

A Study on Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* —Friendship and Enmity: the Ambivalence in Marriage—

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My Mortal Enemy, which is Willa Cather's shortest novel, has been regarded by critics as one of the most difficult to interpret, partly because, as Rene Rapin says:

The incidents are too few. They tell us too little. ¹⁾

Also, as the story is gloomy and the ending is cul-de-sac, not many critics have estimated the novel highly. One of the negative evaluations of the text was made as early as 1926, the year of its publication, by Louis Kronenberger, who declared in New York Times Book Review that *My Mortal Enemy* is "Miss Cather's least important book" saying that Myra, the heroine, is "not so moving, not so delightful", and that the book has "no continuity," and it "forms no organic whole." ²⁾

On the other hand, critics have agreed that this novel is, along with *A Lost Lady*, Willa Cather's exemplary work of art that put into practice her artistic idealism of "simplification", which she insisted on in "the Novel Demeuble".

As it is, Willa Cather's ideas about such vital elements in human society as materialism, religion, art, marriage, love and friendship are integrated with great elaboration in *My Mortal Enemy*, which is comprised of just over a hundred pages.

Before commencing the discussion, the question as to "who is Myra's mortal enemy?" should be answered. There ought to be no doubt that Oswald Henshawe, the husband, is the "mortal enemy" of Myra Henshawe, but some critics have insisted with certain grounds that Myra is the mortal enemy of herself. However, now we know the fact that, reading Fanny Butcher's review of identifying Oswald as Myra's mortal enemy, Willa Cather admitted that Butcher "had gotten the point perfectly." ³⁾ It is possible, as a matter of course, to read a book in a way that is different from the author's intention. but it might be off "the point" if the readers' interpretation of "the enemy" is not what the author had in mind. We will see in this paper that no other character than Oswald Henshawe is imaginable as Myra's mortal enemy.

One conspicuous trait in *My Mortal Enemy* is that it presents dual and opposing concepts, such as wealth and poverty, age and youth, love and hate, and, especially, friendship and enmity. Among them the protagonist's concept about "friend" and "enemy" has the greatest relevance to

1) Rene Rapin, *Willa Cather* (New York: Robert M. McBride & company, 1950), p. 79

2) John J. Murphy (ed.), *Critical Essays in Willa Cather* (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984), p. 229

3) Janis. P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 341

the motif of this novel in which Willa Cather's idea, or more correctly, her suspicion about marital relation, is manifested. As James Woodress says, *My Mortal Enemy* is "Cather's most concentrated study of marital relations."⁴ It is an acknowledged fact that she had a strong doubt about marriage, the type of human relationship attained through love or passion and which will completely change the partner's life from what it would lead to should he or she be not married.

In *My Antonia*, which is admittedly her masterpiece and is supposed to depict the happiest marital relation, there is a well known passage about Antonia's husband Cuzak, who is leading a moderately happy and stable life with his wife:

It did rather seem to me [Jim Burden the narrator] Cuzak had been made the instrument of Antonia's special mission. This was a fine life certainly, but it was not the kind of life he had wanted to live. I wondered whether the life that was right for one was ever right for two!⁵

These passages written eight years before the publication of *My Mortal Enemy* can be cited here as giving the basic idea Willa Cather had in mind in writing this novel. Marriage that determines the partner's whole life, regardless of their nature or their social, economic status is, to put in Deborah Carlin's words, "not the beginning of happiness."⁶ Cather illustrates in a form of a novel the kind of marriage that ends in disaster. Her "skeptical view of marriage" is integrated in the motif of the novel through the life process of Myra and her husband Oswald Henshawe.

In this paper the key words are "friend" and "friendship". As the title contains the word "enemy", it is no wonder that its antonym "friend" and "friendship" is very frequently used in *My Mortal Enemy*. To analyze the heroine's life through her friendship provides the clue to find out Willa Cather's "point". Was there any close ties, any heart-to-heart friendship existed between them? Discussing it is the main point of this paper.

My Mortal Enemy consists of two parts, both first person narrative of Nellie Birdseye. Part I is a description through the eyes of 15-year-old Nellie, while Part II skips ten years and depicts what happened at a West Coast city where Nellie encounters Myra and Oswald.

