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thing else” (111). It is so different, in fact, that it is irrelevant for Nellie, whose disillusionment leaves her hopeless.

Is Nellie's hopeless conclusion also Miss Cather's? The novel offers no grounds for thinking otherwise. The compactness and starkness of *My Mortal Enemy* suggest that Miss Cather had full confidence in the accuracy of this conclusion and in her talents as a writer. Some may find it ironic that the book in which she gained the surest control of her art expresses her most despairing vision of life, but is it really? She was soon to make a journey to New Mexico and to discoveries that would brighten her spirits and give a new serenity to her later novels. Is it not, rather, entirely consistent with her devotion to her art that, when life seemed to fail her, her art saved her?

WILLA CATHER'S *MY MORTAL ENEMY*:
THE CONCISE PRESENTATION OF
SCENE, CHARACTER, AND THEME

By THEODORE S. ADAMS

In several ways, *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) is unique among Willa Cather's novels. It is her shortest novel,\(^1\) so short that she feared that her publisher might refuse to print it as a separate book. It is her last and most extreme example of tightly restricted form. It uses a single narrator, the least obtrusive of her narrators and window-characters, with unbroken consistency and unparalleled skill. Its cast of characters is small and its focus almost exclusively on the heroine, all other characters being sharply subordinated.

A kind of pendant to *The Professor's House* (1923), *My Mortal Enemy* embodies within a single character themes very close to those of the earlier novel. The two novels are unusually clear examples of the *déményblé* technique, a technique perhaps best defined by Cather herself in her essay, "The Novel

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\(^1\) The 1961 Vintage paperback edition with introduction by Marcus Klein is 105 pages long. The first, Knopf, edition is 122 pages long. Numbers in parentheses in the body of my remarks refer to the paperback edition. Except in minor matters of punctuation, the Vintage paperback is identical with the final version in the Library and Autograph editions.
Déméublé.” Cather attacks Balzac, whom she nonetheless ad­
mires, for his cataloging of interior decoration. Tolstoy, she
goes on to say, was also greatly fascinated with food, clothes
and furniture, and yet his “haunting exteriors . . . are always
so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are
perfectly synthesized.” “Whatever is felt upon the page without
being specifically named there—that, one must say, is created.
It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the
overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it . . . the emo­
tional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high
quality to the novel.”2 My Mortal Enemy employs symbols,
echoes from point, suggestive details, and many allusions. The
reader must take hints, combine implications, and strive to
feel, as Willa Cather herself phrased it, “All that has been cut
away.”

There are a number of possible reasons why Willa Cather
never again made use of such tightly restricted form. The
price of concision in My Mortal Enemy—restricted form
combined with the déméublé technique—is abruptness. So
abrupt is the novel in effect that its events acquire a violence
beyond even that appropriate to the character of the heroine.
And the narrator’s repeating in the closing paragraph of the
novel a line from the title-scene shows the author attempting
too late to reap one of the benefits of leisurely recounting.
Willa Cather may have been aware of this abruptness; she may
consciously have strained at her self-imposed limits; she may
have felt that the tightly restricted form was not the proper
showcase for her talents; or she may have felt that she had
exhausted the possibilities of such a form. In any case, she
never used it again, and her next novel, Death Comes for the
Archbishop, was to employ a looser form than she had ever
attempted. Still, all of her novels including this one, may be
called tightly constructed when compared to those of, for ex­
ample, Theodore Dreiser and Thomas Wolfe.

Like the form, the plot of My Mortal Enemy is succinct. It
traces the life of Myra Driscoll from adolescence to death,
concentrating on two periods—twenty years after her mar-

2 This essay appears in Not Under Forty (New York, 1936). 49-51. It ap­
ppears also in the posthumous Willa Cather on Writing (New York, 1949)
and has been widely quoted and discussed. I have quoted above from pp.
48 and 50 of Not Under Forty.
riage and ten years after that, the last year of her life. Orphaned as a little girl, Myra is brought up by her great-uncle, a crude, money-loving and pious man whom Myra understood, appreciated, and, to a great extent, resembled. But Myra falls in love with Oswald Henshawe, the son of one of her great-uncle’s enemies. Myra runs off with Oswald, and her uncle dies, keeping his threat to leave her nothing of his vast fortune. The feud in the background is never explained and so possesses the cruel arbitrariness of the feud in *Romeo and Juliet*.

