioneer life in the late 19th century
- Use Internet sources and primary source material for research
- Work together in small groups on editing and writing skills
- Write an original short story of historical fiction based on their research

**Standards:**

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 5
http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=7&StandardID=5
Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

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MCREL THINKING AND REASONING, Level 4, Standard 2
http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=21&StandardID=2
Understands and applies basic principles of logic and reasoning

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 2
http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=19&StandardID=2
Knows the characteristics and uses of computer software programs.

MCREL WORKING WITH OTHERS, Level 4, Standard 1
http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=22&StandardID=1
Contributes to the overall effort of a group

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 1, Benchmark 8
Writes fictional, biographical, autobiographical, and observational narrative compositions

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 4, Benchmark
http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/standardDetails.asp?subjectID=7&standardID=4
Gathers and uses information for research purposes

**Media Components**

Computer Resources:

- Modem: 56.6 Kbps or faster.
- Browser: Netscape Navigator 4.0 or above or Internet Explorer 4.0 or above. Macintosh computer: System 8.1 or above and at least 32 MB of RAM.
- Personal computer (Pentium II 350 MHz or Celeron 600 MHz) running Windows® 95 or higher and at least 32 MB of RAM
- Software: Any presentation software such as Power Point or Hyperstudio (optional), and word processing programs like Microsoft Word, Word Perfect, ClarisWorks, AppleWorks, etc.
- RealPlayer
- Adobe Acrobat Reader 4.0 or higher. Download the free Adobe Acrobat reader here: http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html

**Bookmarked sites and video resources:**

Tip: Before teaching this lesson, bookmark all of the Web sites used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom, create a word-processing document with all of the Web sites

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listed as hyperlinks, upload all links to an online bookmarking utility such as www.portaportal.com, or make paper handouts of necessary Web pages so that students can access the information on these sites. Make sure that your computer has necessary media players, like RealPlayer, to show streaming clips (if applicable).

Please preview all of the sites and videos before presenting them to your class.

**Video**

**American Masters “Willa Cather: The Road is All”**
Thirteen/WNET New York's series of award-winning specials examining the lives, works and creative processes of America’s most outstanding cultural artists. Explore the American frontier of the 1890s through Cather’s novels about life on the Nebraskan plains.

**Web sites**

- Middlebury College’s Commencement Address Archives
  http://www.middlebury.edu/about/pubaff/addresses/David_McCullough_1986.htm  This link is for David McCullough’s 1986 Commencement Address titled “A Recommended Itinerary”

- Kennedy Library Forum
  http://www.jfklibrary.org/forum_mccullough.html
  The excerpt in the Introductory Activity is David McCullough’s explanation of his own research techniques. It is from the Kennedy Library Forum’s Presidential Historian Series on Wednesday, May 30, 2001.

- *My Ántonia* on-line
  http://www.americanliterature.com/MA/MAINDEX.HTML
  The index to all of the chapters of *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather. The students will need these links for the chapters they have been assigned.

- Common Proofreading Symbols
  http://webster.commnet.edu/writing/symbols.htm
  Proofreading symbols for students to use as a reference guide.

**Materials:**

Teachers will need the following supplies:
- Board and/or chart paper
- Ideally a screen on which to project the Web-based video clips
- Printouts of Web resources if computers are not available in the classroom
- Copies of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* if there are not enough computers for the entire class to read selected chapters on-line
• Video of AMERICAN MASTERS [LINK TO: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/]
  "Willa Cather: The Road is All," Episode #1807

Students will need the following supplies:
• computers with the capacities indicated above
• notebook or journal
• pens/pencils

This lesson was prepared by: Anna Chan Rekate
STEPS

Introductory Activity (The teacher should anticipate that this introductory activity will last one class period.):

1. The day before the beginning of this unit, distribute copies of David McCullough’s 1986 Commencement Address “A Recommended Itinerary” (http://www.middlebury.edu/about/pubaff/addresses/David_McCullough_1986.htm) to all students to read for homework. Distribute copies of the STUDENT ORGANIZER “Commencement Address Reading Questions”.

2. When the students arrive for the class, they should begin by brainstorming their ideas about the main point of McCullough’s speech. Some of their ideas may include:
   - Graduates should travel and see the world.
   - Live and experience life.
   - Success and the pursuit of success isn’t everything.
   - Ultimately, students should reach the conclusion about the connection between reading literature and understanding history and culture in different geographical areas in the United States.

3. The teacher should explain or read aloud David McCullough’s explanation of his own research techniques. The following excerpt is from the Kennedy Library Forum’s Presidential Historian Series on Wednesday, May 30, 2001. He was speaking on his new book John Adams. (http://www.jfklibrary.org/forum_mccullough.html)

   Q: You are known for trying to walk in the footsteps of your subject as you write about them. Did you do so for this book, and could you describe some of your travels?