Nellie, living in a rural town of Parthia in Southern Illinois, has heard from Aunt Lydia about Myra Driscoll's runaway marriage and her disinheritance of a great fortune, and conceived a fairy-tale yearning for "the Driscoll place", now a convent, where Myra and her great-uncle John Driscoll used to live. For Nellie the place has been "the Sleeping Beauty's Palace" from which "Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to Fate." But Aunt Lydia's talk about the development of the affair is not that of fairy tales.

"But they've been happy anyhow?" I sometimes asked her. "Happy? Oh, yes! As happy as

4) James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 385

5) Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 355

6) Deborah Carlin, *Reading Willa Cather* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: A Bell and Howell Information company, 1987), p. 58

7) Willa Cather, *My Mortal Enemy* (Kyoto: Rinsen book Company, 1973), p. 249-250. This edition was reprinted from the original type of the Riverside Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The page references throughout are to this edition.

most people." (249-250) ”

That answer is “disheartening” to Nellie, who think that the very point of their story ought to be that “they should be much happier than other people.” Nellie’s complaint foreshadows and overshadows the development of the plot of *My Mortal Enemy*. Why couldn’t Myra and Oswald be “much happier than other people?”

Myra’s friendships can be categorized according to its nature. Aunt Lydia, the artists in New York, the “moneyed people”, John Driscoll and Oswald Henshawe are the people with whom she is supposed to have friendship. We will look over each of them in this order, but of the greatest importance is her relationship with her husband, as a matter of course.

Aunt Lydia, the Narrator’s aunt, is Myra’s old friend who helped Myra in her runaway marriage and who after twenty years from this affair takes Nellie Birdseye to New York, where Nellie sees the Henshawes’ seemingly fashionable but practically deteriorating life. During the stay in New York Lydia, abruptly, is asked by Oswald to hand over to him topaz sleeve-buttons, which actually a rich girl sent to his office as a present, lest he should provoke Myra, an extremely jealous, suspicious and “keen” woman. Sympathizing with Oswald who possesses nothing for himself because of Myra’s extravagance, Lydia takes on the requested role of an accomplice in this ethically false conduct. Myra penetrates into their plot. As friendship is the criteria of her values, deception of her own friends is an impermissible sin. As it is, Lydia’s act is for the sake of her own husband, but because of this very fact Myra’s resentment and contempt are so augmented that her attitude and her remark to Lydia become bitter and stinging enough. When she bears in mind enmity against “friend” who is treacherous to her, she shows her peculiar, disagreeable expression. Her mouth curls and twists “like a little snake.” This “snake” allusion appears again in Part II, as we will see later. Myra’s confrontation with Lydia happens at the very last scene of Part I, resulting in their total alienation.

In New York Myra has, what she calls, “moneyed friends” whom she says she “cultivates on Oswald’s account.” As she takes on “her loftiest and most challenging manner” among them, there never is a true friendship between them. It is rather an association. What is unfortunate for Myra is that scorn is not the only sentiment she has toward them; envy and vanity, as well as the repentance to her choice in life are also in her mind. Scorn by itself would not impair her much, but envy, vanity and repentance interact each other and makes Myra miserable enough. She reveals her inner conflict: “It’s nasty, being poor.” In saying this she, no doubt, is repenting her choice between the two alternatives, money or romance. She chose romance in spite of her great uncle’s threatening of disinheritance, leaving great fortune behind.

Myra also has friendship with people that belong to the world of art. She admires and occasionally takes care of them. Art and artists, besides religion which she approaches near the end of the novel, are the only thing in which she finds permanent value

Next we should turn our eyes to Myra’s great-uncle John Driscoll. Myra’s happy, luxurious life with the great-uncle and her estrangement with him after the elopement happened before Nellie Birdseye’s birth. Their relationship is, next to the one between her and her husband, is crucial to the theme of the novel. Driscoll makes the fortune by contract labor, and after retiring comes

home to Parthia and brings up Myra, an orphan and his only relative, in luxury. He is unlettered but knows a great deal about men and their motives, and Myra, young as she is, appreciates it. They are on good terms with each other till Oswald Henshawe appears.

