

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the thesis writer analyzes how the novelist's thoughts and experiences, as the result of the influence of the society, are reflected in the main characters in *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra Henshawe and Nellie Birdseye. As exposed in the third chapter, Willa Cather was born in Virginia and grew up in Nebraska, in the midst of a rural society, and she learned a lot of the pioneers' life in Western U.S.A. Thus, her mind was shaped according to the way of thinking of rural people and the pioneers. As a child, her superego was molded after the values and ideas of the pioneers. She grew up bearing the mind-pattern of the pioneers – the society in which she was raised. After she graduated college, Willa Cather moved to the city to pursue her career in teaching and journalism while she developed her talent as a writer. During her life in the city she also experienced the impact of the World Wars, which changed the outlook and spirit of the world. The transition from rural life to urban life certainly brought a profound influence, both psychologically as well as socially. The alteration of the world trend that shaped America into a fast-paced and materialistic country also brought great influence on her way of thinking and world-view. Her being exposed to urban life and urban society, pre and post World Wars, affected her ideas, thoughts, behavior, and product of arts – in this case, her novels. The reflection of Willa Cather's ideas and thoughts can be seen in the characters in her novels, and thus we can also find this reflection of the novelist in *My Mortal Enemy*.

*My Mortal Enemy* is divided into two parts and thus the thesis writer will discuss the novel from the first part to the second. The novel focuses on the life of Myra Henshawe as seen through the eyes of Nellie Birdseye. Nellie in this novel plays the part of a narrator; however, she too has her own ideas and opinion as compared to Myra. Between the first and the second part, there is a gap of ten years period in which the two characters do not see one another. Within these ten years, the two characters have grown and undergone changes in life which affect their ideas and thoughts a great deal. The thesis writer analyzes the ideas and thoughts of each of these two characters and also the way the society in which they live influences their mind and behavior.

## **A. Part I**

In the beginning of Part I, the two characters are introduced to one another and started their friendship. Myra Henshawe at this point is a married woman of forty-five with great pride and prominence. Nellie Birdseye is yet a fifteen-year-old young lady who would readily admire Myra and is willing to learn anything she teaches her.

### **A.1. Myra Henshawe**

Myra Henshawe (Myra Driscoll) was born in Parthia, Illinois, which is also the hometown of Nellie Birdseye. For years, the people in Parthia talks of Myra and her elopement with Oswald Henshawe, a man she was forbidden to

marry. The people of Parthia seem to admire her distinctive nature and courage in making her own mind and striving for the life she chooses to live.

In the first two pages, Myra is described (through Nellie's point of view) as follows: "She and her runaway marriage were the theme of the most interesting; indeed, the only interesting stories that were told in our family... She had been the brilliant and attractive figure among the friends of their girlhood, and her life had been as exciting and varied as ours were monotonous" (9-10).

From the way Myra is introduced in the novel, the thesis writer sees that Willa Cather is inserting her view or idea of a pioneer woman. Myra is depicted as a courageous woman who dares to take risk and is willing to struggle for success by taking a path she chooses for herself. This is the pioneer trait that the thesis writer sees in Myra. Willa Cather depicts Myra Henshawe this way because Miss Cather herself is also a pioneer. She left her hometown to struggle on her own as a journalist in big cities. She has a pioneer trait in her, which motivates her to strive for success on her own, and not to depend on her family. Her high temperament, courage, and self-discipline are her own traits represented in the character of Myra Henshawe.

In the first part of this novel, the thesis writer finds some of Myra's thoughts and ideas, which reflect the thoughts and ideas of the novelist.

### **A.1.1. Myra's Thoughts**

#### **Friendship**

Myra Henshawe is the kind of person who thinks highly of friendship. Friends mean a lot for Myra – and she happens to love making friends. When she first meets Nellie, Myra straightforwardly offered Nellie her hand in friendship. “Now, let us get acquainted. Tell me about the things you life best! That’s the shortcut to friendship” (13).