All this Nellie Birdseye, the narrator, has learned from her Aunt Lydia, who has helped Myra to elope: Myra is the most exciting figure in Lydia’s life as she is to be in Nellie’s. Also from her aunt, Nellie learns that Myra and Oswald have achieved average happiness when, Nellie feels, their romantic flight should have somehow made them “happier than other people.” Visiting her new friends, the Henshawes, in New York City, the provincial Nellie, who comes from the same small Illinois town where Myra had been brought up, falls under the spell of Myra’s commanding fascination. Nellie observes Myra’s interest in the love affairs of her friends, her dutiful visits to the rich families of Oswald’s business associates, her capacity for friendship and her loving insight into her artistic friends: poets, actors, singers. Nellie cannot avoid noticing also Myra’s possessiveness, bitterness and bad temper, her demands on her friends and her hunger for riches. Nellie can scarcely believe that these qualities, good and bad, go hand in hand; but almost despite herself, Nellie has shown Myra in these contradictory lights from the beginning. At the end of the first section of the novel, Myra’s leaving her husband over a trifling quarrel is a sign of how deep her undesirable qualities run.

Ten years later, Nellie finds Myra and Oswald in a run-down San Francisco hotel. Out of pride, apparently, they are hiding from such friends of theirs as still live; sadder still, Myra’s flair for friendship seems gone. Tokens of previous glory, such as their elaborate draperies, now faded and streaked, underline their circumstances. Myra is partly responsible for their poverty, but she is intensely bitter about it, and more and more she turns that bitterness against Oswald. Shortly before her death, Myra ambiguously repudiates the husband whose devotion to her is stronger than ever. At the same time, Myra’s
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spirituality appears to have increased; the paradox of her nature is visible to the end.

Nellie Birdseye tells this story gracefully; she says little of herself and invites little interest in her own problems. She never tells us, for example, how she means to escape the school-teaching which she dislikes but feels compelled to do. Unlike the narrator of My Antonia and the window-character of A Lost Lady, Nellie does not present a study of her own development in parallel or contrast to that of her subject. Nellie tells her tale more smoothly than the narrator of these other novels. In My Antonia, Jim Burden must rely on Mrs. Steavens to relate part of Antonia’s history, and in A Lost Lady, Willa Cather leaves her window-character for a second one and later introduces a third unexplained and wraith-like observer. In My Mortal Enemy Willa Cather draws information from a character other than her narrator, but the author gives not the words of her second source (Nellie’s aunt), but her information filtered like everything else in the novel, through Nellie’s mind.

Nellie is sensitive, intelligent, and naive. So sensitive is she that she is frequently able to suggest more than she knows: a démeublé narrator, as it were, an aid to concision. Her naivete never cancels out her other traits nor acts as a drag in her telling of the story. Instead, her ingenuousness serves a positive function, suggesting how far is Myra from the average person — even the average sensitive person.3

One simile shows — as Giannone explains at much greater length in his study, Music in Willa Cather’s Fiction — how Willa Cather goes beyond the apparent limitations of her narrator. At one of Myra’s parties a young woman sings “Casta Diva” from Bellini’s Norma, “the Casta Diva aria, which begins so like the quivering of moonbeams on the water. It was the first air on our old music-box at home . . . . For many years I associated Mrs. Henshawe with that music, thought of that aria as being mysteriously related to something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt; a compelling, passionate overmastering something for which I had no name, but

which was audible, visible in the air that night as she sat crouching in the shadow” (48).

The relation of Myra’s personality to the aria loses its mystery as one thinks of the opera and its title character, who leads a cult of virgin priestesses while secretly meeting a love and bearing him children, the priestess who sins passionately and yet displays great nobility of spirit. Myra’s resemblance to that priestess will be fully drawn in the course of the novel.

Juxtapositions suggesting comparisons are effectively used in this short novel. See for example Section One, Chapter Five, in which a string of incidents presented with a random air, show now one side, now the opposite side of Myra’s character. The comparison of Myra with the heroine of Norma comes at the very end of this chapter — just after a description of the actress, Madame Modjeska, and her strange fusion of worldliness and spirituality.