John Driscoll, who has a dominant position in town with the power of money and who practically owns a musical band in spite of having no refinement to appreciate music, is the type of person Willa Cather might well have detested. But he is, as it were, a successful pioneer and Nellie's account of Driscoll has no nuance of criticism. On the contrary, Nellie manifests a sympathetic tone to this "picturesque" person. His concept of "friend" is shown through Myra's speech near the end of the novel when she is fatally ill in bed, dying.

"He would help a friend, no matter what it cost him and over and over again he risked ruining himself to crush an enemy." (308)

His mentality on "friend" and "enemy" is inherited into Myra's blood. Her detestation and contempt against her friends' treacherous conduct are so intense that the very thought of it leads her to agony.

"It's all very well to tell us to forgive our enemies. But oh, what about forgiving our friends?" (54)

What should be noted is that Myra herself is the person who betrays her great-uncle. John Driscoll's anger comes from the fact that he was betrayed by his own grandniece with whom he believed he had kept beautiful friendship. Oswald Henshawe is the son of an Ulster protestant "whom John Driscoll detested" and with whom "there was an old grudge." Seen from Driscoll's standpoint it means that since Oswald is the person of the enemy's side Myra is the one who betrayed her friend and went over to the enemy. Driscoll, an Irish who believes in Catholicism, could not tolerate that her grandniece eloped with an enemy. Myra's relationship with her great-uncle changes from friendship to enmity by her runaway marriage. In Driscoll's view Myra breaks faith with him, cuts the blood tie, and goes over to the enemy.

However, religious prejudice is not the only issue here. Another reason for Driscoll's opposition to their marriage is Oswald's inadequate financial resources. Though, actually, his resources and prospects are never so small by general standard, but Driscoll had foreseen the failure of their marriage because he had known more than any other Myra's disposition to extravagance. He knew the life without money for Myra would end in disaster:

"It's better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money. I've tried both ways and I know." (248)

Thus his persecution comes not so much from his religious prejudice as from his own philosophy by which he declares: "a poor man stinks and God hates him."

In the deathbed in Part II Myra finds herself to be exactly in the state her great-uncle foretold, and is obliged to admit he was right. Now that she is in old age suffering from extreme poverty and fatal disease, she realizes fully what he must have felt to see Myra run away with his enemy, leaving him behind. Critics see Myra's elopements from the standpoint of the alternative of fortune or romance, but it is more effective for understanding the novel if we see it through friend-enemy perspective. Myra's runaway marriage is the choice from the alternatives between remaining Driscoll's friend or going over to the enemy. The disinheritance was the result. In the deathbed of Part II Myra repents her choice, succumbs him, and, more importantly, is reconciled with him. She understands the great-uncle's relentless treatment of cutting her out of the will, bequeathing her nothing. Her penitence is directed more to having betrayed the old man than to losing the fortune.

Then, how about the marital relationship between the heroine and her husband? Was there any true friendship between them? Was there mutual trust or reliance?

In Part I Myra visits her hometown after twenty-five years from their elopement. In this early stage of the story, Nellie, a fifteen-year-old girl at this time, recognizes some malicious tone in Myra's attitude to her husband. Nellie feels ease more with Oswald Henshawe, a sophisticated Harvard graduate, than with Myra who makes her "ill at ease." At the Christmas time Nellie visits New York with Aunt Lydia and, at first, is totally impressed by the Henshawes who live in "a solidly-built, high-ceiled" apartment keeping company with fashionable people. As Phillip Gerber says, "except in her own eye, she was never truly poor." But Myra regards her life, which appears so affluent to Nellie, as being poor. Her economical frustration adds to her enmity against her husband.

When Nellie witnesses their quarrel about a "key" Myra found in Oswald's pocket, she alters her view of the Henshawes. Myra's "angry laugh" and "a burst of rapid words that stung like cold water from a spray" gives Nellie "fear." In this scene Oswald deals with the situation with "a distinctly malicious chuckle." Having already seen his secret request to Lydia about the topaz sleeve-button, Nellie harbors some suspicions about his duplicity and his image to Nellie as an unpretentious, sophisticated gentleman makes a slight change. The Henshawes' apartment as a "place where light-heartedness and charming manners lived," is "in ruin."

Everything about us seemed evil. ... it is like shipwreck. The air in that room had been like poison. (280-281)

Thus Willa Cather's writing of failing marriage is relentless. Nellie's depiction of Oswald after seeing their dispute shows the same kind of doubt about a man-woman relationship of "marriage" that Jim Burden showed for Cuzak's life in *My Antonia*.