This shows Willa Cather’s idea of being open to friendship. In her biography, it is said that Miss Cather is the kind of person who really cherishes the blessing of friendship. Myra’s openness to friendship is a reflection of Miss Cather’s readiness to make friends. She knows that talking about one’s best interest is the fastest way to make friend, and so she puts this idea in the words of her main character.

As the story develops, the thesis writer sees how concerned Myra is with her friends. She often becomes a matchmaker for her friends, that her husband comments, “Myra is so fond of helping young men along. We nearly always have a love affair on hand” (39).

The point in this context is not the love affair, but Myra’s readiness to help her friends, in this case in seeking future spouses. Myra is a very thoughtful person when it comes to her friends. She always wants things to turn out alright for her friends, including in the matter of love.

Myra loves her friends and appreciates them a great deal. She holds the opinion that friendship is very important in life and that people have to appreciate and care for their friends. Another example can be seen from her careful attention to one of her best friend, Helena Modjeska. She seeks for the best holly-tree to give her on Christmas. "She gave careful instructions to the florist's man, who was to take the tree to the Savoy; he was to carry with it a box of cakes, 'of my baking,' she said proudly" (40-41).

Myra actually takes pride in the attention she can show her friends. Her pleasure is when the friend she is trying to please is really grateful for what she has done for him/her. This pride of hers points out Myra's idea of friendship, that a friend should always be ready to give, and that giving (attention, appreciation, or things) to our friends is an important element in friendship.

This shows Willa Cather's idea that a friend has to always be ready to help in whatever circumstance and that a person should appreciate his/her friends by giving them the attention they need. By doing so, people show one another how much they care and how much their friends mean for them. Willa depicts how people should care for their friends through Nellie's point of view of Myra:

"My aunt often said that Myra was incorrigibly extravagant; but I saw that her chief extravagance was in caring for so many people, and in caring for them so much. When she but mentioned the name of some one whom she admired, one got an instant impression that the person must be wonderful, her voice invested the name with a sort of grace. When she liked people, she always called them by

name a great many times in talking to them, and she enunciated the name, no matter how commonplace, in a penetrating way” (54-55).

When Myra cares for someone, she does not simply show her attention by giving gifts or visiting them at times. She actually and sincerely thinks highly and respectfully of them. It shows the novelist’s idea that friendship has to be based on sincerity and respect. One should not think negatively of his/her friend or talk against his/her friend. When we make friend with someone, we must treat our friend with sincerity and respect. That is also an important element in friendship.

When one is not respectful toward his/her friend, then the friendship will come to a ruin. This is clear from the example in the novel, when Myra told Nellie of a writer who used to be her friend. The friendship between them is over, and Myra regrets her making friend with the man.

“He used to be a friend of mine. That’s a sad phrase, isn’t it? But there was a time when he could have stood by Oswald in a difficulty – and he didn’t. He passed it up. Wasn’t there. I’ve never forgiven him... Oh, Nellie, I wish you hadn’t seen him! 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?” (56).

From the above citation, the thesis writer learns about Myra’s thoughts on the possibility of a friendship to end. The man who used to be Myra’s friend was not there when Oswald and Myra were in difficulty. He passed the chance of showing his attention and giving them help they needed. By doing so, the man shows that he was not really sincere in making friends and that he actually did not

respect the friendship. Myra concludes that because the man does not respect her and Oswald as his friends, he is not sincere in the friendship, and he refuses to give help or show attention in their time of difficulty, then he is not worthy to be called a friend. From this example, Willa Cather tries to convey that leaving a friend in need is similar to betraying the friendship. She implicitly states the idea – through Myra’s words – that true friends never abandon one another in a time of need. Instead, they are obliged to help each other out of difficulty.

From the above discussion, the thesis writer sees how Myra represents the novelist’s values concerning the importance of friendship. Willa Cather points out her inner value of friendship which she has learned and fully cherishes from her circle of friends. Obviously, Miss Cather has got trustworthy friends who make up her perception of the value of friendship. The high value of friendship she has learned shapes up her superego in understanding what is morally good and meaningful between friends. The thesis writer thus sums up Willa Cather’s idea of friendship as can be seen from the thoughts of Myra Henshawe:

- People should be open to friendship.
- Friends should always be ready to help one another.
- Showing care and attention is an important element in friendship.
- People have to be sincere and respectful in friendship.
- True friends never abandon one another in difficult times.

