

ANALYSIS

My Mortal Enemy (1926)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“Told in a different fashion the story of *My Mortal Enemy* might be almost lurid. Its central character, a somewhat spectacular woman who made in her youth a sacrifice of wealth for love and then found herself throughout life unable to maintain the high mood which would make of such sacrifice a success, is all but flamboyant. Yet told as Miss Cather tells it the effect is not of storm and stress but rather of a quiet and brooding sadness, because its center is the mind of the narrator. She has known the woman when she was still the heroine of a village legend, still a symbol of the love and youth that triumph over difficulty; she has seen her at intervals during the years that follow; and she has gradually divined how things stand, how what began as high romance has ended in the sordid impasses to which a wife who insists upon luxuries beyond her husband’s income leads both him and herself.

To the girl who tells the story, Myra was more than merely an acquaintance, she was one of those from whom life could be learned. In her she had hoped to see romance justified, young faith encouraged; but from her she heard instead: ‘People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know. We were: A man and a woman drawn apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other. Perhaps I can’t forgive him for the harm I did him. Perhaps that’s it. In age we lose everything; even the power to love.’ And it was not, we feel, that Myra was worse than most; only that high resolution is an affair of minutes, life an affair of years. Only things founded in selfishness and prudence last it out...

In a penetrating essay, ‘The Novel Demeuble,’ [Cather] has herself made a plea for a type of fiction less elaborate in its mechanics than the conventional novel, and she has put her preaching into practice by scrupulously avoiding in her best work any machinery more elaborate than her tale required; yet the modesty of which I speak is something beyond that.... Events are seen frankly through the haze of distance; the thing immediately present is not these events themselves but the mind in which they are recollected; and the effect is, therefore, not the vividness and the harshness of drama but something almost elegiac in its softness. The knowledge of the narrator is both mellow and imperfect; he gropes, reflects, and tries (after the manner of a human, far from omniscient, spectator) to piece together the bits of his information and to extract from it as much as he can of its secret meaning. What we get is not that sense of present action for which novelists more commonly seek, but rather a mood—the reverberations of wonder, of interest, and of pity which have lingered after many years in a sensitive, resonant temper....

This method of Miss Cather’s—and she has never, I think, been entirely successful except when adhering to it—has its obvious limitations. It does not stir deep passions and it is, as Nietzsche would have said, to the last degree Apollonian. The mood is a minor mood, brooding and faintly melancholic, with an eye turned always backward. But in the midst of our strident literature its graceful ease has a charm not easy to overestimated. Whenever Miss Cather evokes memory there comes with it a lingering fragrance.”

Joseph Wood Krutch
“The Modest Method of Willa Cather”
Nation (10 November 1926)

“*My Mortal Enemy* is the best example of principles Willa had enunciated in a 1922 essay she wrote for her old nemesis *The New Republic*. ‘The novel, for a long while, has been overfurnished,’ the article began. Art, she wrote, was a matter of selection and simplification and in the story of Myra Driscoll Henshawe she stripped the characters and the scenes of all but the most essential details. Although one critic complained of ‘a creative tautness that robs it of warmth,’ Willa felt that she had achieved the effect she wanted, and she considered *My Mortal Enemy* an exceptional book. She had written it rapidly while

getting *The Professor's House* ready for publication, and in some ways it serves both as a coda to her previous work and as an overture to the books that were to follow.

The marriage of Myra Driscoll and Oswald Henshawe is what the professor's marriage might have been like if his wife had not had money. 'A few memorable interregnums between servants had let him know that Lillian couldn't pinch and be shabby....,' St. Peter had reflected. 'Under such conditions she became another person and a bitter one.' In *My Mortal Enemy* headstrong Myra Driscoll renounces her uncle's fortune to marry for love and, in time, poverty does indeed turn her into a bitter figure. The brief story is told in two parts. In the first part Myra is seen a quarter of a century after her elopement, a worldly woman in her middle years, vain, imperious but still beautiful and infinitely intriguing to the young narrator, Nelly Birdseye, who comes to New York with her aunt to visit Myra and Oswald in their comfortable apartment on Madison Square....

The second part of the book shows Myra ten years later, at the end of her life, far from the glitter of New York. All splendor gone, crippled and dependent, she and Oswald are living in shabby quarters along the California coast. By chance, Nelly is there too to witness the last chapter of the great romance. 'People can be lovers and enemies at the same time. We were,' Myra says to Nelly. But at the end she and Oswald have ceased to be lovers, ceased even to be friends. They have long since destroyed each other and, in her sickness, Myra whispers the fateful words: 'Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?' Knowing death is near, she turns to Catholicism, the faith in which she had been raised, and at the last she makes the supreme effort to leave her squalid room so that she may die alone on a bare headland overlooking the sea, a crucifix clasped in her hands.