... he looked tired and troubled. I wondered ... at the contradiction in his face. I felt that his life had not suited him; that he possessed some kind of courage and force which slept,

which in another sort of world might have asserted themselves brilliantly. (281)

These passages easily remind us of Jim Burden's account about Antonia's husband and present a figure who deviated by marriage from the life he ought to have lived. Evidently, both Jim Burden's sentiment and Nellie's represent Willa Cather's view of marriage.

At the end of Part I, when Myra, after the quarrel, makes a temporary leave from Oswald and gets on the same train on which Nellie and Lydia are going home to the West, she shows her most proud manner, bluffing, "if he needs me, he can quite well come after me," with a biting touch of irony in her speech to Lydia. But her deterioration is symbolized in her appearance. While she gets off the train with "her head high," the long garnet feather is "drooping behind." Part I ends with Myra's breakaway from her old friend Lydia and with a premonition for the grim future of the Henshawes.

In Part II the Henshawes are living at the same apartment hotel with Nellie Birdseye by a curious coincidence. She encounters them after ten years and relates Myra's physical, mental and economical hardship during a few months until Myra's death. They are suffering an extreme poverty, while Oswald devotedly takes care of his wife. Oswald's appearance at their first meeting in ten years is important to see Willa Cather's intention.

... he was not more than sixty, but he looked much older. He had the tired, tired face of one who has utterly lost hope. (290)

In discussing his change of appearance after Myra's death, which we will see later, this passage should be remembered.

What is emphasized in this paper is that, while *My Mortal Enemy* appears mostly to narrate Myra's misfortune incurred by herself, it also describes Oswald's character more than critics have conventionally thought. He is not what Hermione Lee calls "the ever-chivalric Oswald" who endures his wife's "ferocious treatment."⁸ His personality suggests that his life is far from a victimized one. We should keep in mind that, unlike Myra who thinks they have lost "the power to love" in age, he does not think that their marriage is a failure. Critics have not given great attention to Oswald's character so far, but analyzing his unique nature is crucial in interpreting the central theme Willa Cather worked over in *My Mortal Enemy*.

In Part II Nellie is a woman of twenty-five. In contrast to the apartment in New York, Myra lives with Oswald in a "wretchedly- built", infernal apartment hotel where she is tortured by the noise of the people on the floor above. Myra, fatally ill, is dying. Oswald gives her bath, makes her bed, arranges her things, prepares breakfast, comes home at lunchtime and hurries back to his office. Still, significantly enough, Myra's reliance upon him is limited to everyday activities; she has no entire trust or belief in him in spite of her total dependence in everyday life. It becomes clearer that there exists a rift between Myra, a sick woman totally isolated from the outside

8) Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* (London: Virago Press, 1997), p. 220

world, and Oswald who appears to devote everything to nursing her.

The use of the words "friend" and "friendship" is frequent and conspicuous in Part II as well. Oswald's very first speech at the encounter with Nellie in Part II includes the word "friend".

"What it will mean to her [Myra] to see you again! Her friends always were so much to her, you remember... She has no one here." (289)

Indeed she has literally no friend here. Myra, on the other hand, also uses this word in her very first speech to Nellie, but in a totally different way. Her use of this word includes an ironical, negative nuance now that she has been betrayed by so many "friends".

... a beloved friend coming out of the past. Well, Nellie, dear, I couldn't think of any old friends that weren't better away, for one reason or another. ... I gain strength faster if I haven't people on my mind. But you, Nellie, that's different. (291)

In this way Nellie becomes her only "friend", and, for a certain period of time, Myra has more confidence in Nellie than in Oswald; in fact she has some secretive part of life, either deliberate or not, about which Nellie knows but Oswald doesn't know. They have been married for thirty-five years but Myra conceals certain things to him.

Then, how are their credibility gap and their fatal incompatibility presented in this work of art?

