



My Mortal Enemy

Willa Cather

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"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 night, like a confession of the soul: 'Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy.'"

Willa Cather's protagonist in *My Mortal Enemy* is Myra Henshawe, who as a young woman gave up a fortune to marry for love—a boldly romantic gesture that became a legend in her family. But this worldly, sarcastic, and perhaps even wicked woman may have been made for something greater than love.

In her portrait of Myra and in her exquisitely nuanced depiction of her marriage, Cather shows the evolution of a human spirit as it comes to bridle against the constraints of ordinary happiness and seek an otherworldly fulfillment. *My Mortal Enemy* is a work whose drama and intensely moral imagination make it unforgettable.

My Mortal Enemy Details

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lise.charmel says

Dove Willa Cather dimostra che non c'è bisogno di centinaia di pagine per raccontare tutta una vita e tratteggiare in modo indelebile un personaggio forte e implacabile.

piperitapitta says

Myra e le altre

Willa Cather è una consolazione: è la prova che nell'infinito mondo della letteratura c'è ancora tanto da leggere e da scoprire.

La sua scrittura pulita e diretta, sospesa tra le descrizioni dei salotti della raffinata borghesia statunitense alla Henry James (amato e preso a modello dalla Cather all'inizio della sua produzione letteraria), della vacua e superficiale atmosfera delle feste del Grande Gatsby e l'introspezione e la durezza d'animo di certi personaggi di Irène Némirovsky, affascina e rapisce, facendo sì che non una sola parola corra mai il rischio di diventare superflua, che non una sola frase possa essere letta senza catturare l'attenzione, perché ad ogni pennellata corrisponde un colore deciso, indispensabile alla realizzazione del quadro che l'autrice sta dipingendo e che si mostra via via ai nostri occhi in tutta la sua vividezza e con tutto il suo fascino ammaliatore.

Willa Cather ama una narrazione nuda, "priva di mobilia" come amava dire, una narrazione in cui anche l'animo dei personaggi viene subito spogliato da tutti quelle finzioni e quegli inutili accessori che potrebbero distrarre il lettore dalla vera essenza della storia.

Mi stupisce accorgermi, nonostante abbia sempre detto di non amare i racconti, di avere invece una particolare predilezione per i romanzi brevi, ancora di più quando narrano "piccole storie di donne": La donna di Gilles, La moglie di Don Giovanni e adesso Il mio mortale nemico sono gioielli senza tempo, storie in cui tutto si compie e ad ogni azione, anche se remota e apparentemente insignificante, corrisponde sempre un effetto dalle conseguenze devastanti.

Questo che segue è un piccolo e divertente aneddoto su l'incontro tra Truman Capote e Willa Cather:

È il diciannovenne Truman Capote, che ci regala un suo ritratto in "Musica per Camaleonti". Quando ancora non la conosceva personalmente, gli capitava di incontrare una misteriosa signora alla New York Library, il cui aspetto lo ipnotizzava per "gli occhi azzurri, l'azzurro chiaro, vivido, tenero dei cieli delle praterie". Il volto era interessante: mascella decisa, ben disegnato, un poco androgino. Capelli brizzolati, divisi in mezzo. Sui sessantacinque anni, più o meno. Lesbica ? Bè, sì". Conversando con lei che le chiedeva quali scrittori americani prediligesse, dopo aver nominato Hemingway, Faulkner e Fitzgerald, il giovane Capote aggiunse: "Mi piace molto Willa Cather. Ha letto "My mortal enemy ?". Senza batter ciglio la Cather gli rispose: "Per la verità l'ho scritto."

Ilenia Zodiaco says

PAZZESCA.

Una tragedia che vi renderà inconsolabili, scritta con l'eleganza e la squisitezza di una donna capace di

rievocare lo spirito, la materia (e tutta la sontuosa compagnia danzante) degli anni 20. Ricchissimi che diventano poverissimi, innamorati matti che diventano nemici mortali come in Fitzgerald. Splendida prosa, splendido racconto.

