

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT WILLA CATHER



Willa Cather, born in 1873 in Back Creek Valley, VA, was an American novelist known for her portrayals of regional cultures, especially rural Nebraska, where she spent much of her childhood. Life on the Great Plains shaped her writing, which explores themes of identity, resilience, and the relationship between people and the land.

Her notable works include *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *O Pioneers!*, *The Troll Garden*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Song of the Lark*. Her 1922 novel *One of Ours* won the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel, making her one of the first women to receive the honor. She later lived in New York City, where she continued writing until her death in 1947, leaving a lasting mark on American literature.



QUESTIONS: MY MORTAL ENEMY (1926)

- How does the narrator's distance as a young observer affect the story's emotional impact?
- In a 1936 essay, Cather wrote, "Human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life . . . every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them." How do the novel's characters embody this idea?
- Myra is described as both dove- and snake-like. To what extent does she put on appearances for the world, and when do these performances falter?
- Consider this quote: "the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people." How does this moment set up the story's central conflict? What does it say about the characters that they hold Myra and Oswald's love story as a near-myth?
- How do you interpret Myra's declaration at the end that she is alone with her "mortal enemy"?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Consider Cather's use of setting. How do her urban settings compared to her stories set in rural areas reveal different aspects of her characters?
- In the second half of the novel, how does Myra's belief that she is superior to her neighbor, even while living in the same poverty in a smaller apartment, reflect the racism and classicism seen throughout history?
- How does the novel challenge societal views about refinement, culture, and beauty equating to moral goodness?
- The novella has historically been misunderstood or overlooked by readers, writers, and publishers. Does *My Mortal Enemy* work as a novella? Would lengthening or shortening it benefit or harm the narrative?
- What are the similarities and differences between Myra and Dorian Gray in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? Why is it useful to examine these two characters together?

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- [The Willa Cather Archive](#)
- [Willa Cather Foundation](#)
- [Friends of the Elderly](#)
- [Online Marriage Counseling](#)
- [Mental Health Resources](#)
- [Other Book Club Resources](#)

LITERATURE AS PRAXIS

- As Myra Henshawe gets older, she is less capable of taking care of herself; she must rely on her husband for everything and feels most free by the ocean. How can you support the elderly in your community? What can you do to give them a greater sense of freedom?
- How do societal expectations about women regarding marriage, respectability, and sacrifice shape Myra's choices and bitterness later in life? Do similar pressures about relationships and success still exist in your community today? How do these expectations affect young women's sense of worth?
- Nellie is an observer in the story. What role does storytelling play in shaping her understanding of womanhood? Who are the women whose stories influence young women today, and how can sharing personal histories cultivate greater empathy and change? How can you collect these histories and use them to achieve greater understanding?

ADDITIONAL READINGS

- Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (1923)
- Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963)
- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)
- Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)