Despite the superficially random air of the whole novel, My Mortal Enemy perhaps stands alone in its possession of a unity which is both simple and flawless. Death Comes for the Archbishop is a perfectly unified book, but it may be only on second or third reading that it reveals itself as such; My Ántonia also possesses an elaborate rather than a simple unity and relies rather strongly on themes to bind elements otherwise somewhat distant. Because of failures in motivation and proportion, The Song of the Lark and A Lost Lady are disunified even though both possess thematic unity. My Mortal Enemy, however, with its small cast of characters, almost perfectly straightforward action, constricted plot, and consistent, quiet narrator, displays immediately its well-built, extra-thematic structure. The thematic structure also is clear and simple: two themes run throughout. Both themes are embodied in Myra at whom Nellie gazes. Even when Nellie looks about without explicit reference to Myra, Nellie’s descriptions recall Myra’s nature. The themes are intertwined and there is even a single moment in the story when they are simultaneously evoked, the moment when Myra roughly takes her crucifix away from Nellie. (We shall return to this moment later.) So clearly, constantly and appropriately are the themes of the novel embodied, that one can scarcely describe plot, narrator or imagery of the novel without clearly suggesting its themes: the ignoble “poetry of worldliness,” as
E. K. Brown calls it, and the sublime poetry of the soul. The poetry of worldliness is vividly supported by props and settings, both indoor and outdoor. The unexpected memorability of the objects in the novel in connecting with its démeublé technique suggests that the struggle for concision drove Willa Cather to poetry. The prose-poetry that results is haunting.

Nellie’s infatuation with Myra colors all of Myra’s possessions, surroundings and friends. Here, for example is Nellie’s description of Myra’s dinner service — one of the rare moments in which Nellie comments ironically on her own naivety:

Everything in their little apartment seemed to me absolutely individual and unique, even the dinner service; the thick gray plates and the soup tureen painted with birds and big, bright flowers—-I was sure that there were no other like them in the world (27).

And Nellie’s description of Madison Square, her contentedly lonely afternoon there, dimly hints at the mixture of wildness and civilization within Myra herself.

The trees and shrubbery seemed well groomed and sociable like pleasant people... [Water in the fountain] rose and fell like something taking deep, happy breaths; and the sound was musical, seemed to come from the throat of spring. Not far away, on the corner, was an old man selling English violets, each bunch wrapped in oiled paper to protect them from the snow. Here, I felt, winter brought no desolation; it was tamed like a polar bear led on a leash by a beautiful lady (25).

Myra’s atmosphere is rich, very rich to Nellie. When Nellie first sees her, Myra wears a black velvet gown and a necklace of amethysts. Her clothes and her cutting manner show her insistence upon a high style of living. So does the little quarrel with her husband (also in the first chapter) when he finds that she has given his six new shirts to the janitor’s boy because she can’t bear to see her husband in ill-fitting clothes. In New York City, Nellie watches Myra buy for Madame Modjeska’s Christmas the most beautiful and most expensive holly tree that the florist can provide.

But at the same time that Nellie is dazzled by Myra’s wealth, Myra regards herself as poor, and for reasons other than esthetic satisfaction, yearns to be rich. Myra wants stables, a
house, servants, and a carriage in order to equal or surpass certain other women. Nellie observes spite and vengeance in Myra again shortly after this as Myra spends an unhappy afternoon at the theater, dramatizing old quarrels, paying no heed to the stage because she happens to have seen a disloyal former friend in the audience. In later years Myra will praise her uncle because he was a good hater and had "the fist-power to back it up." Myra's marriage to Oswald has robbed her of fist-power; she does not have money enough to act out the vendettas of her imagination.

Myra loves her friends genuinely and yet her choice of artists, rather than rich people, as friends, may be somewhat influenced by her hatred of the meanness of being poor. Nellie implies in her description of Myra's two types of friends that Myra likes being the rich benefactress to her artists, as well as paying her way in the coin of intensity and appreciation.