Teresa Proença says

"Porque tenho de morrer assim, sozinha com o meu inimigo mortal!"

"Parecia forte e quebrada, generosa e tirânica, uma velha mulher cheia de espírito e de maldade, que detestava a vida pelas derrotas que lhe infligira, e a amava pelo seu lado absurdo."

"Duas pessoas podem ser ao mesmo tempo amantes e inimigas..."

Myra... uma mulher corajosa, derrotada por um inimigo mortal: o Amor!

=====

"Luz e silêncio: curam todas as nossas feridas; todas menos uma, e essa é curada pela escuridão e o silêncio."

— *Willa Cather*

Willa Cather nasceu em Gore (Virginia), **Estados Unidos da América**, no dia 7 de Dezembro de 1873 e morreu em Manhattan (Nova Iorque), no dia 24 de Abril de 1947.

Venceu o Prémio Pulitzer de Ficção em 1923, com a obra *One of Ours*.

Quando era estudante, por vezes, vestia roupas masculinas e usava o nome de William. A maioria dos seus amigos eram do sexo feminino e viveu os últimos 39 anos da sua vida com Edith Lewis.

A sua identidade sexual é motivo de desacordo entre os estudiosos da sua vida e obra. Talvez pela "estranheza" das suas amizades, há quem analise a sua obra numa perspectiva *queer*. Outros defendem que não há provas de que os seus relacionamentos com mulheres fossem de natureza sexual, além de que Willa nunca escreveu sobre o amor homo-erótico. Cather nunca se assumiu como lésbica e, muito ciosa da sua privacidade, destruiu todos os seus papéis pessoais (cartas, rascunhos).

Sobre a sua obra, alguns críticos acusaram-na de estar fora da sua época por não usar as técnicas experimentais da moda, como o fluxo de consciência e outras. Por outro lado, a romancista A. S. Byatt diz que Cather reinventou uma nova forma de olhar para o ser humano ao escrever sobre *"os terrores da vida ... e suas belezas"*. É um dos Génios de Harold Bloom que, no seu livro **Génio, os 100 autores mais criativos da história da literatura**, diz: *"Willa Cather, ao procurar valores antigos, teve a possibilidade de os encarnar maravilhosamente nas suas damas perdidas."*

Nota: Para mim, a identidade sexual de cada um não é assunto mas, nas pesquisas que fiz, este é o tema mais referido. Daí que não o referir seria uma forma de censura...

Mary says

A wonderful novella which tells the story of Myra Driscoll who elopes with the impoverished Oswald Henshawe.

We meet them twenty-five years later living in poverty.

'People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know. We Were...A man and a woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other. Perhaps I can't forgive him for the harm I did him. Perhaps that's it'

Beautifully written.

Chris Wolak says

This short novel certainly leaves a powerful impression. Once encountered who can ever forget the bitterness of Myra Henshawe?

My Mortal Enemy is a such a slippery and complex story. My thoughts below seem half-baked. You'd think it would be easier to talk about such a short novel, but I find it's harder to put down in writing what's on my mind about this one than other Cather novels that we've read so far.

My initial reaction to My Mortal Enemy was that it's a cautionary tale about youthful passions. Myra's turning her back on her uncle's money for love is certainly romantic and the stuff of legend, as Nellie makes clear in the opening paragraph, but unlike popular romances which end with the happy couple basking in their first blush of love, Cather shows the reality of how marriages--and individuals--can turn out.

Nellie is disappointed that Myra and Oswald haven't reached a higher level of happiness. When her Aunt Lydia says they are, "As happy as most people," Nellie thinks, "That answer was disheartening; the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people" (25). Where does this "should" come from? Fairy tales, of course. Or, for more recent generations, movies of the romantic comedy variety.