   DM: Yes, indeed. Every house that the Adams lived in in Europe is still standing. Their house in Paris, in Auteuille, just outside of Paris, now part of Paris -- It was outside then, part of the suburbs of Paris -- still stands. And the house that John Adams lived in in Amsterdam, the house he very nearly died in, of fever, is still there. The house they lived in in London, on Grovesner's Square, is still there, one of two 18th century houses, a little house over in the corner. And that's the same square where Franklin Roosevelt's statue dominates the middle of the square. Our overbearing, alas, modern embassy is at one end of the square, and there are some lovely Georgian buildings, red brick, which were Ike's headquarters during the war, are also on the square. There's a great American presence on that square, including the house that the Adams lived in.

   Rosalie and I have been to all of those places. We also followed the route that John Adams and Jefferson took on a garden tour that they set off on for six days one April, because they were getting nowhere with the British government in attempting some negotiations, so they said, "To heck with it," and off they went. And as we set off, we try to do these things at the same time of year, and follow
the same route. It was April. I wanted to see what was out in the way of foliage, what the landscape looked like, smelled like, in the morning, and all that. And we thought, maybe, when we come to some of these little towns, we'll find an inn, or maybe a building that is the same as it was then. Well, everything was the same as it was then.

Last fall, we went with a group of people from the Massachusetts Historical Society, following the path of John and Abigail Adams through Paris, Amsterdam, and London, and went again on that same garden trip. It was a wonderful tour. Had about 35 people from Boston who went along. And I was the tour guide. I've never done anything like that before. It was great fun. And at one point we were standing outside the Adams' house in Paris, which is a very large house. I think they're doctors' offices now. And we were crowding on the sidewalk, and I was standing up against the wall, explaining to everybody about the house and its importance in the story. And people were coming and going on the sidewalk. These 35 Americans are all standing there, looking. And two Frenchmen went by, and one said to the other, "Who are all these people?" And the other said, "Oh, they're just relatives of John Adams."

4. Once you have read the excerpt and highlighted the importance of following in the footsteps of these historical figures, go back to David McCullough’s comment about reading literature as you travel. Why does he recommend reading Willa Cather as you travel through Nebraska? Why should you bring William Faulkner when you are in the South? Why is it important to read history and biography?

5. Help the students understand that to fully appreciate, value and understand history, you must live it as much as you can. If you can experience it physically, reading literature will give you a better understanding of life and the culture than a history textbook.

Learning Activities:

1. To understand life as a pioneer in the late 1890’s, students will be divided into groups and read specific chapters of My Ántonia to learn about the values of pioneer life. Before they receive their reading assignments, show two segments of the American Masters episode, “Willa Cather: The Road is All.” Students should focus on learning about the old pioneer values of family ties, honest work, love of the land, fortitude, hard work and faithfulness.

   - The introduction to Willa Cather – 0:00-12:00
   - Discussion about My Ántonia and Annie Pavelka, the real “Ántonia” – 42:30-50:10

2. Divide the class into five groups. Below are the chapters to assign to each student group and the main value and/or aspect of pioneer life that they will learn about. Within the following chapters, students should look for any or all of the following pioneer values: family ties, honest work, love of the land, fortitude, hard work and faithfulness. After reading the chapters, each group will create a short presentation to demonstrate what it has learned about the life and culture in Nebraska.

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(Reading and brainstorming ideas and strategies for the presentation should take a full class period. The presentations themselves should take another class period.) Each group should also focus on the content listed below each group’s chapter assignment.

**Group 1:** Read Book I, chapters 1-2.
- Focus on the hardships and the wonders of travel during this time period.

**Group 2:** Read Book I, chapters 3-5
- Focus on immigrant life and the struggles with adapting to a new society, a new language, and a different culture.

**Group 3:** Read Book I, chapters 14-16
- Focus on issues of religion and death and how newcomers and the establishment come to terms with each other.

**Group 4:** Read Book II, chapters 1-4
- Focus on the reaction to moving from the country to life in a town.

**Group 5:** Read Book II, chapter 9
- Focus on gender issues and the treatment of “hired girls.”

3. If there is time, you may want to consider showing “My Ántonia,” a 1995 film version directed by Joseph Sargent and starring Neil Patrick Harris, Jason Robards and Eva Marie Saint. This film is 100 minutes long. It is not the greatest film, but it will give students a visual perspective as well.

