

Secreted Behind Closed Doors: Rethinking Cather's Adultery Theme and "Unfurnished" Style in  
*My Mortal Enemy*

by

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In recent years, *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) has been virtually ignored in Cather scholarship. I place the novel in its literary and critical context by building on information from the critical reception and recent scholarship on Cather's work to see how *My Mortal Enemy* fits into the expectations of Cather's writing at the time. A rejection of Cather's changing style at the time of the novels' reception and in more modern criticism has led to a rather narrow assessment of the novels' more ambiguous scenes and an overwhelming hostility toward its protagonist, obscuring the existence of other, more positive interpretations. I provide a close study of the novels' ambiguous scenes in relation to Cather's own discussion of her "unfurnished" style, and explore how critics may have misread these scenes and how we might utilize a new approach, one that takes into consideration Cather's interest and relation to the visual art scene of the time, to rethink assumptions about the novel and about its protagonist. I use Cather's 1923 novel *A Lost Lady* and the criticism that surrounded it to rethink *My Mortal Enemy* and provide a new way of reading the novel, solidifying *My Mortal Enemy*'s place in the Cather canon and strengthening its value to the study of her life and works. By suggesting a fresh approach to the novel, I encourage readers of Cather's work to return to *My Mortal Enemy* to see what they too may have overlooked or misread in their first reading, in context of the novel itself, other novels by Cather, and the spirit of the time in which Cather lived and worked.

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Rethinking Cather's Adultery Theme and "Unfurnished" Style in *My Mortal Enemy*

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## Chapter One:

### “The Thing Not Named”: The Critics on *My Mortal Enemy* and Cather’s Relation to Visual Art

If the ability to craft beautiful sentences is an art form, then Willa Cather is an artistic master and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) is her masterpiece. From early reception to current criticism, however, the novel has been met primarily with hostility and contempt. I intend to explain some of the reasons behind the critical resistance to the work and offer an alternative reading of the novel. I examine the intersections that exist between Cather's writing style in *My Mortal Enemy* and the visual art being produced at the time she was writing it and ask what might be learned from an approach to *My Mortal Enemy* that takes into account this connection. I also argue for a more generous reading of the novel in order to discover what may have been left out or ignored in previous studies. In recent years, the novel has fallen into critical obscurity, overshadowed by Cather’s more popular works such as *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* as well as the emphasis on studying Cather’s life through an interpretation of her writings. I believe that a reading such as the one I provide is necessary to salvage the novel from obscurity, not only among the reading public but even in the world of Cather studies. I hope to revitalize the conversation surrounding *My Mortal Enemy* and to encourage readers to revisit the novel. I emphasize *My Mortal Enemy*’s literary and cultural merit in order to situate the novel more firmly in the canon of Cather’s works and in literary history.

In 1927, John Farrar, one of the earliest critics to review *My Mortal Enemy*, (Farrar, Review), referred to the novel as a "failure" (176). In 1932, L.C. Hartley wrote a review of Willa Cather's career up to that point in which he claimed that *My Mortal Enemy* "promised more than it fulfilled" (103). A year later, Cather's writing was completely discounted by Granville Hicks,

who called *My Mortal Enemy* a "study of despair" and a "novel of frustration and hopelessness" (708). Each of these reviewers saw *My Mortal Enemy* as a disappointment when compared to her earlier works. One way to account for this shift may be a change in her writing style. By the time she wrote *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather had developed and perfected what she called the "novel demeuble" or the "unfurnished novel" technique; she wanted her work to have a style that related meaning through the use of symbolism or juxtaposition of elements rather than through the use of ornate language. In her 1922 essay "The Novel Demeuble," Cather explains her concept:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, it seems to me, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (*Willa Cather On Writing* 6)

*My Mortal Enemy* was a triumph of the "unfurnished" style and a great departure from the more elaborate style used in her more popular Nebraska novels. *My Mortal Enemy*, unlike the aforementioned novels, is among other things a tale of city-life and materialism. There is certainly no praise of hardship to be found here, nor are there long, flowery passages describing the sweeping plains. Cather was finished with such writing, declaring that "word artists have had their day of greatness and are rapidly on the decline. We want men who can paint with emotion, not with words. We haven't time for pastels in prose and still life; we want pictures of human men and women" ("The Novel Demeuble" 31). Perhaps her critics had hoped to see her write another *My Antonía* or *O Pioneers!* and found themselves vastly disappointed when *My Mortal Enemy* did not deliver on this expectation.

After the initial dismissal by critics, the novel remained almost completely ignored until a few Cather scholars brought the novel back into the conversation in the 1970's. The early criticism of *My Mortal Enemy* focused on Cather's technical aspects as well as themes in the novel but was overwhelmingly unflattering. This judgment is perhaps attributable to the fact that many critics came to Willa Cather through her frontier novels, and *My Mortal Enemy* is seen to be a vast departure not only from the style of those novels but from the themes as well. Theodore S. Adams's 1973 article "Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*: The Precise Presentation of Scene, Character, and Theme" echoes the early reception of the novel in his claim that the novel is "superficially random" (142) and that Myra's "undesirable qualities" (140) run deep into her personality. Adams touches on Cather's use of the "demeuble" technique in his discussion of Nellie's function as the narrator of the novel and the symbolism Cather uses in her characterization of Myra, but does not pursue the subject further. In the same year, Harry B. Eichorn published an article entitled "A Falling Out with Love: *My Mortal Enemy*," the first full-length study of the novel's themes of love and disenchantment. Almost every piece of scholarship on *My Mortal Enemy* since has borrowed from or forwarded the ideas Eichorn presented in this article. Like Adams, Eichorn is hard on Myra, describing her as a "vain woman" who indulges in "self-dramatization" (126) and who ultimately "sacrifices her husband" (137). Eichorn's article represents a marked shift in the criticism of *My Mortal Enemy* from analyzing and deconstructing the novel's themes and structure to focusing almost entirely on the novel's protagonist. What resulted was a lively discussion of the novel among Cather scholars that was split into two different factions, with the majority of the scholarship involving critics' personal, moral reaction to the character of Myra.



Many of the critics chose to characterize Myra in hostile terms. In 1975, for example, David Stouck published *Willa Cather's Imagination* and claims, in the brief passages on *My Mortal Enemy*, that there is a theme of "evil in human nature" (117) in the characterization of Myra Henshawe and that the novel "incisively dramatizes an experience of consuming hate and self-damnation" (115-16). In 1990, Eugene England noted that Myra had "evil characteristics" (127) and was filled with "the spirit of revenge" (129). He ends his article with the phrase "Myra fails" (131), a pointed subject and final dismissal of the novel and its protagonist.

While most of the critics exhibited an overwhelming distaste for the novels' themes and specifically for Myra herself, some critics have taken a slightly more sympathetic approach. In her 1978 article "Narrative Technique in *My Mortal Enemy*," Susan J. Rosowski discusses the function of reason and emotion in the novel. One of the most important ideas to come out of Rosowski's study is her illumination of the references to fairy tales in the novel as furthering the "romantic myth" (142) with which so much of the novel is concerned. Rosowski is one of the few critics to show sympathy toward the protagonist, presenting the novel not as the story of "a woman who has ruined her husband" but instead as one that shows the "mutual tragedy to young lovers who grow old, looking only to each other for their human needs" (145). Rosowski also rejected the accepted view of the novel as having a dark, depressing ending—her article celebrates the ending, not only Myra's death on her own terms but also Nellie's freedom from the oppression of the "romantic myth" (148). Doris Grumbach also chose to take a fairly impartial position on the novel in her 1982 article "Willa Cather's Marriage Theme." She managed to use the novel to make several larger assumptions about Cather's views on the institution of marriage. And critics who were unable to completely sympathize with Myra's character but found value in the novel managed to convey their criticisms without the vitriolic

rhetoric used by many of the harsher critics. For example, in her 1974 article “Cather’s *My Mortal Enemy*,” Elizabeth Gates Whaley argues that the novel shows the “tragedy of a misspent life” (131) and calls Myra Henshawe “the dark side of human nature” (133). Whaley suggests that “if we look long and hard at ourselves, we will find a Myra buried somewhere” and that it is important to accept this part of ourselves “if we want to begin to comprehend our immortal longings and our mortal enemies” (133). Whaley’s view is at once critical of Myra’s actions and accepting of her motives. Her analysis shows an awareness of the complexity of human nature that Cather so carefully replicated in her characterization of Myra. While critics have explored themes as diverse as religion, poverty, and gender confusion in the novel, the split between those who sympathize with Myra and those who do not remains a dividing factor in the critical consensus, with the balance heavily inclined toward those who choose to view Myra and the style of the novel in a negative light. In the past decade the novel has fallen into critical obscurity, eclipsed by ongoing conversations about Cather’s Nebraska novels and speculations about Cather’s own private life.