In the second part of the novel, when Nellie finds Myra and Oswald in San Francisco after a space of ten years, Myra is as imperious as ever, her head still like that of an evil Roman ruler. But now at last genuinely poor, Myra is more than ever eager for wealth. She appears to take almost literally her uncle's statement that God hates the poor when she says that money would buy her not merely comfort for the terrible illness which wracks her but also the dignity which she takes herself not to possess in her own person.

Myra lacks the resignation and endurance which would ease her fate. Worse still, though her husband is devoted and self-sacrificing and though all traces of his earlier bitterness have vanished, she accuses him of insufficient effort on her behalf. And her apology, if such it may be called, is a statement that she needed and needs money and that both of them have spoiled their lives. She is fiercely hard on herself: "I was always a grasping, worldly woman." But at the last moment — and last moments are surely more important in literature than in lives — she holds Oswald to blame for everything, even the noises from the floor above. Shortly before she dies, she says to him (or is it at least partly to herself?) in Nellie's presence:

"I could bear to suffer ... [sic] 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?” (95).

The horror of this moment Nellie is never quite able to explain away or assimilate. Several years after Myra’s death, Nellie cannot wear Myra’s jewels given to her by Oswald as a remembrance. The amethysts, traditionally symbolic of love, bring a chill to her heart.

Even in the piety of her last year Myra is spiritually proud. When Nellie picks up her ivory crucifix, Myra “put out her hand quickly and said, ‘Give it to me. It means nothing to people who haven’t suffered.’” With striking quickness the two sides of her nature are summarized by this moment. Throughout the novel Myra is an extremely worldly woman. Yet throughout the novel she possesses a spirituality that is profound and true. She has a great capacity for love and friendship; she shows imaginative sympathy for the suffering of others; she is deeply preoccupied with sin and injustice; to her final religious concern even her great love of money is subsidiary. And these complexities are strongly evoked in a hundred pages.

Myra’s exceptional friendliness shines very early in the novel at the family dinner party. The party is livelier than such gatherings usually are because Myra remembers all the old jokes and stories that the others have forgotten, and her laugh rings out. Nellie sees that Myra sees through to some deeper layer of everyone whom Nellie had been taking for granted. During the same party Myra’s love for Oswald is unmistakable, her pleasure in him vivid—a situation unusual to Nellie in the light of marriages she has observed.

Although, as I have remarked earlier, Myra befriends artists for not wholly disinterested reasons, she proves her real love by making sacrifices for them: taking care of the son of an actress, comforting the tubercular poetess during her last illness, purchasing masses for the soul of Madame Modjeska when Myra and Oswald are badly in need of money. Much as Myra loves money, she keeps a long glove-full of ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces for masses, money for unearthly purposes, as she says.

Myra has a savage awareness of the fickleness of friendship, the tragic faltering of youth, the probably bitter ending of
bright young love, and the pain and sorrow in the world. Nellie, seeing Myra near the end of her life, remembers now that Myra had often in the past veered close to blasphemy of Job, collecting damaging evidence against God. When Nellie first knows her, Myra's savage awareness is an occasional mood; toward the end it approaches a constant one.

Two visions of nature in the two sections of the novel mark the stages of Myra's spiritual journey. In section one, nature seems tamed and modified—gray light glowing over the dome of a building, the outdoor drawing-room of Madison Square, the birds, beasts, and flowers on Myra's dishes. In section two, Myra says that she "lives" on the bitter smell of the sea that sometimes drifts into her hotel-window. Nature is now made up of this bitter smell, light and dark, and a twisted, solitary tree on a cliff running into the ocean. References to "Gloucester's Cliff" suggests terrifying music of King Lear behind the novel, and perhaps Gloucester's speech (IV, 1) is appropriate to think of in connection with Myra's strange death:

There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully in the confined deep;
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
And I'll repair the misery thou does bear
With something rich about me; from that place
I shall no leading need.

Again the reader may note that literary reference is one of Cather's devices for concision. The stark and bitter vision of nature is not without comfort. Myra says of the cliff where she likes to sit and look out over the water:

I'd love to see this place at dawn . . . That is always such a forgiving time. When that 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 absolutions . . . . Light and silence: they heal all one's wounds—all but one, and that is healed by dark and silence (73).