This issue of happiness is what captured my imagination during this reading. Happiness, Cather seems to be saying, is not necessarily found in marriage, casual friendships, or money, but in true, deep connection. This connection can be found with other people, one's creative passion, fulfilling work, art/poetry/music, or faith. Myra lacks this level of connection although she has some appreciation for music and literature. She is a drama queen, a narcissist; Someone who wants fame and fortune without seeming to take much action to attain it.

Right after Nellie's thoughts on the Henshawe's level of happiness, she launches into the fairy tale mythology of romantic love, specifically mentioning Sleeping Beauty. And then this leads into a recollection of Myra's Uncle Driscoll's funeral. At first this seems to be a seemingly incongruous juxtaposition. A fairy tale and now a funeral?

Myra's Uncle Driscoll did a lot not only for the Church, but for other people in need over his lifetime. When Nellie recollects the spectacular turnout and magnificence of Driscoll's funeral mass, it's easy to write it off with cynicism, saying that he bought off the Church. But the reality is that he was dead and the will was a done deal. The Church didn't have to have such a turn out or ceremony, but it did because Driscoll had a deep, mutual relationship with the community and his Church. It seems to have been a relationship based on faith and action.

Nellie says,

"In after years, when I went to other funerals, stark and grim enough, I thought of John Driscoll as having escaped the end of all flesh; it was as if he had been translated, with no dark conclusion to the pageant, no "night of the grave" about which our Protestant preachers talked. From the freshness of roses and lilies, from the glory of the high altar, he had gone straight to the greater glory, through smoking censers and candles and stars" (26-27).

Driscoll's funeral is presented as more of a fairy tale ending than is the romantic story of young love. Cather flips things upside down. The traditional fairy tale ends up being something more along the lines of a horror story.

Why did Myra's life turn out like it did? Her life certainly did not turn out as she had assumed it would. But whose does? She wasn't able to change or adapt to the reality of her situation because, I think, she had no deep connections to support or challenge her. She had no passion of her own. She had no faith in a higher power or in something greater than herself. And her friendships seemed to have been superficial because when anyone challenges her, she cuts them out of her life. When Nellie challenges Myra about how she treats Oswald, Myra tells her to leave and to stay away. She even locks Oswald out for days at a time. It's easy to imagine Myra doing the same with other friends throughout her life. One example is the writer who wouldn't lend the Henshawe's money back in their New York days.

Is Myra incapable of deep connection because she never knew herself? She says: "Oh, if youth but knew!....It's been the ruin of us both. We've destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away" (90-91). Oswald may not be living a completely self-actualize life, but he seems relatively content. He brushes off her dramatics with a calm acceptance and understanding of Myra simply being Myra.

Nellie thinks Oswald could have been cut out for a more adventurous life and he does later go to Alaska. However, he certainly doesn't seem to be destroyed by Myra: he still takes great care of himself and his appearance, takes interest in others, and he still loves Myra. He understands her delusions, as he calls them. Myra, on the other hand, doesn't seem to understand herself or him or anyone else. I think her claim that she needed money is really a desire to go back to childhood, when life was simpler for her and the consequences of her actions were not so detrimental.

Myra's return to Catholicism seems to be tied to her desperation and a desire to return to her childhood as well as to her delusions of grandeur and dramatics rather than any inner or spiritual change.

When Nellie picks up Myra's crucifix to straighten her sheets, the older woman, "put out her hand quickly and said: 'Give it to me. It means nothing to people who haven't suffered'" (109). Not only is Myra rude, she's being dramatic and narcissistic: she clearly thinks she's the only one who suffers. Later she does come to realize that others have suffered and that in the end she is and always has been her own worst enemy. But does she realize she's been the cause of her own suffering? Even in the end she causes others great anguish by lying and running away.

Unlike her Uncle whose life was celebrated with a spectacular mass and whose influence carries on in the community, Myra dies alone and her body is cremated (which belies her return to Catholicism). There was no mass and no mention of a service of any kind. Her ashes are buried, "in some lonely and unfrequented place in the mountains, or in the sea" (119). There's no chance for Myra to find the kind of happiness that Jim Burden thinks about in *My Antonia*: "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." Myra's ashes were buried in a steel box.