In *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather explores themes such as marriage, youth, love, religion, social struggles, aging, and death, all within the span of about ninety pages. The novella is a perfect example of her “unfurnished” technique, managing this complex network of themes while maintaining a concise presence. By so effectively “throwing out all the furniture,” however, Cather left many ambiguities and unanswered questions in the novel, leading to some uncertainty as to what is actually happening in many scenes. In *Willa Cather’s Imagination*, David Stouck writes of *My Mortal Enemy*: “Despite its urbane and frequently witty surface, the book’s theme is ambition, cruelty, and hatred; and that sense of evil operating in human affairs becomes stronger and more pervasive when it is felt but not named, when it remains secreted

behind closed doors" (116). In the interest of simplicity, Cather frequently uses symbolism or deliberate ambiguity to hint at certain pivotal details of the story without saying them outright. What results is *My Mortal Enemy*, a deceptively simple story with a deliberately complex web of truths just beneath the surface. While critics of *My Mortal Enemy* have offered valuable insights regarding certain themes, it remains that the critical split between those who sympathize with Myra and those who are hostile toward her has affected the reception and interpretation of certain parts of the book. It is an unfortunate truth that the vast majority of scholarship on the novel has been from critics who reject Cather's stylistic approach to the story and who have objected to Myra on a moral basis. Thus, many of the more ambiguous scenes in the novel have been interpreted to fit the ends of the criticism rather than being discussed in their own right. This has led to a rather narrow assessment of these scenes, obscuring the existence of other, more positive interpretations. It is necessary then to find a different lens through which to view the novel, one which does not rely heavily on past readings but instead provides a new angle through which to analyze the novel.

Much has been said about the connections between Cather's style of writing and the impressionist style of art of the late nineteenth century, but only a few critics have noted the author's stylistic commonalities with the art forms that governed the first part of the twentieth century, the Cubist tradition and the Surrealist tradition. Cubism was beginning to wane as the prevalent art movement around 1920 with many artists turning their attentions to Surrealism. *My Mortal Enemy* was published in 1926, right around the overlap between these two movements. Certainly the art of the time was concerned with themes of separation and disconnection, with Cubists literally breaking subjects into parts and Surrealists concerned with more abstract notions of disconnection, using art to liberate their minds from the standard, the accepted, the "normal."

Art doesn't exist in a vacuum, and it is common for various art forms to influence one another. While it may be that Impressionist art had much in common with Cather's styling in her early novels such as *O Pioneers!* or *My Antonia*, where she offered us “pastels in prose,” it has little to do with her later novels. A reading of the novel which takes into account the connection between Cather's later novels and the theories associated with the visual arts being produced at the time will provide a new reading of *My Mortal Enemy*, one which is at once fresh and fully grounded in the time in which Cather was writing.

Many readers of Cather's early work were entranced by her artful representation of the American West and were disappointed when, in her smaller novels, her focus moved away from epic portraits of the sweeping plains and onto a close study of the individual natures of her characters. While her art had always been concerned primarily with her characters, her smaller novels are an example of the sharp focus she could apply to a human life when she chose to use it. *My Antonia* (1913) and *O Pioneers!* (1918) were both published before her essay “The Novel Deméuble” (1922), and it is possible to see a marked shift in her writing after this essay was published. Both *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* were earthy novels, full of long descriptions of the countryside and the people who lived there. The writing is beautiful and the novels are lengthy. After publishing “The Novel Deméuble,” however, Cather wrote *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926,) – a trifecta of “deméuble” novels that were radically different in both style and subject matter from the novels that had made her famous. Much of these three novels dealt with problems in love and marriage, and did so in such a focused and personal way that the reader feels almost intrusive upon the lives of the characters. Her unfurnished style did more than simply strip away excess scenery; it stripped away the barriers between the reader and the characters.

Cather's spare style was met with varying responses, with the majority of critics finding her too empty and brief for the subjects she chose. Louis Kronenberger used a "flesh and bones" metaphor, claiming that Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* was all structure and no substance, suggesting even that the structure of her novel was not completely intact: "All bones and no flesh is never a wise method. In this instance Miss Cather has done even worse— – though she has used very little, she has not always used the bones. Significant things are left out, and the reader is left not only unsatisfied, but also puzzled" (O'Connor 291). The complaint that Cather left out "significant things" in *My Mortal Enemy* is one that continues to be discussed in recent criticisms of the novel and is by far the biggest complaint against her "déméuble" technique overall. In order to fully understand her technique, however, it is important for readers to look at why she chose to write in this way. It is clear from her early works that Cather was perfectly capable of sustaining the gesture of a long novel, fraught with details and hour-by-hour accounts of her character's lives. Not only was she capable, but she had mastered the ability and made a name for herself in the literary world by writing in such a way.

Cather was not only a writer but a critic. By examining her reviews of the works of her contemporaries, we can discover what Cather most valued and criticized in the writings of others to then see how her work reflects the views she expresses. There are a few recurring themes that one can see throughout Cather's reviews: disdain for writers who include too many details and praise for those writers who manage to create a lingering mood in their work. On the subject of details in writing, Cather writes, "Art, it seems to me, should simplify. That, indeed, is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process; finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole— – so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader's consciousness as much as if it were in type on

the page” (*Willa Cather On Writing* 102). Cather certainly followed her own advice when she wrote *My Mortal Enemy*, taking simplification very seriously, perhaps more than in any of her other works. Upon closer inspection, it seems that the two greatest criticisms Cather offered are inextricably linked to one another—that is, too many details can detract from a mood while the placement of the right details in correct spacing offers space to set a mood and let it linger. Cather herself makes this connection in her essay on Defoe's *Roxana*: "...in novels, as in poetry, the facts are nothing, the feeling is everything" (*Willa Cather On Writing* 85). Cather praised Stephen Crane in her essay on his novel *Wounds in the Rain* for his careful and selective attention to detail:

I doubt whether he ever spent a laborious half-hour in doing his duty by detail— in enumerating, like an honest, grubby auctioneer. If he saw one thing that engaged him in a room, he mentioned it. If he saw one thing in a landscape that thrilled him, he put it on paper, but he never tried to make a faithful report of everything else within his field of vision, as if he were a conscientious salesman making out his expense-account. . . . What about the clouds, and the light on the hills, and the background, and the foreground? Well, Crane left that for his successors to write, and they have been doing it ever since: accounting for everything, as trustees of an estate are supposed to do— thoroughly good business methods applied to art; "doing" landscapes and interiors like house-decorators, putting up the curtains and tacking down the carpets. (*The World and the Parish* 69-70)

Like Crane, Cather chose her details carefully, such as in *My Mortal Enemy* where she describes the scene in Myra's parlor. We are given the curtains in rich detail, what Robert K. Miller

describes as "some of the sexiest curtains in American literature"(qtd. in " (Miller, "Gloves Full of Gold" 188)), and we are told there is a warm fire and chairs pushed up by the hearth. And although we are given little else to go on, the mind does insist on placing its own items in the scene; a thick, deeply colored rug upon the floor or a chandelier on the high ceiling. Cather herself explains a similar feeling while reading the works of one of her favorite writers, Katherine Mansfield: "One goes back and runs through the pages to find the text which made one know certain things about Linda or Burnell or Beryl, and the text is not there— – but something was there, all the same— is there, though no typesetter will ever set it. It is this overtone, which is too fine for the printing press and comes through without it, that makes one know that this writer had something of the gift which is one of the rarest things in writing, and quite the most precious" (" (Cather, *The World and the Parish* 110-11). From her reviews and her essays on writing, we can certainly gather that Cather most appreciated a story with a mood that lingers over the novel and continues to linger over the reader for some time after the book has been finished.

It is rare, in fact, to read a review by Cather in which she does not go on at some length on the subject of the mood of the novel she is discussing. In her essay on the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather tells us that great stories leave an impression upon a reader, something that can be remembered and felt long after the novel has been put away. This feeling, Cather says, is one that a reader "can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory a melody, or the summer perfume of a garden" ("The Novel Demeuble" 57). Perhaps this explains the sense of wistfulness that pervades *My Mortal Enemy*, even up to the end of the novel after Myra's death and Nellie's final condemnation of young love. On reading the chapter on Parcival in Gertrude Hall's *The Wagnerian Romances*,

Cather describes her sense of enchantment at Hall's ability to evoke the opera for her: "I was astonished to find how vividly it recalled to me all the best renderings of that opera I had ever heard. Just the right word was said to start the music going in one's memory, as if one had heard the themes given out on a piano. The essay recalled the scenes, the personages of the drama, and the legendary beauty, the truly religious feeling that haunts it from end to end" ("The Novel Demeuble" 61-2). Cather was a master of creating a mood, and her mastery is no clearer than in *My Mortal Enemy*. Spare in style and simple in subject, the story of Myra Henshawe and the overwhelming tones of regret, wistfulness, and, strangely enough, hope nonetheless linger on with a reader. In his article, "The Modest Method of Willa Cather," Joseph Krutch says of *My Mortal Enemy*: "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" (Krutch 57). Krutch goes on to say that the mood of *My Mortal Enemy* 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 overestimate. Whenever Miss Cather evokes memory there comes with it a lingering fragrance" (Krutch 58-9). This "lingering fragrance" is the lasting mood of her work, a mood that can only be created when the author completely commits to her subject and chooses carefully the events to describe, the details to include, and perhaps most importantly, what to leave to the reader's imagination. Cather was not the first author to leave room for her reader, but she certainly perfected the art. Interestingly enough, the visual artists of her day were working with a similar idea in mind.