One illustration of their irrecoverable gap is shown in the scene where Myra, lamenting her misfortune and suffering from self-denunciation, becomes temperamentally unstable and locks Oswald and Nellie out of her room. Locked out, Oswald tells Nellie using the word "friendship":

Sometimes she has locked me out for days together. It seems strange—a woman of such generous friendships. ... It's as if she had used up that part of herself. (302-303)

"That part of herself" is used up indeed, but this remark also suggests that she doesn't have friendship with Oswald, either.

One fact that is secretive to Oswald but overt to Nellie is that Myra has kept some "gold pieces". Living in poverty in an hell-like apartment, so tortured by the noise of the people upstairs, and even declaring that "money is the protection... it can buy one quiet", she has never told Oswald about the money. But on the other hand she spends part of this money unstintingly for the mass of an actress she admired. Even in such practical, worldly things as money matters there exists a secret between them. To this connection an interesting fact is that Myra's act is similar to what John Driscoll has done to her. In this respect Willa Cather's contrivance is so dexterous and symbolic. He wills no money for her but spends it for "town band," that is, a group of artists practically in his employ. He wills his fortune to the church while Myra spends her money for the mass, both "for unearthly purposes", as Myra says. It is evident that Myra harbors the same ambivalence to Oswald as Driscoll did to Myra. When she says, "I can feel his savagery

strengthen in me," her mind hovers around his nature of risking himself "to crush an enemy."

"Gloucester's Cliff" also shows their rift. Nellie hires a carriage and takes Myra out to a promontory on the coast, by which Myra is so charmed that she names it "Gloucester's Cliff" associating it with the episode in King Lear. Viewing "the Pacific" from this headland gives her great peace of mind she had not experienced for years.

"I'd love to see this place at dawn. ... That is such a forgiving time. ... it's as if all our sins are pardoned." (300)

They come here "again and again." As it is, Oswald knows nothing about the dying wife's aspiration for the place until her death. Only when he hears from Nellie about it after his wife died, he knows of the Gloucester's Cliff as Myra's salvation.

The gap turns out deeper even at her death. Myra's behavioral pattern shows that she does not wish to leave the vestiges of her existence behind. Myra is "gone" one evening and they find a sheet of scribble. This farewell note, suggestive of their hopeless relationship, is imperative, for the author signifies so much of their rupture in this brief message.

Dear Oswald. My hour has come. Don't follow me. I wish to be alone. Nellie knows where there is money for masses. (324)

Here is a mention about the money she has kept in secret. Another notable thing is the desire: "Don't follow me. I wish to be alone." We should remember Myra's bravado in the last scene of Part I. Myra's last cry of "Don't follow me", evidently, is the continuation of these words in Part I, and it symbolizes her repentance to the choice of Oswald Henshawe as her husband and its tragic outcome. She wishes to die alone because by doing so she tries to resist desperately to the life with Oswald.

The fact that there was no signature is another proof of Nellie's mentality and of their miserable relationship. It is clear that she wishes to erase the existence of herself as Oswald Henshawe's wife. She wants to break free from the Henshawe's name. The "blood tie was very strong", the author says in the early stage of this novel. Indeed, the development of the story reveals that the "blood tie" was stronger than marriage "tie".

Her wish to be separated from Oswald is seen in her will. In spite of the doctrine of Catholicism in which she comes to put faith ardently before her death, she wills her body to be cremated and her ashes to be buried "in some lonely and unfrequented place in the mountains or in the sea." The clause of the will shows not only her desire of eliminating her trace of existence but also her refusal to be buried alongside Oswald Henshawe or under the Henshawes' name.

Myra has a propensity to discriminate people by her judgment as to whether they are a friend or enemy to her. Her hostility is evinced finally toward Nellie Birdseye, the narrator. Since she has frequently witnessed Myra's wayward, almost tyrannical attitude to Oswald, she murmurs:

" ... I wonder why you are sometimes so hard on him now." (313)

Myra's expression suddenly changes, the corners of her mouth trembling. After a dispute she says to Nellie once for all:

"I'd rather you didn't come any more for the time being, Nellie." (315)

Why does she get so angry and scornful just because Nellie defended her husband? The answer is found in her expression of her face. Her cynical, scornful laugh is the sign of showing her anger and contempt, and in this scene the description of Myra's facial expression suggests her feeling:

She was smiling, but her mouth curled like a little snake. (315)

We have already seen the same "snake" expression at the scene in Part I where she estranges herself from Aunt Lydia. This is an expression peculiar to Myra when she shows at a person's betrayal, that is, when she judges that her friend ceased to be a "friend". Hearing Nellie defend Oswald, Myra judged her to be on his side, to be a person who betrayed her and went over to the enemy. Myra's act of ordering Nellie to leave the room shows that Myra has alienated herself even from Nellie, her only, last friend.