Things I've been pondering:

Myra says, in response to something the priest said to her off the page that, "in religion seeking is finding."

What did the priest say to her? What was she really seeking in the end? Does she have faith or was her clutching of the crucifix no different than the fortune teller who used to visit her? Does she commit suicide?

Matteo Fumagalli says

Videorecensione: https://youtu.be/v_4zkLpgzWo

Orsodimondo says

AMORE E DISTANZA

La storia è narrata attraverso gli occhi di un giovane che ammira la donna protagonista, e adulta, come accadeva già in 'A Lost Lady'.

Qui, parlando in prima persona, la narratrice è Nellie, innocente quindicenne, che nella parte finale ha dieci anni di più.

La donna ammirata, apparentemente cuore del racconto, è Myra, all'inizio della storia già matura e sposata al grande amore della sua vita, Oswald, uomo di fascino, e alterna fortuna economica.

Myra è in anticipo sui tempi, sceglie l'amore, in un'epoca in cui una donna si sarebbe comportata in tutt'altro modo. Un gesto deciso, una ribellione che dimostra carattere e personalità.

Myra ha rinunciato a tutta la sua fortuna economica, è stata diseredata, perché ha sposato Oswald, l'amore della sua vita. E Myra è il grande amore nella vita di Oswald.

Cos'è che allora non funziona? Che spinge Myra in fin di vita a definire Oswald *il mio mortale nemico*? Chi è la vittima e chi è il carnefice tra loro?

New York, 1899.

Strana, insolita storia d'amore. Personaggi e relazioni che portano alla mente i teoremi psicologi di Henry James. Personaggi misteriosi sui quali i critici e gli studiosi si sono a lungo arrovelati: sembra che il modello ispiratore sia una coppia di amici che la Cather conobbe a New York, S. S. McClure e sua moglie Hattie (lui è quello in piedi nella foto in basso). Se così fosse, molto probabilmente la giovane Nellie sarebbe uno specchio della stessa Willa Cather.

Una donna capace di rinunciare a tutto per l'amore, pur essendo, per sua stessa ammissione, avida e legata ai piaceri materiali, quelli che derivano dall'agio e dalla ricchezza, questa donna consapevolmente sceglie di essere diseredata per seguire l'uomo di cui è innamorata. E vivono insieme tutta la vita, una vita che conosce un lungo periodo di splendore e ricchezza di beni, di incontri e piaceri, ma poi declina, li conduce alla povertà, e porta lei ad ammalarsi.

Però, rimangono insieme: lui sempre devoto e innamorato, lei a suo modo sempre fedele.

E allora perché lo definisce *il mio mortale nemico*?

Quasi che l'accusa fosse: mi hai portato ad amarti per tutta la vita, non ho potuto non amarti e di questo io ti accuso, perché infine questo amore mi ha reso povera infelice e sofferente.

Los Angeles, 1990.

Anche qui un 'ritratto di signora' (James ancora, e sempre), anche qui la donna al centro del racconto ha un fascino speciale: non si tratta di bellezza fisica, ma di spirito, di raffinatezza e gusto, della sua capacità di

aggregare persone, di interessarsi al mondo dell'arte, prima di tutto agli stessi artisti.

Anche qui c'è una prima parte di benessere economico, durante la quale è facile vedere come il paese America (US) sia prospero, luminoso, in crescita. A cui segue la seconda parte, nella quale le sorti dei personaggi mutano in direzione della perdita, e la stessa nazione americana diventa ripiegata e indecifrabile.

Curioso che la prima parte, quella dedicata alla luce, sia ambientata nell'est, soprattutto a New York (Madison Square), mentre la seconda, quella che racconta la penombra e il buio finale, si sposti in California, posto che è immerso nella luce, dove il sole tramontando sull'oceano sembra chinarsi sulla terra e il mare, baciarli, in un gesto di clemenza, di perdono e assoluzione.