Cather is largely regarded as a traditionalist. This could be one reason why so much of her art is compared with works produced decades previous, rather than along with her



contemporaries. James Woodress tells us that "[Cather] deplored Prohibition, the Jazz Age, the flapper, the relaxation of moral standards, the deterioration of taste, the scramble for money; she didn't like cubism, couldn't take Gertrude Stein or Ezra Pound seriously, wouldn't go to see an O'Neill play, and probably could not have been dragged to hear Schönberg" (Woodress 476). Of course, a distaste for the modern world doesn't mean she wasn't in some way influenced by it--that. That said, the time that produced artists such as the Surrealists and Cubists was also the time in which Cather was most prolific. This suggests that her relation to the modernist art of her day was not so much one of influence, but instead of parallels, moving forward together, even if the two were estranged. In her dissertation, *Paintings and Drawings in Willa Cather's Prose: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Polly Patricia Duryea explains that Cather often discussed her style in terms like "portrait, color, impression, design, sketch, pattern, and composition" and that she "openly advised young writers to use techniques following the 'development of modern painting.' She invited them to simplify, to subordinate, to be more vague" (19). Perhaps a quote from Surrealist painter Ian Hornak can best be used to explain Cather's stylistic relation to Surrealism. In a 1976 interview on the subject of Surrealist art, he noted, "My idea of a perfect surrealist painting is one in which every detail is perfectly realistic, yet filled with a surrealist, dreamlike mood. And the viewer himself can't understand why that mood exists, because there are no dripping watches or grotesque shapes as reference points. That is what I'm after: that mood which is apart from everyday life, the type of mood that one experiences at very special moments" (Hornak). Cather's treatment of Myra's story is not likely to be compared to the more popular notions of surrealism, typified by artists such as Salvador Dalí, but rather more like Hornak's approach – a dreamlike, special mood free of the doldrums of daily life.

Nellie's account, being one pieced together from her memory, is entirely made up of "special moments"-- moments that showcase the best and worst in Myra. Many critics have decried Nellie's abilities as a narrator because the entirety of her story lies in the translation from her memories from her childhood. This in mind, one must ask how much of a child's memory is fabricated? How much of our memories do we actually remember compared with how much we create? The study of memory is complex and certainly out of the scope of this project, yet we can trace much of the criticism of Nellie's narration as stemming from the problem of truth in memory. Pablo Picasso explained in a 1923 interview his theory of the relation of art to truth: "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth. At least the truth that is given us to understand" (Picasso 315). Taking Picasso's words in mind, we can align them to Nellie's narration. A childhood memory may not be absolute and the facts gained from such memories may not, in the end, be complete, but it is the only "truth" we are given; it is the depiction of a woman's childhood memory of Myra and, placing complete factual accuracy aside, a mood--exactly the thing that Cather tells us she wishes to do with her writing in her essay "The Novel Demeuble." She acknowledges that it is the mood of a story that lasts, not the details. The eye, she says, skims across the page that is filled with "material surroundings" whereas the mood of the story, the thing "felt upon the page without being specifically named there" is what makes a story last for the reader (Cather 41-2). J.H. Matthews defined Surrealism in his book *The Surrealist Mind* as a "perception of reality over which reason was denied the opportunity to exercise confining restrictions" (Matthews 67). If we locate Nellie's narration in the Surrealist tradition as Matthews defines it, then we see that her lack of verisimilitude is not a hindrance, but instead an advantage to the story. We are provided with scenes from Myra's life that reflect the mood of her story, without the "restriction" of facts. In his "Manifesto of

Surrealism," Andre Breton claims that "[t]he mind which plunges into Surrealism, relives with burning excitement the best part of childhood" (243). Cather most certainly has done this with Nellie, a narrator who glosses over all facts of her town except the "old Driscoll place" and who recaptures her times with Myra, times she admits as the most exciting of her life, with excitement and devotion. The intersections of Nellie's memory and imagination turn out to be a part of what makes *My Mortal Enemy* and much of Cather's writing such a success. Stephen Tennant says it best, in the introduction to *Willa Cather On Writing*, when he claims that "Art is not life, and is not a substitute for it, or an aggrandizement of a dubious reality. It is a necessary commodity -- compacted of many realities and fantasies, unrealities and dreams, which the artist commands and respects" (Cather xi). It is not every writer who can be called an artist, yet Cather certainly numbers among them.

In the following chapter, I intend to provide a rich, close reading of the ambiguities in *My Mortal Enemy* through the lens of Surrealist and Cubist thought. By providing a close study of the novel's more ambiguous scenes in relation to Cather's "unfurnished" style and the theories associated with the visual arts in the early part of the twentieth century, I am able to assert *My Mortal Enemy*'s importance as a triumph of Cather's preferred style. Through the study of common critical interpretations as well as a thorough study of the text itself, I will explore how these scenes may have been misread and how we might utilize a more generous approach to rethink our assumptions about the novel and about its protagonist.

## Chapter Two:

### “Color-patched words” and Cufflinks:

#### A Close Reading and Visual Analysis of Cather’s Style and Theme in *My Mortal Enemy*

Polly P. Duryea claims that "Art was a religion for Willa Cather and its Artist was God" (1). She points out that with the rise of the Cubist, Futurist, and Expressionist movements in art, Cather's own work began to change,; her symbolism "became more vague," reflecting the "simplified" modernity of the changing scenery of the art world. Duryea also suggests that Cather, much like the early Surrealist artists, was highly influenced by the French Symbolist poets of the time, admiring the way they "created vague moods by transposing musical analogies or colorful images into their compositions . . . insert[ing] color-patched words like roses or rubies, substituting them to expand the mood in a poem" (Duryea 10). It would seem that Cather adapted the Symbolists’ techniques to her own prose, for in *My Mortal Enemy* we find symbolist imagery such as the vibrant plums and milky creams of her New York apartment, the furniture in colors described as "ripe purple fruit," and the curtains in a "rich cream-colour that lies under the blue skin of ripe figs" (23). This rich, literally fruitful language suggests wealth and prosperity, precisely the illusion Myra was going for. The home also evokes a Hestian quality: Oswald has placed a bottle of champagne on ice for their company, he "push[es] chairs up to the hearth" so the women can continue their conversation while they warm themselves by the fire, the table is set with "individual and unique" china (23). There is a formal mood to the entire scene, increased by the presence of the maid who announces the arrival of Mr. Ewan Gray, whose appearance spurs the group to move into the parlour for conversation. When he is first seen, Mr. Gray is standing by the fire, his arm resting on the mantel. The young man is described as fair-skinned

with melancholy eyes. He is wearing his evening clothes and has "a few sprays of white hyacinth in his coat" (23). Even his name, "Gray," suggests an inherent coolness, reflecting the "melancholy" in his eyes. The scene is fraught with a sense of cool formality against warmth, the "coolness" of Gray's appearance juxtaposed by the warmth of the fire.

Jo Ann Middleton, in her book *Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique*, discusses Cather's use of juxtaposition in her prose: "The concept of juxtaposition is critical to all of Cather's mastery of literary technique. Because juxtaposition involves the relation of one detail to another, each detail is significant and must be placed with utmost care. Because the meaning of two details is found in their relationship, in the reaction they produce by existing side by side, the artist can write with the utmost compression" (48). *My Mortal Enemy* is full of such contrasting images, such as the image of the "little grey spot" on Myra's pillow that came from her tears when she read the poem "about the flower that grows on the suicide's grave, *die Armesunderblum*, the poor-sinner's-flower" (66). This is an image full of contrast, the grey of the tear-soaked pillow corresponds with the image of the dirt over the grave, and the vibrancy of the flower is set against these images, making it seem all the more vivid in contrast.

In an interview published in *The Bookman* in 1921, Willa Cather discusses her desires for her art:

What I always want to do is to make the "writing" count for less and less and the people for more. In this new novel I'm trying to cut out all analysis, observation, description, even the picture-making quality, in order to make things and people tell their own story simply by juxtaposition, without any persuasion or explanation on my part. Just as if I put here on the table a green vase, and beside it a yellow orange. Now, those two things affect each other. Side by side, they

produce a reaction which neither of them will produce alone. Why should I try to say anything clever, or by any colorful rhetoric detract attention from those two objects, the relation they have to each other and the effect they have upon each other? I want the reader to see the orange and the vase—beyond that, I am out of it. Mere cleverness must go. (*Willa Cather in Person* 24)

If we are to apply Cather's explanation of the use of juxtaposition in her work, we must ask ourselves what, exactly, she intended to convey with her contrasting elements. In the parlour scene discussed earlier, the figure of the cool, melancholy Ewan Gray symbolizes young love. He is said to have come to see Myra for romantic advice and to show her the love poems he has written for his sweetheart, Esther Sinclair. Cather chooses to place him "standing by the fire" (PAGE #?). If Cather meant to express in her use of juxtaposition the relation the elements have to one another and the effect they have upon each other, then the image of Ewan's cool figure against the background of the bright flames of the fire suggests what Nellie describes as the "flaming courage of youth" later in the novel (85).