### **Love and Marriage**

Although the people of her hometown always speak highly of Myra's elopement with Oswald and how courageous she was in choosing love rather than her great family inheritance, Myra's sentences deny the idealistic view of love. After twenty-five years of marriage, Myra views her love to Oswald in the beginning as nothing more than adolescence love. It was nothing than an urge for having a life-mate – it was the drive generated by her id: the sexual drive.

The love-story between Myra and Oswald is part of the pioneer traits that always exist in Willa Cather's novels. Miss Cather grows up in the pioneer society enough to recognize that it is the characteristic of Western society to adore youthful love. The adolescence restlessness is one of the many traits of the pioneer society, and especially among the youngsters. Miss Cather must have seen many examples from the life of young people in her hometown to insert this trait into her work.

Myra confessed to Nellie that Oswald "went into an office only because we were young and terribly in love, and had to be married" (50). After they are married, however, they find out that love is not as beautiful as it used to be. She tells her friend, Ewan Gray, that "love itself draws on a woman nearly all the bad luck in the world" (38). This describes how Willa Cather does not put love between men and women in the positive light. In the novelist's mind, love tends to be complex rather than naïve.

Myra has learned that love is not only an emotion. After two people have decided to marry because of love, they have to go through many hardships and



struggles to defend their marriage. It is not an easy matter. It is not idealistic either. The fulfillment of the id's desire leads the couple into realizing with their egos that love is not simply a desire to fulfill. It is a life they should defend and fight for. The love in a marriage is confronted more to the reality of life rather than on the idealistic side of love people use to think of in their youth. That is why Myra says that love draws nearly all the bad luck in the world. Myra knows how it feels to be in love, but she also knows the end of it. It is not as happy as most people think. She tells Nellie concerning Ewan Gray and Esther Sinclair, her two friends who are deeply in love with one another,

“See the moon coming out, Nellie – behind the tower. It wakens the guilt in me. No playing with love; and I'd sworn a great oath never to meddle again. You send a handsome fellow like Ewan Gray to a fine girl like Esther, and it's Christmas Eve, and they rise above us and the white world around us, and there isn't anybody, not a tramp on the park benches, that wouldn't wish them well – and very likely hell will come of it!” (41)

It does not mean that Myra detests marriages, but she has an opinion that marital life is not as wonderful as most people think of. It is filled with many struggles and difficulties so that it may cause the couple to suffer throughout their marriage. She is sad that Ewan and Esther are going to get married because she knows that they will not be completely happy all the rest of their lives. Basically, Myra wishes to spare her friends the suffering of being married because she knows how hard it is to maintain one's marriage. She knows that marriage which

is stirred only by the desire of the id and does not calculate the reality by using the ego will not end up happily.

This is Willa Cather's way of conveying her view of love and marriage. From the biography, the thesis writer knows that Miss Cather remained unmarried. It is assumable that she avoids being married because she knows the hardships every marriage has to suffer. Myra's thought of love and marriage actually comes from Willa Cather's idea that most marriage cannot maintain the idealistic love once praised by the youths. The difficulties in marital life tend to blur the ideal concept of love, thus limiting it to the routine and reality in life. By conveying this thought, Miss Cather actually positions friendship above love and marriage. She praises and prefers friendship to marriage. People do not undergo such hardship in friendship as they find in marriage. In friendship, all stand as individuals who are bound by the bond of friendship. They are free to run their own lives, careers, businesses, and keep their privacy – yet in the same time they care for one another and are ready to help their friends. It is so unlike a marriage, in which two individuals are bound to be one in all they do. They have to share their private lives, businesses, activities, etc. In marriages, people can be threatened by jealousy and affairs, because they are no longer counted as individuals, but as couples. It is not so in friendship, because all stand as individuals on neutral grounds and need not worry about jealousy and love-betrayal.