The climax of their rupture, comes in the scene where Nellie hears Myra's voice at the deathbed, "scarcely above a whisper but with perfect distinctiveness":

"Why must it be like this? I have been true to friendship; I have faithfully nursed others in sickness....Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" (321)

This is the very last words she utters alive. Even at this last moment she is tormented not only by her strong ambivalence to her husband by whom her life deviated, but also by repentance to her "idolatry" as Nellie says. Here again she refers to friendship, along with the vital phrase "my mortal enemy." Her friendship, whatever value she puts on it, meant nothing in her later life, especially after she came to suffer poverty: it compensated nothing for her disastrous marital relationship, to say the least.

For Willa Cather marital relationship is a jeopardy, because in her view the couple cannot lead a life appropriate for their nature or their aspiration. To put in Deborah Carlin's words again, "marriage is ... at worst a disastrous choice."⁹

If *My Mortal Enemy* is the novel that only depicts Myra's misfortune and delineates her character, the story might well have ended with Myra's death. Indeed, readers feel a slight, not great, relief to see Myra die in a certain spiritual repose on Gloucester's Cliff, with the ebony crucifix in her hands, totally alone. Indeed Nellie's description has a touch of condolence in telling that Myra must have seen "the morning break over the Pacific", which she has yearned to see and

9) Deborah Carlin, *op.cit.*, p. 61

was practically her salvation.

She must have died peacefully and painlessly. There was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn. ... I told Oswald what she had said to me about longing to behold the morning break over the sea, and it comforted him. (326)

We should look into Oswald character more in detail. The last few pages after Myra's death manifest Oswald nature more clearly. In fact this last section is essential to know Willa Cather's motives in writing *My Mortal Enemy*. We already saw a scene where he and Nellie are locked out of Myra's room, but, as it turns out, on the next morning he enjoys talking with a eighteen-year-old girl over breakfast in a restaurant on the ground floor. There is no implication of anything immoral between him and the girl. Nevertheless, seeing that he is talking "with evident pleasure" with a girl while his wife is suffering from "a malignant growth" in an upstairs room, his behavior does not seem to be a temporary diversion; it suggests a sort of duplicity existing in his character. In this connection we should note that during the breakfast Oswald wears that topaz sleeve-buttons which caused the breakaway between Myra and Aunt Lydia.

Unlike Myra he never "used up that part of himself": he can form friendship with others even from now, even after she died. This is what we should discuss most in this paper. This last section, which for the most part consists of Oswald's speech to Nellie, reveals Cather's motive of creating Oswald's character. The exemplar of failed marriage is sarcastically presented here with both casualness and intensity. Oswald says to Nellie:

I don't want you to remember her as she was here. ... Remember her as she was when you were with us on Madison Square. (328)

His most conspicuous nature is that of maintaining himself even in the worst situation by putting the value on the memory of the happiest times. The problem is, "the happiest times" to Oswald was never the happiest times to Myra, for whom the past was the object of repentance and the present of repulsion and denunciation. Oswald conceives the past as the central value in their life, and therefore the memory of "the best of those days" works as the compensation for the worst situation of the present. Myra was aware too much of this aspect in his personality and its difference from hers. Indeed the difference irrecoverably stood in an obtrusive way to one another. Myra knew their situation:

"It's a great pity isn't it, Nellie, to reach out a grudging hand and try to spoil the past for anyone? Yes, it's a great cruelty. But I can't help it. He's a sentimentalist, always was; he can look back on the best of those days when we were young and loved each other, and make himself believe it was always like that. It wasn't. I was always a grasping, worldly woman; I was never satisfied." (314)

She was never satisfied, to be sure. It is imaginable how Myra, "a grasping woman", has been irritated by Oswald who does not suffer the same dejection. Even if their present life is miserable, he can displace his mind from the present situation into the past when he believes they were happy.