In *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, James Woodress paraphrased a portion of a letter written by Cather in 1940, explaining among other things why Ewan Gray and Esther Sinclair had not reappeared in the novel and providing yet another link between Cather's writing and the visual art of her time: "They had appeared in the Madison Square chapters to illustrate one aspect of Myra's character-- her propensity to help young lovers overcome obstacles even though, as she put it 'very likely hell will come of it!' Cather explained patiently that she was painting a portrait of Myra with reflections of her in various looking glasses. It would have been foolish to try to account for any of the people Myra had loved and left behind" (Woodress 384). The statement that Cather was "painting a portrait" of Myra is important to the study of the novel for

if we are to understand its protagonist the way Cather would have her understood, we must explore the way she came to be upon the page. Myra as an image broken into parts and shown from all angles is essentially a Cubist rendering, meant to provide a modern view of a subject expressed simultaneously from all sides and all points of view. Laura Winters expands on this connection in her article "*My Mortal Enemy*: Willa Cather's Ballad of Exile." Winters claims that Cather's description of her technique in writing Myra "places her firmly in the Modernist tradition. As in a Cubist painting, different forms . . . must be reconstructed by the viewer to create a human figure. The reader of *My Mortal Enemy* must piece together an acceptable Myra from the various shards" (32). It is important, however, to use *all* the shards, rather than picking and choosing from them to suit one analytical purpose.

The desire to characterize the novel in monochromatic terms has led to the objection of practically every facet of Myra's personality. In *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading*, Deborah Carlin says that "*My Mortal Enemy*, perhaps more than any other book Cather wrote, suggests through its own deceptive metanarrative some of the difficulties her novels pose to the reader about the acts of reading and interpretation. It is a cautionary tale for critics about reading Cather's works as simple, cautionary tales" (Carlin 29-30). That is, however, exactly the position many critics have taken with the novel. While moral objections to Myra's character have occurred primarily around the most ambiguous scenes, such as Oswald's faithfulness in his marriage and Myra's return to religion, it is important to note that some critics have chosen to carry their interpretation into scenes that are clearly examples of Myra's virtues. Even one of Myra's best attributes, her complete adoration of her friends, is interpreted as something ugly in Amy Kort's 1995 article, "Coming Home from Troy: Cather's Journey into Pessimism in *My Mortal Enemy*," when she claims that "Myra surrounds herself with people who, like herself,

choose to live myths of their own creation. Among them, however, Myra is unhappy, for she must constantly augment their buoyancy in order to keep her created world afloat . . . . Myra strives to cushion herself in a bubble of interest in danger of bursting at any moment" (39-40). Kort uses Nellie's statement that Myra's "account of her friends was often more interesting to me than the people themselves" (*My Mortal Enemy* 33) as evidence that Myra's friends and friendships were not as wonderful as she made them out to be. Consider, though, Nellie's earlier impressions of Myra's relationship with her friends: during the visit to Myra's sick poetess friend, Ann Aylward, Nellie explains that their talk took her breath away and that they said "such exciting, such fantastic things about people, books, music--anything; they seemed to speak together a kind of highly flavoured special language" (35). These are not simply the memories of a child infatuated with the conversation of adults; it is an example of Myra at her best. There is certainly no attempt here to use her friendship to prove anything to Nellie; it is simply Cather showing the reader another side of Myra, a happy and joyful and charming side.

It is not surprising that the scene comes after Myra has expressed her jealousy of a wealthy acquaintance "splashing past" her in a carriage (34). A close analysis of Cather's visual elements of her scenes can provide us with so much more than a passing reading would provide. Myra and Nellie are at first in the back of a hansom cab surrounded by trees. Above them, the sky is darkening above the snow covered park as a wealthy woman leans out and waves at them from a carriage. On the next page, we find that we are in a bright, sun-filled flat bursting with fruit baskets and flowers, standing on a balcony watching river boats passing by while listening to Myra and her poet friend talk of beauty and culture. The position of the scenes provide us with two pieces of Myra in a limited space. The scene in the park is the perfect visualization of how Myra's jealousy affects her and we find that even a brief encounter can ruin an otherwise perfect



day. On the other hand, the opposing scene with Ann Aylward provides us with a glimpse of the joy that Myra finds in her friendships. She can be jealous and worldly, but she can be charming and jubilant as well. It seems to be the desire of many critics to make Myra "all" of one thing-- Myra as a jealous, grasping old crone or Myra as a desirous and cruel, dispossessed Queen. Perhaps many characters in literature do follow this pattern, but Myra is not one of them. Cather wrote Myra as a human being, true to life in all her complexity. It seems that the word "complex" has become more and more a throwaway word, substituted so often for the right word when the right word cannot be found. This is not one of those cases. Myra is, indeed, a complex character. The fragmentation of her presentation, both through the underlying Cubist philosophy and the structure of the book itself, are evidence enough of Cather's ability in this area.

Returning to Myra's friendships for a moment, consider Nellie's explanation of Myra's particular manner in speaking to her friends:

When she liked people she always called them by name a great many times in talking to them, and she enunciated the name, no matter how commonplace, in a penetrating way, without hurrying over it or slurring it; and thus, accompanied by her singularly direct glance, had a curious effect. When she addressed Aunt Lydia, for instance, she seemed to be speaking to a person deeper down than the blurred, taken-for-granted image of my aunt that I saw every day, and for a moment my aunt became more individual, less matter-of-fact to me. (36)

Myra's adoration of her friends comes across even in the way she speaks their name. Nellie's suggestion that it is a less blurred version of her Aunt that Myra seems to be addressing is indicative of Myra's ability to perceive her friends as they are and let them know through her attention that she truly sees them; it is indicative of her complete involvement with whomever

she is speaking. Myra is active and fully present within her friendships, and she burrows deeper than impressions to get to the complex individual below. The painter Joseph Plaskett said that Cubism began "because, in the process of analyzing form, something that lay in the form, a plane, could be lifted out to float on its own . . ." (Plaskett). This is, in a sense, what Myra does with her friends. She finds and speaks to the best of a person and allows that quality to lift out and upward, floating forward and away from surface or usual impression. Nellie shows us that/how Myra's fine-tuned perception seeks out the best in others and, in turn, shows us the best of her.

The determination of critics to project and foster hostility toward Myra is shown even in interpretations of her death scene. Having been sick and unable to care for herself for years, Myra resolves to make her death, at least, less disappointing than her life. She returns again, at dawn and on her own, to the cliff that once inspired her to tell Nellie, "I'd love to see this place at dawn... . . . that is such a forgiving time. When the first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution" (61). Myra dies in silence, watching the sun rise over her favorite cliff. "Light and silence," she had once told Nellie, "they heal all one's wounds—all but one, and that is healed by dark and silence" (61). At the end of a lifetime of disappointments, some self-made and some created by others, Myra has found a place of peace. Christine Kephart claims that "Myra's overwhelming defeat endures in Nellie's narrative reconstruction as the prevailing mood of the story, a mood of darkness that enshrouds Nellie's memory" (36). Kephart suggests that *My Mortal Enemy* is primarily a story of defeat, and her article is meant to be a study of all that is light and dark in the novel, yet Kephart leaves out the events leading up to Myra's death that are described in proud, triumphant terms, culminating in the statement that "there was every reason

to believe she had lived to see the sunrise” (82). This statement is a powerful testament to Myra’s strength of will. Nellie’s affirmation that Myra likely saw the sunrise quite literally brightens up the end of the novel and Myra’s life. It is puzzling that this very important line was left out of Kephart’s analysis until one returns to the introduction of the article. Kephart means to show the novel as a tale of “overwhelming defeat” with a tone filled with “death and despair.” The triumphant, brightly lit ending of Myra’s life does not fit into such an assessment and therefore was ignored completely in the analysis. While Kephart completely omits the scene from her analysis, Stephen Tanner interprets it as further evidence of the protagonists’ moral deficiency. He argues that Myra's death on the cliff is not a moment of triumph but is instead a "consummation of the romantically conditioned selfish willfulness" and that her death represents a "self-centered and self-deceiving romantic gesture of escape from frustrated materialistic ambitions and the inevitable frictions of domestic intercourse" (30). How is it that such a scene, one that is so beautiful and reassuring that it comforts even Myra’s husband in his time of grief, is translated into evidence for Myra’s selfishness? Unfortunately, both Kephart and Tanner have fallen into the same pattern that many other critics of the novel seem to be susceptible to: they judge the novel as a dark, depressing descent toward death and either ignore the beautiful moments of the novel or twist and force these moments to suit their own analysis, no matter how uncomfortable the fit. The fact is that Myra is a complex character who is at times selfish, jealous, and cruel and at other times selfless, generous, and kind. Critical interpretations sometimes focus on a character as one “type” of person rather than taking into account their complexity; Cather’s spare style, with her concise manner of description and non-linear exposition, especially lends itself to this sort of interpretation. Even with the increasing brevity

she exhibited in her changing style, Cather's characters were no less complex and interesting than they were in her earliest novels.