Nevertheless, though the novelist proposes this idea of positioning friendship above marriage, Willa Cather also holds her own positive opinion

concerning married people. From the character of Myra Henshawe, the thesis writer sees that although Myra's youthful love toward Oswald has faded to some extent, she still loves and cares for him in another way. So, some part of the id has been transformed into ego; the urge has found its way to cope with reality.

As a wife, Myra positions herself as Oswald's suitable helper. She is there for him in good times and bad times. She helps him in things he cannot handle, such as making connections through getting acquainted to people. Since Oswald is not really good in making friends, Myra has to find him the channels to prestigious and influential people. She befriends business people "on Oswald's account. 'He is the sort of man who does well in business only if he has the incentive of friendships. He doesn't properly belong in business.'" (50)

Myra here plays the role of a helpful wife. She knows how to use her talent to lift up her husband's prestige and cover his weakness. She treats him with respect and helps him to appear before public in prestige and dignity. Her smartness as a wife gives her husband an extra reputation in the eyes of the people. She knows how to respect her husband, and that is her plus point as a wife. Her superego teaches her that as a wife she has to display a good morality in front of public for the benefit of her husband.

Willa Cather might have wanted to say that it is better to trust in friendship than marriage. However, if someone is married, it is best for him/her to treat his/her spouse with respect and care for him/her with extra attention. Although hardships may rise in a marriage, it is best for couples to be able to complement

one another and to cover up each other's weaknesses, though the love they once had is no longer as blazing as it used to be.

Thus, the thesis writer may sum up Willa Cather's view of love and marriage as depicted through the thoughts of Myra Henshawe:

- Love in reality and marriage is not as beautiful as most people imagine.
- It is better to trust in the bond of friendship than in that of marriage.
- Married couples are expected to respect one another and to complement one another in their marital life.

### **Money and Properties**

Although Myra was raised in luxury, it seems that she has no interest in her family's great inheritance. By marrying Oswald, she left her fortune behind and walked into a life full of risk and struggle. "She had wanted to leave without taking anything but the clothes she wore -- and indeed she walked out of the house with nothing but her muff and her *porte-monnaie* in her hands" (23).

This shows Myra's idea that money is not the most important thing in life. She knows that she can survive on her own without having to rely on family inheritance. By describing Myra's indifference to the family's fortune, Willa Cather inserts the idea of a pioneer woman. Myra here is depicted as having a high pioneer trait. Courage and struggle are two traits of pioneers' life, and Willa

Cather portrays it clearly in Myra. As a pioneer, she is able to struggle on her own without depending on the family. This shows her independence and courage.

It also reflects Willa Cather's independence, courage, and struggle. She left her hometown in her early twenties (similar to Myra) and started a life full of risk and struggle as a journalist in the city (Pittsburg, then New York). Willa Cather chooses to live independently though her family is quite well-off in Nebraska. She does not depend on her family's fortune, but on her own ability and motivation for personal success. Willa Cather behaves thusly toward fortune because her pioneer superego teaches her about the value of independence and gaining success on one's own. When she is able to reach her own success without the family's help, she feels self-satisfied due to her being able to fulfill the superego's demand.

Further on, the thesis writer also sees that Myra is a very generous person. She gives away her husband's half-a-dozen new shirts to their janitor's son (15), always gives money to street kids (36), gives extra tips for the florist's man (41), and gives a hansom cab driver such a large fee "that he snatched off his hat and said twice: 'Thank you, thank you, my lady!'" (53) Myra tells Nellie, as her response to the hansom cab driver's reaction, "'All the same,' she whispered to me as she fitted her latchkey, 'it's very nasty, being poor!'" (53)

Myra's generosity shows that she always has pity on the poor. She knows how difficult the life of the poor is, and therefore she is always ready to give to the poor. She and Oswald had gone through difficult times before, during their first years of marriage, where they had to move to a big city and struggled for a

living. Now that Myra is successful and rich, she remembers the poor and never hesitates in giving them extra money. Her generosity shows her idea that the rich should have special care for the poor and help them whenever they find a chance to do so.