From her vision of nature and from her renewed religion which she mingled with that vision, Myra derives the strength to endure her life and to ritualize her death. Unknown to anyone, Myra rises from her deathbed, and has a cabman drive her to her cliff. Here she pays him from her hoard of gold pieces and against his better judgment (Myra exerts her old charm for
the last time), persuades him to leave her alone in this deserted spot. When Oswald reports that Myra is missing, Nellie guesses where she has gone, but decides to remain silent. Later, when Myra’s body is found, Nellie tells Oswald that Myra doubtless found in the sunrise the absolution that she had desired.

Although Myra’s ritualization of her own death is to Nellie the most impressive of her achievements, may we not be more impressed by her endurance of her life? Both Myra and Oswald suggest that she is considering suicide during her last year. (One thinks again of Gloucester’s cliff.) She is frantically impatient with poverty, she has in old age—her expression though she is fifty-three—lost everything, even the power to love. Oswald, fearing that she will kill herself, says what we have reason to believe: “She hasn’t an ounce of endurance but she has enough desperate courage for a regiment.”

While Myra turns to nature as a source of values, the personal past returns upon her whether she will or not, as it returns upon the hero of Cather’s first novel, Alexander’s Bridge, and on the hero of The Professor’s House, the novel just before My Mortal Enemy. Myra has always resembled the great-uncle who forbade her marriage; in her last year she has his ferocity, his crudity, his piety. Suddenly she consciously allies herself with him and his Catholicism. The uncle’s reputed piety, his gift of his fortune to the Church, and his magnificently elaborate funeral now seem to resemble the worldliness and spirituality in Myra. Were he still alive, she would go and beg forgiveness. Like Alexander’s and the professor’s, her acceptance of her personal past involves a rejection of the present. Unlike the two men, she not only rejects the present and all of its commitments, including her commitment to her husband, but she does so with grim satisfaction. Myra, we are made to feel, arrives at ultimate truth; she is a twisted saint who makes terrible demands on those around her. In this she resembles the figures of great artists and pioneers who appear in Cather’s other works.

A complicating factor in Myra’s saintliness (if we may call it that), or a definition of her limitations, is Oswald — saintly too and returning his wife’s repudiation with unflinching fidelity. Could the mere sentimentality of which Myra accuses him have
sustained him through seven years of straitened circumstances with her? Though Myra has great desperate courage and by a great effort of will is able to summon the endurance which her situation requires, Oswald, the secular saint, has endurance enough for a long war.

Myra’s statement, “In religion seeking is finding,” shows how active and exalted her concept of religion is. The circumstances of this utterance, her holding an imaginary argument with Father Fay, draw it into contrast with the early scene in which she, preoccupied by vengeance, cannot concentrate on a play. Thus the intensity of her religious concern is emphasized. But Myra is a saint of a special kind. Father Fay’s description of her as “Like one of the saints of the early Church” is perhaps best defined by Willa Cather herself in her other references to the early Church:

The daughter of heathenesse and the early church she was; doomed to torturing visions and scourgings, and the wranglings of soul with flesh.

Nothing short of death itself could make an absolutely sure convert of Kundry. There were many such stubborn struggles in the early days of the Church; they are to be found even in the lives of the saints.4

The wilfulness of Myra’s own struggle is visible even beyond her life. For though she dies with a crucifix in her hand, she meets death on her own terms and in what she regards as the holiest setting. Furthermore, Oswald finds that her will demands her cremation — in defiance of the Church to which she has finally returned.

The themes of the novel balance: in the first section we ask how a woman who gives herself so warmly and freely to her friends can yet be so selfish and vengeful; in the second section we ask how a woman so disloyal and cruel can yet be a saint. Myra is an exceptional, even a freakish person. But angels and devils warring for possession of her soul present an eternal human paradox. My Mortal Enemy dramatizes but does not resolve this paradox.

4 The first quotation is from “The Marriage of Phaedra,” a story from The Troll Garden (1905). It appears on p. 94 of the 1961 Signet Classic paperback edition. The second is from “Three American Singers, Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, Olive Fremstad.” McClure’s, XLII (December 1913), 47.