While it is true that Myra has been judged unfairly by many critics, there are many instances in which Cather has left a scene so ambiguous that it is difficult to interpret what is going on in the scene, let alone what is meant by the scene in the larger context of the novel. Critics have then read ambiguous scenes very differently, sometimes convincingly and sometimes not. While I don't expect to discover all the answers -- after all I don't think Cather meant for us to be able to decode with absolute certainty what she purposely left ambiguous -- I do believe that a reading of the visual elements of the novel can provide new insights. When one carefully considers the scenes that have caused the most disagreement among literary critics, it is clear that most of the ambiguity is focused on Myra's marriage and her return to religion. The subject of Myra's return to religion has been explored (Tanner, England, Murphy), but her marriage has yet to be fully explored. Oswald's fidelity in his marriage to Myra is one of the most ambiguous subjects in the novel and almost every critic who has written about the novel has tackled the subject in some form or another, but never in the context of understanding and interpreting the novel's ambiguity.

To begin, there are two key scenes in the first part of the novel that are important when we consider Oswald's fidelity. The first is a scene in which Oswald asks Lydia to pretend to give him a pair of cufflinks so that Myra will not find out that they were given to him by another woman. He insists the gift was completely innocent and that he only wants to launder the cufflinks through Lydia so Myra does not become unnecessarily suspicious. The second important scene occurs when Nellie walks in on Myra and Oswald's heated argument about a secret key Oswald possesses, the result of which leads to Myra's leaving Oswald for a time. Both

scenes are presented in pieces--we are invited to see only parts of scenes, rather than their entirety.

When Oswald convinces Lydia to give him the sleeve buttons, he assures her they have no underlying meaning and that he only wishes to spare the feelings of the girl who sent them. He describes her as being from a "breezy Western city, where a rich girl can give a present whenever she wants and nobody questions it" (27). As convincing as he sounds, the visuals of the scene make him appear slightly less than sincere. The package with the sleeve-buttons was hidden away in his pocket, and he is said to have slipped them into Lydia's muff as they were walking. He pulls Nellie and Lydia to either side of himself and explains about the gift. Something in his method is unnerving; perhaps the way he bestows the sleeve-buttons on Lydia before she has agreed to his request and the manner in which he pulls the women close to himself as they walk to cajole them into joining his scheme.

From this scene, we quickly flash forward to a scene in which Lydia presents the sleeve-buttons to Oswald. Myra says that the buttons are perfect for Oswald and exclaims, "I can't get over your canniness, Liddy" (30). Lydia takes Myra's delight as genuine and uses the moment to skewer Myra by retorting that it would "never occur to you that anyone besides yourself might know what is appropriate for Oswald" (30). Myra only laughs in response to Lydia. It is important to note here that Myra does not react to Lydia's remark except to laugh "heartily to herself" (30). If Myra's reaction is overly mirthful, Oswald looks positively crucified. He is described as "seeming disturbed, and not overpleased. He grew red, was confused in his remarks, and was genuinely reluctant when his wife insisted upon taking the gold buttons out of his cuffs and putting in the new ones" (30). Oswald's discomfort is evident, suggesting that we have missed something between his request to Lydia and the presentation of the buttons. Perhaps there

was an argument, or perhaps something more subtle, but something has transpired that we have not been invited to witness.

Despite the evidence for infidelity, many critics see the scene as evidence of Myra's jealousy and quick temper. Eugene England contends that Myra's "vindictive jealousy is unfounded, evil, and destructive" (128). Such an analysis is founded on the view of Oswald as self-effacing, ever-suffering, and blind with love for Myra. This view quickly breaks down in light of the previous scene and the visual elements in the opera scene. Nellie notes that Oswald appears gloomy during the opera "with something sorrowful in his strange, half-moon eyes" (30). When he goes to pull Myra's fallen cloak over her bare shoulders, she laughs and tells him, "Oh, Oswald, I love to see your jewels flash!" (31). When we recall Nellie's description of Myra's laugh, that it was "sometimes terrible . . . she had an angry laugh that I still shiver to remember" (9), we can better interpret the deeper meaning of such a moment. Analyzing the visual elements of the scene, we can surmise that Oswald's attempt to pull the cloak up over Myra's bare shoulders can be likened to his secrecy and desire to keep her in the dark, so to speak. The cloak, however, has fallen off, and Myra laughs again at his pathetic attempt at secrecy. Nellie says Oswald "frowned so darkly that I thought he would have liked to put the topazes under his heel and grind them up" (31).

In her article on the subject of gems and jewelry in *My Mortal Enemy*, Kathryn Stofer explains Myra's comment to Oswald that she loved to see his jewels flash as a double-entendre suggesting his infidelity (20). Despite Cather's ambiguity in the scene, the reactions of the characters and the visual elements certainly suggest that Myra was aware of the true origin of the sleeve buttons. Robert Miller points out that Myra is "infuriated by Oswald's acceptance of topaz sleeve buttons because she is perceptive enough by this point in her life to understand that there

are no free gifts. These jewels . . . are either a gift to which Oswald must reciprocate (perhaps with some romantic attention) or a gift given in reciprocation for some gift he has already bestowed" ("Gloves Full of Gold" 188). If we are to agree with Miller's analysis, the sleeve-buttons then become more than just a gift and take on the responsibility of being a material representation of Oswald's infidelity.

Before the end of the first part of the novel, we witness for the first time a fragment of an argument between Myra and Oswald. This scene is telling, both of their marriage and their individual identities. Nellie walks in on the argument and tells us that she was greeted by "Myra's angry laugh and a burst of rapid words that stung like cold water from a spray" (41). She overhears Myra questioning Oswald about a key, demanding that he tell her "the truth about this key" and claiming that she "will go through any door your keys open" (41). Oswald responds with a "distinctly malicious chuckle" and declares to Myra that "you'd have a hard time getting through that door. The key happens to open a safety deposit box" (41). Through Nellie's observation, we can imagine the visuals of the scene. When Myra tells Oswald she went to the bank to find out if the key was from a safe deposit box, Oswald exclaims "The hell you did!" and jumps up from his chair so hard that Nellie can hear the sound through the door. Oswald is not the folded, fearful man that critics would have him play, but is instead at least equal to Myra's anger. We never discover what is in the safety deposit box or what led Myra to be so suspicious of the key to begin with, but this fragment of argument shows, at least, that Myra's anger is not unfounded.

Later, Myra runs into Lydia and Nellie after she has left Oswald "to think over" a disagreement they've had, most certainly surrounding the cufflinks and the mysterious bank key (44). In one of the first pieces of scholarship ever written on the novel, Theodore Adams declares

that "Myra's leaving her husband over a trifling quarrel is a sign of how deep her undesirable qualities run" (140). The categorization of the arguments as being "trifling" shows an example of the critical lean toward Oswald and away from Myra. Before leaving for Pittsburgh, Myra revisits the topic of the sleeve-buttons and casually lets Lydia know that she knew their true origin: "Oh, Liddy dear, you needn't have perjured yourself for those yellow cuff-buttons. I was sure to find out, I always do." Lydia angrily states to Nellie that "[a] man never is justified, but if ever a man was . . ." (45; ellipses in the original). . . ." Stofer presents this as evidence that Lydia also had suspicions that Oswald might have been unfaithful to Myra (Stofer 20), though Lydia's comment may have meant only that Oswald shouldn't have *lied* about the gift. England would likely contend this is the case. "Like Myra," he says, "some critics would make Oswald--or marriage itself-- the villain rather than holding Myra accountable as one of the free agents who entered the marriage" (126). What, though, is villainous in Myra's entrance into the marriage? If Myra is to be blamed at all, one could point to her jealousy, her materialism, or any one of her other negative qualities as a catalyst for Oswald's disloyalty. Assuming Oswald was faithful before they were married, it is unlikely that the very act of marrying Oswald can be construed as her taking part in the destruction of said marriage or giving free reign to his future infidelity.

In the second part of the novel, we are reminded again of those cufflinks. Oswald has struck up a friendship with a young girl who works as a writer for a newspaper. Nellie describes the relationship in terms that seem innocent enough: "He called her his little chum, and her admiration was undoubtedly a help to him. It was very pretty and naïve" (64). From what Nellie describes in this section, the only clue that the relationship is perhaps not completely innocent is that she ends by returning to those topaz sleeve-buttons that caused so much strife between Myra and Oswald earlier in the novel. Harry Eichorn pointed out the reference: "Oswald is still



wearing the sleeve-buttons ten years after the quarrel with Myra, and it is significant that Nellie notices them in a scene describing Oswald's friendship with a girl who works on a newspaper, a scene immediately following Myra's locking of her bedroom door" (126). Why, if the friendship with the newspaper girl is innocent, would Cather close Nellie's observation with a return to the very item that originally caused Myra to doubt Oswald's fidelity? Considering the strict styling of Cather's unfurnished style, one cannot ignore when she creates such a direct juxtaposition between scenes. Stephen Tanner, however, suggests a different reading. He claims that the association proves Oswald's innocence by contending that the friendship with the newspaper girl is evidence that the key and cufflinks episodes earlier in the novel were innocent as well (30). Such a reading relies, of course, upon agreement that Oswald's relationship with the girl is in fact innocent. Consider the "evident pleasure" with which he speaks to her and Nellie's comment that the girl "was always on the watch to catch a moment with Oswald" (64). While it is not certain that Oswald was having a physical affair with the girl, the little evidence we have rarely points to a completely innocent relationship.