This tendency of mind is also seen in his words after Myra's death. This speech shows what a difference there is between them and how totally incompatible they were from the beginning. Looking back the days of their youth, he says:

"We were happy. Yes, happier than it falls to the lot of most mortals to be ... she had such beautiful friendship. (328)

Here, besides the fact that he is not aware that there has been no "beautiful friendship" between Myra and himself, we should remember Aunt Lydia's words that were "disheartening" to Nellie and were the starting point of Nellie's story-telling; in spite of the fifteen-year-old Nellie's disappointment at the fact that they were never "much happier than other people," Oswald, never so "grasping" or "worldly", believes they were "happier" than most mortals.

But explaining how he accepts the actuality needs a little more comment. We should turn our eyes to the very ending of *My Mortal Enemy*. Oswald never regrets their marriage even though their marital relationship concluded in such a terrible way. This mentality in Oswald works to overcome or, rather, to cover the present situation with the memory of "the best of those days." Considering his peculiar mentality, it might not be surprising to hear him say the following:

"These last years it's seemed to me that I was nursing the mother of the girl who ran away with me. Nothing ever took that girl from me." (328)

For him "the best of those days" is the criteria of his values. Past is more valuable than present. Therefore Myra as she was thirty years ago is more important for him than the woman as she is now. In his eyes the old woman he has taken care of is a different one from a young, beautiful girl he loved. Definitely it is Myra that knew more about their actual situation than Oswald. There is a scene where Myra tells Nellie about their marriage relationship in lieu of the author, evidently:

"A man and woman draw apart from that long embrace and see what they have done to each other. ... In age we lose everything, even the power to love." (314)

Nellie denies Myra's last words, saying, "he hasn't" lost the power to love. But here we should realize Myra is right. No matter how devotedly he nurses his wife, it is not love in its truest sense because the woman he nurses is not the one he loved and eloped with, but an old, "unreasonable", sick woman. Oswald's recognition of the actuality is thus screened by his memory of the past.

Importantly this mentality works as both a flaw and an advantage. Though it appears at a first glance to be his personal defect, it is also his advantage because by this trait he gets over the difficult, even fatal, situation that would otherwise lead him to ruin. He is never utterly dejected by the actuality, or never concludes his life at the nadir of adversity. Myra thinks that "in age we lose everything." It naturally means there is nothing left, not even "the power to love" or not even the power to live on. For Oswald, however, all his past, including the period when they were "happy" and when "life was hard", is part of his experiences during his life process. Therefore he is never so irrecoverably shattered that he cannot subsist any longer without purpose. He differentiates good times from bad times; he can repeat his experiences as long as he lives. Even after his wife's death his life will not be that of a recluse who only subsists his remaining years until his own physical death. Myra's death never leads him to total despair and ruin.

He decides to go to Alaska, not because he is in such a despair to live quietly as a recluse, but because still he has a definite aim of working for the steamship company.

Now, the climax of Willa Cather's sarcasm is revealed through Oswald's another surprising speech.

I have always wanted to go [to Alaska], and now there's nothing to hold me. (327)

Ironically enough Oswald has lost nothing by Myra's death. On the contrary, he is freed. Here we should remember Nellie's impression in the early stage that "his life had not suited him". Critics have turned their eyes only to Myra's choice and her consequent misfortune, but as a matter of fact Willa Cather presents her husband's life as the one that deviated from what it should have been. Freed from Myra's bondage he recovers the will and strength to live forward even at the age of over sixty. His expression before he leaves for Alaska is totally different from that of the one who had "the tired, tired face" and has "utterly lost hope", as Nellie describes in their first encounter at this apartment hotel. While he tells about going to Alaska, Nellie realizes in him what she had seen in New York ten years ago when the Henshawes were "happy". She now finds the right word to express that:

I knew it meant indestructible constancy...almost indestructible youth. (328)

Sixty-year-old Oswald who looked much older has thus recovered his "indestructible youth" to live on, freed from the bondage of Myra who was a different woman to him from the one he had long cherished in mind.

Nevertheless, we should note that, though Nellie refers to Oswald's recovery of indestructible youth, there is never any ray of hope shown even at the very end. The concluding passages are dark and enigmatic:

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 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!" (329)

These passages are not those of a twenty-five-year-old girl but obviously Willa Cather's warning.