Vittorio Matteo Corcos: Sogni, 1896, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Roma.

La scrittura di Willa Cather colpisce per la sua essenzialità sia sintattica che formale, un lessico elegantemente spoglio che anticipa sia l'arte di Hopper che quella ben più posteriore di Carver. Tanto più in una novella così breve che fa quasi credere che sia stato tagliato più di quanto sia stato lasciato. Ciò nonostante, pur nella dimensione così compatta del racconto, gli spunti, i germogli sono davvero numerosi e notevoli.

Truman Capote fotografato all'epoca del suo incontro con Willa Cather.

Indimenticabile il racconto che Truman Capote fa del suo incontro con Willa Cather in "Musica per camaleonti":

Un giorno di gennaio uscii dalla biblioteca al tramonto e mi trovai sotto una nevicata. La signora con gli occhi azzurri, che indossava un cappotto nero, di ottimo taglio, con il collo di ermellino, era in attesa sul marciapiede. Una mano era levata in aria, per chiamare un taxi, ma non c'era ombra di taxi. Mi guardò, sorrise, e disse: Crede che una tazza di cioccolata gioverebbe?

C'è un Longchamps dietro l'angolo." Lei ordinò una cioccolata calda; io chiesi un martini "molto" secco. Mi chiese, semiseria, "Ma è abbastanza grande?" "Bevo da quando avevo quattordici anni. E fumo, anche." "Non dimostra più di quattordici anni, ora." "Ne compio diciannove a settembre".

Poi le raccontai alcune cose: che ero di New Orleans, che avevo pubblicato diversi racconti, che volevo fare lo scrittore e stavo lavorando a un romanzo.

E lei volle sapere quali scrittori americani mi piacevano. "Hawthorne, Henry James, Emily Dickinson" "No, viventi." Ah, be', uhm, vediamo: molto arduo, dato il fattore rivalità, per un autore contemporaneo, o un potenziale autore, ammetterne di ammirarne un altro. Infine dissi: "Hemingway, non un uomo assolutamente disonesto, un velleitario in tutto. Thomas Wolfe, non tutto quel vomito violetto; e poi, certo, non è vivo. Faulkner, in certe cose: Luce d'agosto. Fitzgerald, in certe cose: Diamond as big as the Ritz, Tenera è la notte. Mi piace molto Willa Cather. Ha letto My mortal Enemy?" ??Senza un'espressione particolare rispose: "Per la verità l'ho scritto."

PS

Il mio commento è più lungo del romanzo di Cather, sigh.

Washington Square Park, New York City, 1924: da sinistra a destra, S. S. McClure, Willa Cather, Ida Tarbell, Will Irvin.

Sketchbook says

Who is the "Mortal Enemy" ? Oh, yes, it's "My..." Willa Cather is not writing about a disappointing marriage, or any marriage. In a moment of personal crisis (what, why, we don't know), she's writing about the damage done to ourselves by making *one* mistake that alters our life, the damage done by optimistically letting any passion guide us. Here, Cather explores what a bad *decision* can cost us, but -- we don't realize it at the time. Do what you want, but be prepared, always, for wreckage. And...do not sneer at the importance of money, for therein lies freedom.

This is a dark, disturbing novella (80 pages in my edition) dealing with a headstrong woman who marries for love and is disinherited. Cather ponders the American psyche, which is always on the naïve side when it comes to the realities of life. Is the protagonist unlikeable as many argue ? I think not. She simply cannot help herself because she doesn't know herself. *Like most people.*

Teresa says

3.5 stars

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 shipwreck; we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless. (pg. 51)

This novella reads easily, with some beautiful passages, like the one above. It is quite intense, as perhaps a short work should be.