Consider, for example, Myra's statement later to Nellie that Oswald was "always a man to feel women, you know, in every way" (74). Given Myra's doubts regarding Oswald, it is difficult not to read into this statement, especially considering it is directly followed by Nellie's observation of his relationship with the newspaper girl. Their relationship is described in what amounts to sexual terms. Nellie calls her "that crude little girl" and describes Oswald as "directing her inexperience and groping hunger for life" (74). *Crude*, *inexperience*, and *groping hunger* are certainly not innocent turns of phrase, and Cather uses them like splashes of red all over what Oswald would prefer to be a black-and-white picture. Even if there is little evidence for a physical affair with the girl, the references to the sleeve buttons and the sexual imagery

surrounding their relationship should at least give us pause to consider again Oswald's past infidelity when judging Myra's cruelty to him in her final days.

Many critics, even those who admit Oswald may not have been faithful to Myra, seem to suggest that Myra's treatment of Oswald in the second part of the novel is overly harsh. Other critics defend Oswald entirely, such as Theodore Adams, who calls Oswald "saintly" and says that he "returns Myra's repudiations with unflinching fidelity" (147). Stephen Tanner claims that Myra "fails to accept the consequences of her own actions, blaming others for her unhappiness. She refuses to forgive her husband, who has wronged her in no appreciable way" (" (Tanner 30). If we are to believe Adams and Tanner, we must agree that Oswald is innocent of all wrongdoing and Myra has simply been wasting her breath all these years hurling accusations at him while he, her ever-patient and loving husband, blind in the face of the love of his life, cares for her in her sickness while she breaks him down. I do not intend to suggest that Oswald didn't love Myra, for I believe he did, especially in light of comments like the one in the last chapter where he says he'd "rather be clawed by her . . . , than petted by any other woman I've ever known" (84). But it is impossible to absolve him of all his sins just so that one might comfortably read Myra as a raving lunatic. John J. Murphy puts it well when he notes that "Myra's lack of peace expresses itself in her suspicion of youth... . . . Her past, which Nellie finds so romantic, is now the cause of Myra's anguish" (46). If anything, Oswald's dedication to the care of his wife in the second part of the novel is evidence of his own shame for having contributed so heavily to her great disenchantment with life. It is accepted that Myra gave up a life of comfort and wealth to be with Oswald. It is further accepted that she later suffered some sort of great disappointment, which led to her ill treatment of Oswald. Some critics, such as Ann Fisher-Wirth and Lady Falls Brown, have claimed that it is Myra's materialism and worldliness and subsequent lack of wealth in her

life with Oswald that led to her disappointment. Others, such as Grumbach and Rosowski, have suggested that it was Myra's desire for her life with Oswald to live up to the romance of their elopement that frustrated her so. Stofer suggests that Oswald's unfaithfulness and dishonesty within their marriage is what led to Myra's deep regret later in the novel: "Whether Oswald betrays Myra and their marriage in a physical relationship or in an emotional way through lies and deceit, the fact remains that he betrays her and their love" (20). It is unlikely that Cather meant for Myra's dissatisfaction to be traced back to any one thing, but Oswald's infidelity would certainly explain why so much of Myra's anger is directed toward him—he, who has managed to maintain his health, his hopes, and still wears those topaz sleeve-buttons like a daily reminder to Myra of his infidelity and his refusal to confess or offer apology for his transgressions against her.

Rosowski perhaps provides the best sum of all the parts, pointing out that "Myra questions the romantic myth of which she had become a part . . . These tensions between romantic expectations and human realities eventually ends in separation" ("Narrative Technique in Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*" 144-45). Certainly all of Myra's disappointment can be related to the discrepancy between her hopes and expectations and the reality she instead faced. Miller tells us that "Myra was destined to find life disappointing because of her Celtic tendency to expect too much from it" ("Strains of Blood" 174). Since the gap between Myra's elopement with Oswald and Nellie's first encounter with the couple is so wide, it is difficult to gauge what Myra's expectations may originally have been. Whatever the case, it is likely that Myra's expectations were high—after all, who begins a relationship hoping for mediocrity? Certainly the witty and spirited young Myra would have had high hopes for her marriage. It is one of the saddest

possibilities of the novel, to think that Myra was “destined” for disappointment just because she had high hopes.

Much has been said about Nellie’s disillusionment during the course of the novel, her bright beginnings believing that Myra and Oswald’s life should resemble a fairy tale breaking down slowly over the course of the story into a complete abandonment of what Rosowski calls the “romantic myth” (“Narrative Technique in Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*” 144). Deborah Carlin claims that “Nellie functions in *My Mortal Enemy* as the disappointed and disillusioned reader who stumbles upon what she thinks is a romance in medias res, only to discover that it is something quite different and quite reprehensible” (29). Nellie tries, during the second part of the novel, to appeal to Myra and ask for sanctuary for Oswald, whom she feels has suffered unnecessarily. “You are hard on him,” she says, “and when there are so many hard things, it seems a pity” (72). At this point, Myra turns against Nellie, wielding her icy sarcasm like a weapon: “Yes, it’s a great pity. And I’d rather you didn’t come any more for the time being, Nellie . . . Will you be pleased to take your things and go, Mrs. Casey? . . . It’s owing to me infirmities, dear Mrs. Casey, that I’ll not be able to go as far as me door wid ye” (73). Myra’s change here is reminiscent of the argument between Myra and Oswald that Nellie walks in on in the first part of the novel. Nellie described the moment, saying, “everything was in ruins . . . everything about me seemed evil. When kindness has left people, even for a few moments, we become afraid of them, as if their reason had left them. When it has left a place where we have always found it, it is like a shipwreck; we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless” (42). If she felt this when perceiving Myra’s anger toward Oswald, she surely felt it again in this moment when Myra’s anger is, for the first time, directed at her. Robert Miller explains that “[t]his is the only scene in which Myra speaks with anything like a brogue, and it is,

of course, a type of playacting to which Myra resorts to disengage herself from Nellie after allowing her a moment of great candor" ("A Race without Consonants" 174). While not surprising that Myra would need to disengage after hearing Nellie attempt, in a sense, to protect Oswald from her, especially if Myra felt ashamed or embarrassed by Nellie's vocalization of something she perhaps felt herself, it is also entirely likely that the sudden turn had much to do with her anger that an outsider might attempt an analysis of her treatment of her husband.

Nellie is particularly affected by Myra's last complaint against her husband, only a few days before she dies. Myra is lying in bed with Nellie by her side and Oswald sitting in a chair in the same room. Nellie explains that "[t]he sick woman began to talk to herself, scarcely above a whisper, but with perfect distinctness; a voice that was hardly more than a soft, passionate breath. I seemed to hear a soul talking: I could bear to suffer...so many have suffered. But why must it be like this? I have not deserved it. I have been true in friendship; I have faithfully nursed others in sickness . . . . Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" (78; ellipses in original). Nellie is deeply affected by Myra's words and tells us that she's never "heard a human voice utter such a terrible judgment upon all one hopes for" (78). Nellie's comment suggests that it is Oswald who Myra is referring to as her "mortal enemy." Marvin Friedman certainly agrees and explains what might have led Myra to make such a judgment: "In the second half of *My Mortal Enemy*, we find that Myra has acquired some insight into the failings that have led to the couple's current predicament. . . . She knows that Oswald, by idolizing her and passively sacrificing his personal goals at the altar of her idolatrous demands, has allowed her to destroy him. He in turn has imposed on her an unbearable burden of guilt which, in that sense, has made him her mortal enemy" (62). Friedman's explanation, while still placing the heaviest blame on Myra, does provide a more balanced view than many other critics have suggested. John J.

Murphy also suggests that Myra meant Oswald, but takes a very different approach, summing up the novel as "the stark tale of an unpleasant woman who turns against her husband" (40).

Murphy's assessment shows a very limited scope, and Susan Rosowski countered his argument later, explaining that "Nellie does not depict Myra Henshawe as a woman who has ruined her husband, as some critics have suggested; instead, she presents the mutual tragedy to young lovers who grow old, looking only to each other for their human needs" ("Narrative Technique in Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*" 145). Rosowski's argument is certainly more balanced and avoids placing blame on either Myra or Oswald.

While all of these critics agree that Oswald was Myra's mortal enemy, other critics have suggested that Myra was referring to Nellie, to her sickness, to poverty, or even to herself. Merrill Skaggs, a celebrated Cather scholar, made the case that Nellie is the "prime candidate" for Myra's mortal enemy (14). Skaggs suggests that Cather set Nellie up as Myra's rival for Oswald's attention, and that she functions as Myra's enemy by being all that Myra cannot be, primarily young and still hopeful.

Considering all the possibilities, let us look into the scene itself. Nellie explains that it is midnight, the room is dark and lit only by candlelight, as Myra has had a very bad day, and she and Oswald have been sitting up with her (77). In the previous scene, Myra had abolished electric light in her room and demanded, "At least let me die by candlelight; that is not too much to ask" (76), so it is not unlikely on this night that Myra feels she is coming to the end of her life. Nellie is sitting by an open window and Oswald is on the sofa, both in view of Myra's bed. Myra speaks "scarcely above a whisper" (77), and when she finishes, Nellie immediately looks to Oswald. His face is shielded by his hand, and Nellie tells us that he "did not move or shudder" (78). We certainly know that Nellie believes Myra was referring to Oswald, her immediate

search for a reaction from him tells us as much. Oswald's reaction, however, is less clear. He sits on the couch, shielding his face with his hand. One possible explanation is that he, too, believed his wife was referring to him and he was crying, shielding his face from sight. But the position is also one of shame. Perhaps, if it was indeed his own frailties in their marriage that led to her deep disappointment and regret later in life, he felt guilty and so hid his face from shame. With forgiveness such as a major theme of the novel, it is perfectly plausible and even likely that Myra's statement was her final judgment upon her husband, finally showing that she will not, she cannot, forgive him.