In her last years Myra came to bitterly regret the romantic adventure of her youth. 'I should have stayed with my uncle,' she says. 'It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away.' But for Willa Myra's tragedy was not that she had been cut out of her uncle's will; it was that she had cut herself off from her past. In the end she finds her way back to where she belongs, to her own people and the world she left behind, by returning to the religion of her fathers. From Willa's point of view, that made Myra a less despairing figure than Professor St. Peter, who was allowed no such consolation. Significantly, Willa never thought of *My Mortal Enemy* as she thought of *The Professor's House*, that it was a grim, middle-aged book....

In spite of a mixed critical reception, the short novel sold well. A debate over whether Myra's 'mortal enemy' was Oswald or Myra herself was waged by both the critics and the public and the controversy probably helped sales. In a captious letter Willa's old friend George Seibel put the matter to her squarely. He had personally decided that Myra's husband was her enemy, but he found that most readers thought it was Myra, and he had had a heated argument on the subject with one opinionated lady 'of literary propensities.' He pressed Willa to tell him exactly what she had intended. 'Of course you are quite right,' she answered."

Phyllis C. Robinson
Willa: The Life of Willa Cather
(Holt 1983) 242-44

"Critics of Willa Cather seem confused by the narrative strategies in *My Mortal Enemy* (1926): the sometimes cursory vision of narrator Nellie Birdseye, the 'unfurnished novel' technique, a complex system of cultural allusions, a difficult and contradictory heroine in Myra Henshawe, and (to some) an uncomfortable religious resolution. Approaches have focused on love, money, or religion—seldom all three—to grapple with Myra. The last category, religion, has divided critics into those who deny its seriousness or see it as a negative ingredient, those who *conclude* that it is essential, and those who idealize or condemn Myra according to their religious preference....

The most helpful criticism has addressed technique. *My Mortal Enemy* illustrates the principles expressed in Cather's 1922 essay 'The Novel Demeuble,' revisioning of the 'popular superstition that "realism" asserts itself in the cataloging of a great number of material objects' and also her significant dependence on webbed allusions.... The 'secret web' of classical allusions has been clarified in recent studies by Mary Ruth Ryder and Erik Ingvar Thurin, and the novel's symbolism of jewelry and gems has

been interpreted by Kathryn T. Stofer.... The novel is 'an awakening' to sentimental notions of love [Susan Rosowski] argues, and Cather's 'only novel devoted to romantic love.' Within the Cather canon it represents 'a freeing of storytelling from those aspects of romanticism that had reached a dead end'...

Myra's anguish is failure to find 'unconditional love (which is God) through her relationship in marriage.' We would expect that in 1926, the year between the faith crisis in *The Professor's House* and the pilgrimage that is *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather would explore religious complexities; however, critics are increasingly troubled by them. Hermione Lee finds 'the religious feeling of *My Mortal Enemy*...disconcerting,' and Merrill Skaggs finds 'Myra's latter-day Catholicism...not especially convincing'.... Other critics encourage a religious approach but fail to follow one.... Ironically, some of the critics who focus on the novel's religious issues are overly judgmental.... In order to conclude that Myra's deathbed conversion is a travesty, [Stephen] Tanner is forced to dismiss the young priest as 'boyish,' impressionable, and consequently pliable'...

He best treatment of religion in *My Mortal Enemy* is Michael Murphy, who alone stresses the importance of the tension caused by marriage outside the church. He commends Cather's unusual sophistication in viewing the spiritual struggles of an older Catholic woman from the perspective of a young and impressionable Protestant observer who only dimly perceives. Myra is not modern, in that she challenges sentimental American approaches to mortality and 'hopes to regain some dignity in Roman rituals that acknowledge mortality and consecrate suffering and death.' Murphy reminds us that Myra refuses to deny her guilty past and responsibility for abandoning her faith for romantic love....'

The retrospective second chapter of *My Mortal Enemy* establishes Myra's guilt in marrying Oswald, Oswald's innocence in marrying Myra, and Nellie's bias, naivete, and arrangement in relating their romance.... According to the religious conscience surviving her break with the church, which she associates with her Irish heritage (including old Driscoll), Myra is living in sin and cannot transfigure her relationship with Oswald from natural love to chastity.... Myra's civil marriage puts her in darkness, becomes a spiritual death; which explains Nellie's juxtaposing it with Driscoll's funeral, the extravagant religious ceremony the wedding should have been....

Myra's cremation is a variation on Norma's death by fire and emphasizes, I believe, Myra's consummation in the divinity reflected in candles and at dawn. Oswald's Alaskan adventure indicates perhaps the awakening of the potential Nellie imagined in him. Nellie's chill from the string of amethysts is hopeful, keeps her disillusionment fresh, and motivates her narrative; it reveals that she has yet to fathom Myra, whose mystery has become an ongoing invitation, a grace, for transcendence."

John J. Murphy

"Gilt Diana and Ivory Christ: Love and Christian Charity in *My Mortal Enemy*"

Cather Studies 3

(U Nebraska 1996) 67-71, 74,97

Michael Hollister (2015)