I struggle a bit with characters, portrayed from the outside, who seem to be universally loved, though they are difficult people. That love makes sense for those who knew Myra when she was young; but not so much for the younger narrator, whose only purpose is to tell us Myra's story, though she doesn't get to know Myra until she's an older woman. Another character saying 'oh, you should've known her when she was younger' and another wondering if the prickly Myra behaves as the early saints must've done don't convince me.

I can forgive the coincidental second half set in the West because of its focused intensity. The location is used for the same reason Cather uses the Southwest in other works. I don't mean to come across as negative as this is definitely worth reading and hardly takes any time at all to do so. It's also thought-provoking, which is a definite plus.

The twist of the title is powerful, and I like that the narrator is obtuse as to whom the enemy likely is. I'm glad I didn't read the Goodreads blurb beforehand (it's not attached to this edition), as it's best to come upon the titular phrase wondering about its significance and without knowing its context.

The introduction (which as usual I'm glad I read afterwards) admits that though this is not one of Cather's best and can be rather frustrating, it is an important bridge between *The Professor's House*, which I read a couple of years ago, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which I have yet to read. After I read the latter, this is a book I could see myself rereading.

Blixen says

O antica, solitaria lacrima!

Si può al contempo amare e odiare la stessa persona? Lo scriveva già Catullo nel suo famoso epigramma *Odi et amo* e il tema è antichissimo, ma in questo racconto lungo di Willa Cather c'è qualcosa in più. La scrittrice scava nel passato portando alla luce resti di una vita che *non è stata*, rimpianti che con il passare degli anni hanno perso la malinconica evanescenza per marmorizzarsi in un cupo astio.

Conosci quella poesia Heine in cui l'autore scopre nei propri occhi una lacrima che non è del presente, una lacrima antica, di quelle che era solito piangere un tempo?

Una lacrima anacronistica, che appartiene a un periodo della vita a lungo sepolto?

Amare vuol dire superare ogni egoismo, certo. Significa anche accettare che al di fuori di noi ci sono forze tali da non permetterci di seguire il modello ideale di vita che avremmo voluto seguire. Nella vicenda narrata dalla Cather si percorre lo spartiacque dell'amore: passione e rimpianto, appagamento dell'anima e gioie materiali.

Si ama e si odia perché non si accetta di essersi persi nell'altro.

Dhanaraj Rajan says

An excellent book.

This is a story about Love.

This is a story about marriage.

This is a story about redemption.

This is a story about forgiveness.

The story is really short. The prose is economical. The impact, I got, was tremendous.

The story is about a rich girl deserting her riches for the love of her life. She is an Irish Catholic and the boy for whom she leaves everything is related to German Protestantism. The life seems to be good. But when at the end of her life as the couple is reduced to abject poverty, she probes few questions relating to her life.

She loved wealth and fame - the worldly treasures. But as the life is ending she longs for heavenly treasures. The one who had abandoned religion turns to religion. The other worldly treasures cannot be obtained unless the commandments of Scripture are obeyed. The one commandment she finds utmost difficulty with is the commandment regarding forgiveness.

"It's all very well to tell us to forgive our enemies; our enemies can never hurt us very much. But oh, what about forgiving our friends? That's where the rub comes!"

And whom did she find it hard to forgive? Her own husband who put up every torture that she threw at him. In her death bed, it was he who was looking after his lover/wife. But she considered him her mortal enemy.

"People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know. We were...A man and woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other. Perhaps I can't forgive him for the harm I did him. Perhaps that's it."

The last scene (the death of the lady) is symbolically placed. Reading it I was struck and it was here the impact was strong. The book remains in me and will remain in me for many days.

I know I have not done full justice to the book. I have not succeeded in transmitting the feel that I had as I finished the book. There are far too many symbols and images in so short a book that I will have to reproduce the entire work to make you see it. Turning into a Willa Cather fan.