Willa Cather has also undergone such difficult times when she gave up a steady life and career in journalism and dedicated her life for writing. She inserts her idea in her main character. In Miss Cather's opinion, the rich should care for the poor and be empathic to them, because living in poverty is very unpleasant. The poor are always faced to difficulties in life and they need people's care and generosity in their time of need. So, after undergoing difficult times, Willa Cather implants new values into her superego, the ones that emphasize the importance of generosity toward the poor in the society.

For Myra Henshawe, the importance of money is that it buys people prestige and good connections. She makes friend with wealthy people for the sake of her husband's prestige and good connections. When she meets her rich friends, "Myra was dressed in her best – making an especial effort on Oswald's account; but the rich and powerful irritated her" (51). This shows that actually Myra does not like befriending the rich and influential, but she does it for prestige and connections. The more wealthy friends she and Oswald have, the more they can gain prestige and good connections. In Myra's opinion, money buys prestige, but not happiness. It shows from the way she feels irritated among the rich.

This also reflects Willa Cather's opinion concerning wealth. By portraying Myra's position as a prestigious woman who does not feel comfortable among the

rich, Miss Cather describes her own feelings toward money and the rich. As a good journalist, she had to get along with influential people and learn their way of living. She was also successful in her career, which positioned her on the upper circle in the society. Nevertheless, Willa Cather does not feel comfortable living among the rich and famous. She prefers the life of an artist, in which she feels more secure, happy, and comfortable. That is why in the end she gives up her successful career as a journalist and becomes an artist (writer) instead.

The thesis writer can see Willa Cather's idea of money from Myra Henshawe's thoughts:

- Money is not the most important matter in life.
- The rich should be thoughtful and generous toward the poor.
- Money may buy people prestige and good connections, but it cannot buy happiness and comfort.

#### **A.1.2. The Influence of the Society**

The thesis writer finds three stages of Myra's life and the three types of society which forms her throughout these stages. The first stage is her childhood period, in which Myra grew up within her family. The second stage is her adolescence period, in which she had her own circle of friends – and where she met Oswald. The third stage is her maturity period, in which she has lived a settled marriage in the city.

## **Childhood**

Myra Henshawe grew up in Parthia, Illinois. She was an orphan and was raised by her wealthy uncle, John Driscoll. Myra's uncle was the richest and most influential man in Parthia. He also happened to be the only family she had. He raised her like his own child, and "she was a good deal like him; the blood tie was very strong" (20). The family is the first social institution a child first lives in. It is the family that forms the child's character and way of thinking – her ego and superego. Myra's character and way of thinking is greatly influenced by her uncle. It is said that: "John Driscoll made his fortune employing contract labor in the Missouri swamps. He retired from business early, returned to the town where he had been a poor boy, and built a fine house in which he took great pride. He lived in what was considered great splendor in those days" (19).

As can be seen from the above citation, Willa Cather depicts Myra's uncle as a man with pioneer traits. He started from zero and reached success on his own effort. Myra later on grows up as a woman with pioneer traits because she learned it from her uncle. Her pioneer character is shaped in the family. She learned of independence, courage, and struggle from her uncle. These are the values embedded in her superego. Later on, when the time came, she decided to start from nothing and build her success independently, as the way her uncle taught her.

Willa Cather's depiction of John Driscoll also reflects her own father. Willa Cather's father took his family to move from the tranquil life of Old Virginia to the wild Western prairies of Nebraska, where he struggled to start a



new life from zero and in the end became a successful businessman. Willa also inherits this pioneer trait from her father. It is proven by her leaving Nebraska to pursue a career in big cities without relying on her family's fortune. Thus, the thesis writer sees the reflection of Willa Cather and her father in the description of Myra Henshawe and her uncle.

### **Adolescence**

During her teenage days in Parthia, Myra "had everything: dresses and jewels, a fine riding horse, a Steinway piano... When they [Myra and her uncle] were at home, in Parthia, his house was always open to the young people of the town" (20). This shows that Myra happens to be a very sociable person. She likes to make friends and invites them to her house. The circle of friends is the second social institution Myra lives in. This social circle also influences her way of thinking, and it teaches her of new ideas which are sometimes in contradiction with the ones she has been taught at home. The adolescent idea of love is one thing Myra's uncle never taught her and she learns it from her circle of friends.

