



## MARGINALIZED WOMAN IN WILLA CATHER'S *MY MORTAL ENEMY*

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### ABSTRACT

*Cather's fiction demonstrates an understanding and interest in revealing the consequences of gender roles. Therefore, it is important to study Cather by making a connection between her novels and the tension and turmoil that existed because of the changing roles for men in America. President Theodore Roosevelt stood as an example to males of the "man's man" who wielded the big stick and marched powerfully into battle. The then American President, Roosevelt encouraged men to be strong and courageous, and not to be weak and feminine. During the Gilded Age in American history, social conventions encouraged men to be the protectors and providers, and men understood that success in life came from acting within these conventions. However, the woman stepped onto the stage and advocated women's right to independence and equality. Gender conventions provided men and women a rubric to follow that helped them to understand their place in society. But woman began to display gender characteristics commonly associated with men, making the early twentieth century in America a time of confusion concerning gender roles.*

### INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather (1873-1947) is an American novelist, short-story writer, poet and journalist. Cather is known more as an artist than as a critic of society. Throughout her whole career she warned against whatever gained its place at the expense of the human spirit or at the loss of man's healthy relationship with the earth. She also spoke against money and materialism. Cather has given picturesque description of the pioneer life on the American frontiers.

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In *My Mortal Enemy* Cather undertakes the portrait of Myra Henshawe who is trying desperately to convince herself that her primary concern is love, is forced to realize that her essential passion has always concerned money. The novel tells the story of a couple - Oswald and Myra-who risk all for love and eventually lose all. Here also we see the frustration of the debased American dream of fame and fortune.

In this novel, *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather introduces a woman who had thrown away money, religion, family all for love and who found that love was not enough. Out of love for Oswald Henshawe, Myra left behind the life in which she had been brought up. Myra's uncle even threatens her if she marries Oswald Henshawe a Protestant of modest means, he will disinherit her. But Myra elopes with her lover in a dramatic fashion, and marries him.

Myra through her marriage asserts that one does need wealth or position to find happiness or fulfilment in life. But she does not adhere to her assertion for long, for later this idealist turns out to be embittered and wicked. Marriage makes her see everything in the light of fame and fortune. She seeks the friendship of the rich for her husband's advancement. Myra appears as a gracious queen to Nellie the narrator but later she becomes jealous and over-ambitious with an inordinate craving for wealth.

Myra does not succeed materially. Towards the end of life she says to Nellie "He (Oswald) is a sentimentalist, always was, he can look back on the best of those days when we were young and loved each other, and himself; believe twelve it was like that. It wasn't. I was always a grasping, Worldly woman, I was never satisfied." (70)

Cather in *My Mortal Enemy* shows Myra at two points; as a mature worldly woman and ten years later face to face with death. As E.K. Brown points out in *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*:

*The first picture abounds in the poetry of worldliness, the devotion of her husband, the charm of her apartment, the interest of her friends etc. But soon life takes its turn and they become poor. Then Myra becomes another being malevolent and rough. Myra has lost almost all that had given her life appearance and atmosphere of enviable achievement. (23)*

After years of sickness and suffering this worldly woman has passed out of worldliness into preoccupation with primary realities. Thus the story moves toward a final Christian reckoning that the quest for power and possession must end in failure and that only in religion and art is there any source of permanent values.



In the end she abandons the secular values of her western life and embraces the Catholicism of her youth. The passion for the sacred grips Myra and seizes all her emotional energy and meagre financial resources. Her hoarded gold pieces are spent for unearthly purposes. Artistic companionship and social ritual of her other life are replaced by sacramental - an ebony crucifix with an ivory Christ. Sanctity and yearning for immortality are her only realities.