Gattalucy says

Gli uomini, in effetti, le uccidono le donne. Almeno alla maggior parte di loro piace essere uccise.
(Victoria Mary Sackville West)

Quando so di aver poco tempo a disposizione per leggere concentrata mi cerco un libro veloce, breve, la pallottola di una fucilata, che a volte colpisce al cuore, mentre altre mi passa via accanto e viene poi subito dimenticata.

Questo doveva essere una spruzzata di cipria veloce, un leggero intermezzo di poco conto. ma è stato piacevole, e più interessante di quel che potessi pensare.

"Ma io sono fatta così, si può essere nemici e amarsi allo stesso tempo, poi un uomo e una donna si sciogliono dal lungo abbraccio. ...Sono stata un'amica sincera, ho assistito fedelmente gli altri nella malattia. Perché devo morire così, sola con il mio mortale nemico?"

Lark Benobi says

Nellie, young and inexperienced, tells the story of Myra, an older woman from her town who gives up a fortune to elope with Oswald, the man she loves. Nellie begins by relating the stories and gossip of her Aunt Lydia, who had once helped Myra elope. Then she relates three meetings with Myra in the course of Myra's life and marriage, and each meeting is filled with both mystery and with accurate, aching details of a life that has not gone according to plan. In a way the novel is a slight fragment of something larger--there is so much left unexplained and unexplored--but in another way it's perfect. It's a perfect use of a narrator with limited knowledge but extreme gifts of observation. I was trying to think of other novels I liked that used his narrative technique and came up with *The Great Gatsby* and *Sophie's Choice*, but in the case of *My Mortal Enemy* the narrative technique is far more pure, where so very little is revealed directly, and the only real entry into the novel's deepest meanings is contained in a single sentence: *"Why must I die like this, alone with My Mortal Enemy?"*

At its heart, a chilling, revelatory, terrifying look at marriage.

mark monday says

oh Mother, oh Father! I sorta get you now, thanks to *My Mortal Enemy*. such a short little piece but such a powerful punch. I'd give this 5 stars for personal impact, but the impact was so painful and intense, I could never consider this a favorite.

once upon a time, Myra and Oswald eloped. they were, and are, the love of each other's life. such are the things of happily ever afters! but such is not reality; it is certainly not the reality I've experienced.

their lives are witnessed by a niece - initially impressionable, later a grown woman full of empathy and a desire to see life as it actually is - or as it could be, as it should be, if things could be perfect and people could be flawless. Cather does a superb job in characterizing this woman at two points in her life, and an equally excellent job at revealing all the different sides of both Myra and Oswald - how they appear to others, how they appear to each other, how they understand and misunderstand themselves. Cather's characterization is rich and deeply felt and *real*; it should also go without saying, given the author, that the prose itself is sublime. the ending is stark, sad, and beautiful.

can a vibrant, kindly, idiosyncratic, independent woman also be a cold-hearted, viciously critical bitch? can a sensitive, brave, strong, loving man also be a thoughtlessly straying rake who carelessly seeks comfort elsewhere? can all the disappointments in life that often have nothing to do with a shared love somehow accumulate enough so that those disappointments tarnish that love - make that love something strained, something that tastes both sweet and bitter? yes, yes and yes. I've seen it; I've experienced it firsthand. maybe I've had a block to understanding this, to understanding how my parents have acted, how I have acted, how people can be so full of love for each other yet also be the cause of so much needless pain. maybe it is something I've refused to understand because the understanding - the demystification - is too painful, so painful it becomes something to ignore and avoid. the wonderful painful thing about top tier literary fiction is that it forces the reader to look inside themselves as well - and to look at people through a different lens, one that is otherwise kept in a drawer somewhere, buried and unacknowledged. thanks, Willa Cather and My Mortal Enemy, for forcing me to look through that lens. for forcing me to understand my own parents and how their lives together have created something both glorious and completely awful. for forcing me to recognize how their lives have impacted what I have done in my own life - or what I have chosen not to do.

so yeah, thanks are definitely in order... but for some reason I am not feeling a whole lot of gratitude.

12 of 16 in Sixteen Short Novels.