**Culminating Activity/Assessment:**

1. After listening to all of the presentations and using their own research, the students will write an original short story of historical fiction for their culminating activity to demonstrate their knowledge of the life and times of a pioneer in the 1890s in Nebraska. They are free to create their own characters and story lines. (Depending on the amount of class time available, the teacher may want to assign the writing for homework.)

2. For the next class, students should come in with two copies of their first draft so that students can work in peer editing groups.

3. The first stage of peer editing should focus on “revision.” Please stress that this is not a time to focus on spelling errors. Instead, students should identify problems in the following areas. There should be at least two readers for each story.
   - Organization – Does the story make sense chronologically, geographically?
   - Ideas and examples – Are they historically accurate and relevant to the plots of the short story?
   - Word choice – Are they precise and/or appropriate for the time period and audience?
   - Completeness – Are there unanswered questions about the characters?
   - Relevance to the Lesson – Do the stories pertain to pioneer life in the 1800s?
4. After the first peer editing session, students should revise their writing for the next class. They should come to class with two copies of their revised story. This round of editing should focus on language conventions and mechanics.

5. Provide students with a key for proofreading symbols. Review the purpose and use of each symbol if they are not familiar with them. Print out a copy of http://webster.commnet.edu/writing/symbols.htm and the “Proofreading Checklist” for every student. The proofreading symbols sheet is a good reference for them to have for all classes.

- Are there sentence fragments?
- Are there any run-on sentences?
- Do subjects and verbs agree?
- Is verb tense consistent?
- Are there spelling errors?
- Are the beginning of sentences and proper nouns capitalized?
- Do sentences use appropriate punctuation?
- Is internal punctuation (comma, colon, semicolon, dash) used appropriately? Be especially careful with dialogue. The comma goes inside the closing quotation marks. For example: “I saw Wilma at the store,” Dana told her mother.
- Are pronouns used correctly?

6. Next, have students work in peer editing groups. Provide them with an editing Checklist to be used in peer sessions. Each writer should get feedback from at least two students.

7. For the final class, students should edit their work and come to class with their finished stories. Hold a publishing party so students can share their work.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

- Students may be interested in writing personal experiences with “pioneering life.” Immigrant students or first generation Americans may want to write about themselves or their family. Other students can choose to recount the pioneering tales of local community members who have immigrated to America. As they write the story, they can consider how the person(s) pioneered and learned about a different culture and history. How did they adjust to and mix with their new homes, neighbors and environment?
- Read one of David McCullough’s books and then establish a discussion group. Since the lesson focuses on reading literature or biography to understand history, discuss how McCullough’s techniques allow readers to understand history comprehensively. His books include: 1776, John Adams, Truman, The Course of Human Events, Great Bridge: The Epic Story of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge, Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914, and Johnstown Flood. In the book, Mr. Shimerda gives Grandmother Burden a book containing two alphabets – an English one and a Bohemian one - and requests that the Burdens teach Ántonia.
English. Think about the kinds of books you would use to teach Ántonia about American culture and society, language and history. What titles would you pick and why? Complete a project that explains the rationale behind your selection.

**Cross-Curricular Extensions:**

- Architecture – study the architecture of homes and villages of the 1890s and create a three-dimensional model.
- Cooking – research the cuisines or traditional recipes of the time period and prepare them for the class. Include a discussion about why you think these foods were typical of the time and place by taking into account the kinds of animals and plants that were domesticated by settlers or indigenous to the Nebraskan plains.

**Community Connections:**

- Students may be interested in writing oral histories of community members that have been or are pioneers. Use the oral histories primer on Thirteen’s *Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* website at [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/education.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/education.html) for an overview and tips on using oral histories in the classroom. As the students write the story, they can consider how the person(s) pioneered and learned about a different culture and history. How did they adjust to and mix with their new homes, neighbors and environment?
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS READING QUESTIONS

1. What is the main point in McCullough’s speech?

2. Why does he use literature as a jumping off point to understanding history? Pay close attention to the following excerpt:

Take the novels of Willa Cather when you go to Nebraska. Bring Faulkner when you're going south. Take Cather, Faulkner, take books wherever you go. Read. Read all you can. Read history, biography. Read Dumas Malone's masterful biography of Jefferson and Paul Horgan's epic history of the Rio Grande, Great River. Read Luigi Barzini's books on Italy and America. Read the published journals of those who traveled the Oregon Trail. Read the novels of Maya Angelou and Robertson Davies, read Wendell Berry, Wallace Stegner, and the poems of Robert Penn Warren.
## PROOFREADING CHECKLIST

Proofreader #1: ____________________________  
Proofreader #2: ____________________________

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<th>Writing Mechanics</th>
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<td>Has the writer successfully written in the active voice?</td>
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**Comments:**