The novel, *My Mortal Enemy* is Cather's most concentrated study of marital relationship. According to Deborah Carlin, *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading*, "the novel speaks of two betrayals: betrayal of marital fidelity and the betrayal of religion." (12) Myra runs away from her uncle at the opening of the novel. It is a break with the family tradition. Her marriage with a German free thinker is opposed by uncle Driscoll which finally resulted in her disinheritance of family property. Myra expected a husband to gratify her every need. But after marriage she is disillusioned. Myra's giving up a traditional family backing ends up in her ruin.

The romance of Myra and Oswald was bound to end in unhappiness in Cather's view. As James Woodress points out, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*, "although Cather was a devoted romantic believing in the creative imagination to connect individual with the world, she regarded romantic love as over indulgence in emotion." (90) In *My Mortal Enemy*, during their second meeting Myra tells Nellie of the tragic consequences of romantic love:

*See the moon coming out Nellie, behind the tower. It weakens the guilt in me. No playing with love, and I'd sworn a great oath never to meddle again. You send a handsome fellow ...to a fine girl ... and it's Christmas Eve, and they rise above us and the whole world around us, and there isn't anybody, not a tramp on the park benches that would not wish them well - and very likely hell will come out of it (31).*

The excess emotion degenerates into sentimentalism in the case of Oswald and in Myra it changes into hate when she realizes that love is not enough. Marriage in haste results in repentance at leisure; Myra says to Nellie "Oh youth but knew, we have destroyed each other, I should have stayed with my uncle... we have thrown our lives away" (90-91).

Myra grows discontented because Oswald never makes enough to support her taste for luxuries and she discovers that Oswald perhaps is unfaithful. As James Woodress notes, "Their fortunes and their relations deteriorate slowly." (96) Oswald loses his job, Oswald's new business fails and he is forced to take menial job with the Street Railway Company. Gradually as Hermione Lee observes, "the young lovers become each other's punishment." (26) The result is self realization. As in the case of Professor St. Peter she also

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does not find meaning in the values of her prime youth. “It was a rough self, as E.K. Brown says, “that has nothing to do with artistic friends or charming apartments or gentle husbands.”(19) In *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra says to Nellie “a man and woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other” (105).

Having given up her God for worldly love in marriage never blessed by the Church or with children Myra Henshawe has descended into darkness. In one sense Oswald, her husband, is her mortal enemy for that he seduced her away from her family and religion but then betrayed her by encouraging the affection of other women. “Myra is in one sense her own enemy”, says Sally Peltier Harvey, “so caught up with her own times. She becomes a divided person. On the one hand the mortal nature of worldly grasping and on the other an altruistic nature that rejects materialism.”(107)

Finally Myra moves towards a Christian reckoning. Myra rejects her fortune and her religion to marry for love, but in the end she rejects her love and returns to the faith of her childhood. She runs away from her uncle at the opening of the novel. And she runs away from the husband at the end of the novel.

It is pertinent to note John J. Murphy’s comparison of *My Mortal Enemy* to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. He sketches the three phases through which Myra passes. Dante’s journey to the summit begins on the steps of penance and ends with purification. The first step is Myra’s recognition of sin. The second is her contrition. She laments over to Oswald about the very happenings of their lives together. In receiving the Eucharist she is finally restored to grace-purification.

Towards the end she is even ready to ask pardon to her uncle had he been alive in *My Mortal Enemy*.

*We were very proud of each other and if he’d lived till now, I’d go back to him and ask his pardon because I know what it is to be old and lonely and disappointed, yes, and because we grow old we become more and more the stuff our forbears put into us (82).*

During the last months of her life Myra becomes wholly preoccupied with religious faith. She tells Nellie that although she broke away from the Catholic Church and ran away with a German free thinker, she still believes in holy words and holy rites. Towards the end of the novel Myra shows Nellie the bag of money that she has kept hidden in order to pay for Masses for Modjeska and for herself; “she has at least made her peace with God” (106).