Willa Cather inserts this as another trait of pioneer society. The pioneer traits also talk about adolescence restlessness, and Myra's love story serves as an example. Her elopement with Oswald is a cliché Western romance which colors the life of the Western society.

"Some months after this conversation, Myra went out with a sleighing party. They drove her to a neighboring town... There, in the presence of his [Oswald's] parents and of Myra's friends, they

were married by civil authority, and they went away on the Chicago express, which came through at two in the morning” (23).

Myra’s elopement with Oswald is supported by her circle of friends, and this proves that another social institution outside the family can bring a great influence on the making of someone. Myra’s friends have influenced her way of thinking so that she finally decides to give up her family and follow the desire of her youthful passion. At this point, she thinks that love is more important than family matters and inheritance. At this point of adolescence also, the desires of the id – especially the sexual drives – are peaking, and youngsters would fall into the web of romance without realizing that they are actually following the urges of their most primitive motivational force.

### **Maturity**

Twenty-five years after her elopement, Myra has grown to full maturity in character. She has established her own character and values. In these days, Myra’s community is divided into two:

“Her friends, I found, were of two kinds: artistic people – actors, musicians, literary men – with whom she was always at her best because she admired them; and another group whom she called her ‘moneyed’ friends (she seemed to like the word), and these she cultivated, she told me, on Oswald’s account... Among these people, Mrs. Myra took on her loftiest and most challenging manner” (50).

The thesis writer sees in the novel that actually Myra loves her artistic friends far better than her “moneyed” friends. It shows that Myra considers art and high culture as far more valuable than money and power. Myra’s taste has come to its maturity. She knows for certain the things that can bring her happiness (friendship with the artists) and the things that she uses only as a means to an end (the influence of her wealthy acquaintances). The artistic people broaden up her way of thinking. They teach her poetry, music, and literature, which generally speaks of things more important than daily reality. This helps to enrich her knowledge and refine her character – especially her superego. The “moneyed” people help her to maintain her husband’s prestigious position in the society and make business run well for the Henshawes. By getting along with the wealthy, Myra knows her way in the competitive business world and how to survive in the urban society.

Myra’s two communities also reflect Willa Cather’s social life. When she was still a journalist, Miss Cather had to face two different communities. The first one is the artistic people, from whom she learned more about arts and latest issues of art. From these people, Miss Cather learned to develop her talents and skills in writing, either poetry or prose. The second community is the influential people, whom she had to get acquainted with in order to maintain and support her career as a journalist. These acquaintances gave her prestige and helped her to get around in the competitive urban society. It is no doubt that Miss Cather prefers the first to the second community. This preference is shown clearly in the main character, Myra Henshawe.

## **A.2. Nellie Birdseye**

Nellie Birdseye is the narrator in this novel. She was born in Parthia, Illinois, and for many years she has heard the story of Myra and Oswald's elopement being told in her family. Lydia, Nellie's aunt, is one of Myra's old best friends. Nellie grew up in a good family, and she is the favorite of her Aunt Lydia. Myra tells Nellie on their first meeting, "You see, I prod you because I am certain that Lydia and your mother have spoiled you a little. You've been over-praised to me. It's all very well to be clever, my dear, but you mustn't be solemn about it – nothing is more tiresome" (13).

Willa Cather depicts Nellie in Part I as an intelligent but rather shy girl. This may be a reflection of her past. Miss Cather was a quick and intelligent young lady who was always willing to learn from her mentors. Nellie's friendship with Myra also reflects Willa Cather's fondness in befriending older women and learning from them. One example is Sarah Orne Jewett, the writer, who was a dear friend to Miss Cather and happened to be much older than she was. Willa Cather learned a lot from her and regarded her as her mentor, as does Nellie regard Myra.