The initial romantic tale of Myra's elopement told to Nellie when she was young set up her expectations and impressions of what love is supposed to be. Later, it is Myra's legacy of disappointment that leaves Nellie with a lasting sense of doubt and suspicion when it comes to love. In his article "A Falling Out with Love: *My Mortal Enemy*," Harry B. Eichorn writes, "Seeing Myra finally reject her husband as her mortal enemy, Nellie has come to distrust human love itself. Nellie's experience suggests that, after all, there may be something sadder than falling out of love—falling out with love before one has ever fallen in" (122). Eichorn's comment is another example of the kind of deep disappointment that seems to be a theme of the novel. Nellie shows the effect Myra and Oswald's story has had upon her at the end of the novel as she reflects on the amethyst necklace Myra leaves to her:

I have still the string of amethysts, but they are unlucky. If I take them out of their box and wear them, I feel all evening a chill over my heart. Sometimes, when I have watched the bright beginning of a love story, when I have seen a common feeling exalted into beauty by imagination, generosity, and the flaming courage of youth, I have heard again that strange complaint breathed by a dying woman into

the stillness of the night, like a confession of the soul: "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy!!" (85)

In ten years, presumably from her interaction with Myra, Nellie has turned from a young girl of fifteen who describes a time in her youth when she would walk by the old Driscoll place and think about the place as being "under a spell, like the Sleeping Beauty's palace; it had been in a trance, or lain in its flowers like a beautiful corpse, ever since that winter night when Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to Fate" (15) to a young woman of twenty-five who calls love a "common feeling" that is "exalted into beauty by imagination" and who cannot trust in the hopes of young love because of what she saw of Myra's life. Jo Ann Middleton explains, "Amethysts have the power to prevent nightmares, but they are also a talisman against intoxication, and Nellie can never see the "bright beginning of a love story," that intoxication of love, without hearing Myra cry out against her mortal enemy" ("Why Must I Die Like This" 188). What Myra has left Nellie is not just a necklace, but a material symbol of her bitter disappointment and resentment of the very idea of love.

We find in studying Cather's body of work that there is a distinct difference in her writing style from her earliest novels to her later novels and that criticism surrounding those two periods of Cather's work were very different. In Chapter Three I build on the ideas presented in the first two chapters by considering *A Lost Lady*, one of Cather's novels which functions like a bridge between her early and later styles, in relation to *My Mortal Enemy*. In rethinking the novels in relation to one another, in terms of their themes, composition, and the scholarship that surrounds them, I expose significant similarities and differences that link the novels together, solidifying their place in the Cather canon and strengthening their value to the study of her works.



### Chapter Three:

#### “The Cheeks of Morning”:

#### Relating Style to Criticism in Cather’s *A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy*

In 1926, Louis Kronenberger wrote a review of *My Mortal Enemy* entitled "Willa Cather Fumbles for Another Lost Lady." In the review, he acknowledged that *My Mortal Enemy* will likely be compared to *A Lost Lady*, Cather’s earlier 1923 novel, because both novels carry the same basic organization and approach to the story of a “lost lady.” He claimed that *My Mortal Enemy* is "immeasurably inferior to *A Lost Lady*" and complained that Myra is "not so real, not so moving, not so delightful" as Marian Forrester. Kronenberger also compared the narrators of the two novels: ". . . the interpreters of *My Antonia* and *A Lost Lady* had a real relationship to them, dwelt inside their plots. They gave them more verisimilitude than Nellie gives this. . . . Nellie is a colorless, artistically meaningless character, and her impressions are correspondingly without color or meaning" (BR2). Kronenberger went on to unravel the book itself, claiming that "the book is a succession of incidents, and they do not reveal enough. One seriously doubts whether, in its effect as well as in its form, it can be called a novel . . . ."novel" (BR2). Of course, Kronenberger is only an early example of criticism linking the two novels and certainly should not be taken as the primary voice on the issue. But in his review there is a reaction telling of the views of the time that tells us much about how and why *My Mortal Enemy* might have been received so poorly when *A Lost Lady* was received so well.

Although he acknowledged thematic similarities, I don't think Kronenberger completely understood in what ways the novels were similar, which led him to categorize the connection as "not altogether significant" (BR2). Further, Kronenberger didn't seem to understand that it is the

differences, not the similarities, between the two novels that provide the most interesting interpretation and shed the most light on what was actually going on in Cather's work at the time. In this chapter, I highlight some of the most significant similarities between the two novels and compare the reception and criticism of *A Lost Lady* to that of *My Mortal Enemy* in order to better understand the critical interpretation of Cather's style at the time.

In most of the critical reception and scholarship of *A Lost Lady*, we do not find as much of the angry rhetoric with which *My Mortal Enemy* was received. Early criticism of the novel was generally positive, if belittling for its novella form. That isn't to say, however, that critics agreed on any one interpretation of Marian Forrester. Examining the reception surrounding the novel, one finds two schools of thought on Marian: some claim that she is immoral, colorless, and a symbol of corruption; others claim that she positively shimmers. Moral objections to Marian's character in criticisms of the novel are not difficult to locate, particularly when looking into early reception of the novel. In 1924, Percy Boynton claimed that Marian was a "weakling and a ne'er-do-well. She is a tarnished creature whose immorality lies not so much in the infraction of laws and precepts as in the fact that such a life as hers is inherently self-defeating. She is not even brilliantly alluring" (379). Granville Hicks likely would have agreed with Boynton, for in his 1933 review Hicks compared Marian to her husband and found her lacking: "Captain Forrester has in him the stuff of the pioneers, but his wife, though one feels in her capacities for heroism, is the product of changed times, and she abandons her standards, betrays her friends, and encourages mediocrity and grossness. She is the symbol of the corruption that had overtaken the age" (707). The rhetoric here can be easily compared to the vitriolic rhetoric to which Myra was later treated; however, such criticism does not occur as often around Marian Forrester.

Most critics seem to contend that Marian, if a little reckless, remains generous, intelligent, charming, gracious, and a paragon of devotion. In his 1924 review, Lloyd Morris explained:

Generosity, courage and comprehension are qualities not lacking to Marian, who is of all Miss Cather's heroines the most intelligent. But it is not impossible to perceive that her weakness is ultimately her strength, an incorruptible probity of instinct which submits to neither the denial of circumstance nor the restrictions of a discriminating taste. In *Antonia* Miss Cather has illustrated the workings of passion in the eternal Penelope; in Marian she has revealed the flowering of passion in the eternal Helen. (648)

Morris' comment, in effect, transformed the most negative aspects of Marian's character into something positive. Robert Footman made a similar point in 1938 when he described Marian's charm as something cyclical in nature, claiming that Marian was "not only intensely alive, she is intensely devoted. Her devotion takes the form of being charming and gracious to men whom she respects and whom she stimulates. Their admiration in turn invigorates and repays her" (132). Morris and Footman provide examples of an analysis that is quite opposite from the analysis given by Boynton and Hicks, choosing to interpret Marian's behavior as forgivable in context of the disappointments and hardships she had faced in her lifetime. In the most generous reviews of *A Lost Lady*, it is this approach that we encounter most often. Marian's infidelity is characterized as a symptom of her life-affirming nature, and her betrayal of her husband is accepted as a result of her marriage to a man twenty years her senior.

As to why the novels are similar, there is much to compare. Like *My Mortal Enemy*, *A Lost Lady* is a novel in two parts, with marriage, sickness, infidelity, poverty, disenchantment,

aging, all told from the point of view of Niel, the half-involved, half-removed narrator, whom Adams refers to as the "window-character" of the novel (141), presumably because so much of his truest glimpses of Marian come from glances through her window. What seems to continually get overlooked in the comparison of the two novels is that Marian's connection is not to Myra, but rather to Oswald. When *A Lost Lady* has been compared with *My Mortal Enemy*, the connection has always been between Marian and Myra. As Lloyd Morris explained in his 1924 article, "Marian Forrester . . . dallies with cheap excitements to escape complete frustration" (645). Marian is primarily regarded as a misguided but well-meaning heroine while Myra is shunned as a villain. Marian is forgiven for her excesses and adultery by virtue of the disappointment she faced upon her husbands' financial ruin and ill health. Myra, who stays faithful to her husband throughout their lives even while he does not return the same respect to her, is condemned. While the two women may have common demeanors and desires, their actions set them apart and make a connection between Marian and Oswald far more likely.