It is clear that this worldly woman has passed out of worldliness into preoccupation with primary realities. As E.K. Brown observes:

*The final mood is much like St. Peter. She cares for light and silence and solitude, the sweep of the wind, the light and smell of broad waters. It is her triumph that when she comes to die she has all these circumstances and unlike St. Peter she has a crucifix. (250)*

As death approaches, Myra feels that her marriage to Oswald has separated her from religion and she returns ardently to the faith of her childhood. "Her triumph", according to Susan Rosowski, "is that she turned from her idolatries to the truth of religion." (53) Fr. Fay, the Catholic priest, who attends Myra Henshawe in her last days, prepares the reader for that turn. For he says "I wonder whether some of the saints of the early Church weren't a good deal like her" (94).

In *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra is searching for immortality. A yearning for the immortal is explicit in the second part of the novel. When Myra is on the West Coast her search is hedonistic. First she discovers a secular immortality—fame, fortune, friendship and valuable things. For Myra says to Nellie: "Art and through it artists do not die Nellie! How the great poets do shine on the dark corners of the world. They have no night (82). Experience has shown her the destructibility and impermanence of material things. And finally she recognizes that religion stands for permanence and traditional values.

During Myra's death-bed scene she remarks: "religion is different from everything. In religion seeking is finding" (94). For her as Dorothy Tuck McFarland has noted in *Willa Cather* that, "religion is both the means and expression of wholeness of becoming one with herself." (95) Interpreting Myra's above statement Nellie observes: "She seemed to say that other searching it might be the subject of the quest that brought satisfaction or it might be something incidental that one gets on the way, but in religion, desire was fulfillment; it was seeking itself that was rewarded" (94).

Instead of expensive jewels she keeps a crucifix and candles beside her. The time she spends on the cliff arouses thoughts of reconciliation and relief, and she dies peacefully on the cliff, clutching a crucifix. In *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather describes Myra at the sea side as follows: "We found her wrapped in her blankets, leaning against the cedar trunk, facing the sea. Her head had fallen forward the ebony crucifix was in her hands. She must have died peacefully and painlessly" (101).



Religion here functions as an explanation of and reparation for human suffering. In this context Myra's life has meaning. As Deborah Carlin observes,

*The meaning of the novel can be seen in Nellie's interpretation. In it we could identify a textual unity and read Myra's end as the logical outcome of her religious training and of familial link to her uncle's character. Even in the face of failure in love relationship and marriage the meaning is in religion.(72)*

Thus a return to faith and religion gives meaning to Myra's life.

The confusion came because men no longer understood exactly what their prescribed gender conventions are. Woman, who once served as foils to men, now wanted to be seen as equals. The flux of gender role brought angst to the early twentieth century American male because as woman grasped power men lost sole authority over politics, culture, and the like. Cather did not directly state in her own writing the events of her time, but it would be suggested that due to the time period in which she lived and the shifting ambiguous nature of her characters and plots, connections can be made to her contemporary society and the confusion surrounding gender roles.

Cather's novels should be studied as a rejection of prescribed roles. Her request that all of her correspondence be destroyed came from her desire for privacy, and they also came from a desire to design her own identity regardless of societal and gender boundaries. Her youthful stint at cross-dressing also reveals her ambiguity toward prescribed gender roles and conventions. The America, in which Cather grew up, helped to fuel the fire of Cather's confusion surrounding gender roles and her desire to define her own identity.

*My Mortal Enemy* reveals that a major consequence of gender expectation is that of lack of satisfaction. As a result of doing just what he should within the male role, St. Peter is not yet ready to move into the next role defined for him by society. His desire to remain in the old house parallels his desire to remain in the old familiar gender role. His desire for the past remains so strong that his identity fractures and he longs for a release from responsibilities and role playing. *My Mortal Enemy* puts into words the rise of woman and the subsequent male confusion over gender roles in Cather's America.

To end up it is to be concluded that Cather's entire life and works were spent trying to carve out her own identity and to live and act within a role that she created for herself.



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