### **A.2.1. Nellie's Thoughts**

From Nellie Birdseye, the thesis writer sees Willa Cather's way of depicting the way of thinking of a young Western lady. Nellie is yet inexperienced and she has a lot to learn from Myra. Willa Cather describes her in this way to represent her own feelings and thoughts when she was yet a young Nebraskan girl.

## Love

As a young lady, Nellie's perception of love is still very cliché and idealistic. This is the way Western youngsters think of love. They always think that love is beautiful and exciting and that people who marry for love must be happy all the days of their lives. Nellie thinks so highly of Myra and Oswald's love story, picturing them as the happiest couple she can ever imagine.

"But they've been happy, anyhow?" I sometimes asked her [Aunt Lydia].

"Happy? Oh, yes! As happy as most people."

That answer was disheartening; the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people" (25).

Here, the thesis writer sees how Willa Cather depicts her youthful perception of love through the mind of Nellie Birdseye. Western youngsters mostly think of love from an idealistic point of view: when two lovers are deeply in love and dare to risk all that they have for love, they should live happily ever after.

However, after her first meeting with Myra, Nellie suddenly changes her idea of romantic love. She compares Myra, who married for love, with her late uncle, who forbade her to marry Oswald:

"After I went home from that first glimpse of the real Myra Henshawe, twenty-five years older than I had always imagined her, I could not help feeling a little disappointed. John Driscoll and his

niece suddenly changed places in my mind, and he had got, after all, the more romantic part” (27).

From her meeting with Myra, Nellie realizes that love is not as ideal as she had imagined it to be. After many years, love is mixed and contaminated with too much reality and thus its idealistic quality fades.

This is Willa Cather’s idea of opposing the youngsters’ idealistic point of view of love to reality. In real life, love is not ideal. Therefore, young people who think that romantic love is always wonderful and exciting have to be prepared to find that it is not so in reality.

The inexperienced Nellie once sees love only from the point of view of the id, but luckily she is a young lady of good judgment. She is a woman-of-reason who prefers standing on the bridge of ego than following wildly after the id. Her readiness to learn from reality helps her to quickly shift her ideas from the id’s point of view to the ego’s point of view. The thesis writer can then sum up Willa Cather’s idea of love as seen from the eyes of young Nellie Birdseye:

- Love is always ideal in the mind of adolescents.
- Love in reality and marriage is not as ideal as young people imagine it to be. It may, in fact, contain many flaws and disappointments.

### **Myra and Oswald**

Nellie’s impression of Myra is that she is a woman of great affection. Nellie admires the way “in caring for so many people and in caring for them so

much” (54). This caring, affectionate trait of Myra may also be the reflection of Willa’s trait, for she was much like her mother, Jennie, a woman who enjoyed many things and cherished even the simplest matters. Once, Nellie associates Myra with the *Casta Diva* aria she had heard the night before:

“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 shadows” (60).

By admiring Myra’s affectionate character and understanding her inner nature, Nellie actually shows that she is a very sensible young lady. She is quick in understanding other people’s character and very capable of seeing the best traits a person possesses. This proves Nellie’s sensitivity, which also depicts Willa’s sensitivity as a young lady. Nellie here sees the virtuous side of Myra as she listens to the music. She understands that Myra has another quality within her which cannot easily be seen in daily life. On the night when they heard Helena Modjeska played *Casta Diva*, Nellie realizes that beyond her high looks, Myra Henshawe is actually a virtuous woman of great passion and affection. Her virtue, kindness, and affection make her admire and respect Myra the more.

Nellie’s ability to see the virtuous trait in Myra and her admiration to her also reflect Willa Cather’s admiration toward older literary women who became her models and mentors. She sees the best quality in them, treats them with

respect and honor, and learns from them to improve her own skills and talents. This shows that she is very sensitive to improvement. Her acquaintance with such artists helps refining her morality and high values.

Nellie's feeling toward Oswald Henshawe is based on pity. She looks on him with sympathy.

“I wondered, as on the first time I saw him, in my own town, at the contradiction in his face: the strong bones, and the curiously shaped eyes without any fire in them. 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” (65).