The most significant connection between Oswald and Marian can be found in their relationship with their spouses. Marian was married to a man almost twice her age, a man it took two strokes and a string of bad luck to finally kill. Cather even says Captain Forrester thought of Mrs. Forrester as "very, very young" (63). Oswald and Myra were certainly closer in age, yet Myra's poor health led Oswald to describe her as seeming "like the mother of the girl" (84) he ran away with all those years ago. Unlike Myra, Oswald aged gracefully and maintained his health, even to the point of moving on to Alaska after her death to pursue a position at a steamship company he wished to work for (84). In health and mentality at least, Marian and Oswald were both married to partners who were much older than themselves. Rosowski pointed out that Captain Forrester "becomes a helpless spectator of change. We realize, when we see him

sitting before the sun-dial watching the shadows move across the stone, that he is powerless before time. Once the age of the pioneer gentleman is past, others must come to terms with the present . . ." ("Willa Cather's 'A Lost Lady': The Paradoxes of Change" 53). This sense pervades *My Mortal Enemy* and the character of Myra Henshawe who, much like Captain Forrester, found herself forgotten, alone, and lost in a world that had moved on without her. When Myra, for example, is talking with Nellie about poetry, she dismisses the poets of the day in favor of older poets she remembers from her youth. When Nellie reminds her that she likes Walt Whitman, Myra laughs and asks: "Does that save me? Can I get into your new Parnassus on that dirty old man? I suppose I ought to be glad of any sort of ticket at my age!" (66). Myra knows that she does not fit into the "new Parnassus" of Nellie's artistic world, and one is reminded of Cather's own statement on the subject of the First World War: "The world broke in two about 1920, and I belong to the former half" (qtd. in Bennett 146). Cather revisits this theme in one way or another in most of her novels; the older generation dies out or is forgotten and their friends and family must find a way to carry on and adjust to a new world without them. Just as Marian Forrester left Sweet Water after the death of her spouse, Oswald Henshawe left for Alaska after Myra's death. Unencumbered by the specter of the old world which their spouses represented, both characters were able to join the new world, though perhaps later in their own lives than either would have preferred.

The connection between Marian and Oswald further provides evidence for the existence of the adultery theme in *My Mortal Enemy*. Just like Oswald, Marian Forrester cared for her aging and sickly spouse as one completely and utterly devoted to nothing but his care. And just like Oswald, Marian seemed able to charm any one of the opposite sex within sight. The critics who would point to Oswald's devoted care of his wife in her latter days need only look to Marian

Forrester for evidence that, at least in Cather's work, such a show of devotion does not imply commitment to all areas of a relationship. Nancy Morrow explains in her 1984 article "Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* and the Nineteenth Century Novel of Adultery" that "Cather admired the great nineteenth century adultery novels and subtly [sic] evokes her memories of them in her own novels. But she admired them as works of art, providing insight into human experience, not as social criticism" (301). While Morrow was speaking primarily of *A Lost Lady*, her point can be used to consider *My Mortal Enemy*. Morrow explained that Cather had "unfurnished the nineteenth century adultery novel of its moral purpose" (301) in her depiction of Marian Forrester. If we accept that Oswald Henshawe was unfaithful to his marriage, then must not the novel be included among the adultery novels of its time? Cather's depiction of Oswald Henshawe's infidelity was certainly not the main current of the novel, but neither was it the primary point in *A Lost Lady*. As Morris Dickstein points out in his 1999 article, "The Magic of Contradictions: Willa Cather's *Lost Lady*", "Cather not only allows [Marian] to make a case for herself, to assert her right to live on as she pleases, but also refuses to punish her by killing her off--the inevitable consequence of adultery in the nineteenth-century novel" (29). Cather treated Oswald with the same lack of sentimentality and moral overtone with which she treated Marian Forrester, yet the ambiguous nature of the scenes that depict Oswald's infidelity lead most critics to deny the adultery theme of the novel altogether.

If it is true that our first reaction is right, that Myra is a tyrant and Oswald her ever-enduring pawn, why would we have ever been introduced to bank keys and sleeve buttons in the first place? Cather's style dictates that only the necessary be included, yet she chose to include these details and not only include them, but make them deliberately ambiguous, suggesting rather than outright stating their deeper meaning. One can argue, as critics have, that the episodes

merely highlight Myra's jealous nature and ill treatment of her husband; but if this were the case then why allow the reader to doubt Oswald at all? Why would Cather not have treated Myra's jealous nature in much the same way she treats Myra's delight in her friends or cruelty in her sickness? Why would she not have made Oswald Henshawe as irrefutably constant as Captain Forrester? In a brief novel such as *My Mortal Enemy*, there is no room for wondering for wondering's sake. Cather does not seek to "trick" her reader by hallways that lead to nowhere or doors that open to nothing. If Cather paints a door, she expects her reader to go through it. We must conclude, then, that the deliberate ambiguity in the novel, especially in these key moments, at least partially exonerates Myra and proves her husbands' infidelity.

In 1923, Lillian Ford commended Cather for treating the subject of infidelity in *A Lost Lady* without the sense of condemnation that accompanied so many other nineteenth-century adultery novels (1). Perhaps it is because of Cather's treatment of the subject stylistically that so many critics have been quick to ignore or gloss over the adultery theme altogether. The novels are certainly different stylistically, but what remains constant is Cather's emotional detachment from the content of the stories themselves. We do not encounter a sense of judgment when reading either of the two novels, and it is perhaps due to this lack of condemnation in her tone and the spare detailing with which she chooses to portray the scenes that suggest infidelity that lead critics to judge the novels so differently.

Where the two novels have so much in common, Cather's style in writing them sets them far apart. *A Lost Lady* provides a perfect bridge between Cather's pioneer novels and *My Mortal Enemy*. Morris Dickstein explains that "*A Lost Lady* is a brilliant epilogue to Cather's famous pioneer novels, but it has a different tone, not heroic and optimistic like the Whitmanesque *O Pioneers!* but bittersweet and retrospective like Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*" (20). If *A*

*Lost Lady* is an epilogue to the pioneer novels, it also functions as a prologue to her later "unfurnished" novels. In *Willa Cather's Modernism*, Jo Ann Middleton explains:

Far from the overfurnished nineteenth-century novels, in her own avant-garde work Willa Cather leaves vacuoles that the reader must fill to complete the story thematically and textually. In *A Lost Lady* we not only find a fragmentation of Marian's total effect on other characters as we observe their various interchanges with her, but we are privy to Niel's internal fragmentation of his own view of her.

(93)

While it is true that *A Lost Lady* is vastly more fragmented and spare than Cather's earliest novels, the novel still maintained much stylistically from its prairie predecessors. Especially in the first part of the novel, Cather devotes pages of writing to the landscape, sparing no details in her flourishes and artful settings, despite the town's being somewhat less remarkable than the wide spaces of her prairie novels. Morrow notes that "If Sweet Water is a gray, dull little town, the marsh, prairies, and forest nevertheless glow with color and glisten with light in Cather's descriptions" (288). Interiors are treated with much the same amount of detail, and we find that we are not just in the Forresters' sitting-room, but instead are in a "rather dark room with walnut bookcases that had carved tops and glass doors" where "a little coal grate was burning under the black mantelpiece" and the "floor was covered by a red carpet, and the walls were hung with large, old fashioned engravings" (29). Cather provides a complete picture of this room and the contrast between her description here and her description of the interiors in *My Mortal Enemy* is vast. Myra's entire apartment is, in fact, described to us within the space of a single sentence; Nellie explains that she loved the apartment for its "solidly built, high-ceiled rooms with snug fire-places and wide doors and deep windows" (23). The only other parts of the apartment that



are described are the velvet chairs and curtains. In *My Mortal Enemy* and in much of her later fiction, Cather uses details only as they are needed to suggest a concept she wished to convey. "Beyond that," as Cather once said, "I am out of it" (*Willa Cather in Person* & Boehlke 24).

It seems entirely likely then that much of the generous reception and criticism of *A Lost Lady* was due to its setting and style, for we find that some of the same things critics applauded in *A Lost Lady*, such as the child narrator who experiences a coming-of-age across the frame of the novel and the tight focus around the life of a singular character, were condemned in *My Mortal Enemy*. Although Cather was experimenting with her new spare style, *A Lost Lady* still managed to maintain much of what critics loved about her writing in her prairie novels. Perhaps it is that by the time *My Mortal Enemy* came around, most of her critics had hoped she would return more fully to her previous style and were disappointed when she chose instead to "throw out all the furniture" in her newest novel. As Lionel Trilling pointed out in 1937: "This technical method is not merely a literary manner but the expression of a point of view toward which Miss Cather had always been moving-- with results that, to many of her readers, can only indicate the subtle failure of her admirable talent" (Trilling 48). While it may have been that Cather's revolutionary style was not appreciated at the time in which she was developing it, it is a style that did indeed form part of a movement among writers to change the way in which America read. Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Alice Munro found inspiration in Cather's style and even Ernest Hemingway, who discredited Cather for obtaining her war knowledge secondhand for her 1922 novel *One of Ours*, is famous for his "iceberg theory," a writing technique suspiciously similar to Cather's "novel deméuble." Even the most rabid of *My Mortal Enemy's* critics would admit that the novel is the best example of her unfurnished style; yet the novel has fallen by the wayside, falling out of Cather studies altogether in preference for her early prairie

novels and more “furnished” style. If we are to understand Cather’s work, and indeed the spare style that caught on like wildfire across American literary fields in the early twentieth century as a whole, then it is imperative that works such as *My Mortal Enemy* are dusted off and brought back into the conversation.

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