Nellie's sympathy toward Oswald shows that she is a young lady with a kind heart. She can empathize on other people's sufferings. She can understand that there is something lacking from Oswald's life because he does not live the life he desires to live. Oswald is not a man of business. Nellie can see straightly that he ought to be a soldier or an explorer. However, because of his love for Myra, Oswald gives up his sense of adventure and ends up becoming a businessman instead. Here, the thesis writer sees Nellie's thoughts of Oswald. First, she finds him a gentle-hearted man who readily sacrificed himself for the happiness of his wife. Second, she holds an opinion that to be content and happy in life, someone has to fulfill his personal calling in life. Oswald is not really happy living in New York because he leads a life of a business man, which is not of the calling of his heart.



From Nellie's point of view of Oswald, the thesis writer sees that Willa Cather wants to insert her opinion that it is important for people to fulfill their personal callings in life. It will make them feel content and really happy because it will make them cherish the place where they belong. People cannot be happy living or working where they do not belong. Willa Cather once experienced this. Although she made lots of money as a journalist, she did not feel complete satisfaction in journalism because her personal calling is that of a writer. Only after she gave up journalism and started her career as a writer that she felt really content, happy, and complete in her life.

From Nellie's point of view of Myra and Oswald, the thesis writer can sum up Willa Cather's idea:

- Some people have hidden traits which cannot be seen easily in daily life. However, when we are able to see the best in one's character, we will learn to admire, respect, and learn from them even more.
- People should follow after their personal calling in order to live a full, satisfying, and happy life.

### **City Life and Country Life**

Nellie first visited New York when she was fifteen. Her point of view of the big city and the urban life is the point of view of an inexperienced visitor, not a citizen. She adores New York, as would any country-dwellers who take their

first visit to the city. Nellie admires the beauty of the city, which is different from the beauty of the country.

“When we went out into Madison Square again, Mrs. Henshawe must have seen my wistful glaze... Madison Square was then at the parting of the ways; had a double personality, half commercial, half social, with shops to the south and residences on the north. It seemed to me so neat, after the raggedness of our Western cities; so protected by good manners and courtesy – like an open-air drawing room” (33-34).

Here, Nellie compares the city and the country. They are different in architecture, in atmosphere, in the laying-out, in function, and in attitudes. Nellie is charmed by the new atmosphere she finds. She has an opinion that the city is a much more exciting place compared to the country.

Willa Cather must have also had the same thought as Nellie. As a country girl she holds a certain admiration to the city and later on she tries her luck and pursues a career in the city. The admiration to the city urges her to leave the monotonous country life and enter the busy city life. This can be seen in Nellie Birdseye. After her first encounter with New York in the first part, she will return ten years afterward to pursue her career there.

### **A.2.2. The Influence of the Society**

In Part I, the thesis writer recognize two stages of life in which Nellie Birdseye is encountered to different societies. The first one is her childhood in

Parthia, Illinois, and the second is during her visit in New York, where she learns of social life in the city.

### **Childhood**

Nellie Birdseye was born and raised in Parthia, Illinois. She comes from a good middle-class family. Her mother and aunt raised her to the way of the Western rural society. People in the Western U.S.A. live a steady life, where developments in science, technology, and information do not take place so often and rapid. The society changes little during the years and they tend to nourish the old norms and habits of doing things. New ideas and breakthroughs rarely happen. People prefer to preserve the old ways. Nellie is brought up in a family with such old-fashioned ideas which are handed from one generation to the next. That shapes her into a simple-minded young lady, despite her cleverness. Nellie thinks of the life of the society in which she grew up as boring and monotonous, and that is why she always imagines Myra and Oswald's elopement as the most exciting story she ever knows.

Willa Cather also grew up in an almost-similar rural society. She knows of the monotony of life in the country and the way the people preserve their tradition in cultivating the land, farm, ranch, or running other businesses in the country. In short, life does not undergo rapid changes in the country – and this makes the progressive growth of the city and all the excitement in it very tempting for Willa Cather, as well as for Nellie Birdseye.

## **Adolescence**

During a time in her adolescence period, Nellie Birdseye experiences one thing which would change her course of life: her starting a friendship with Myra Henshawe in New York. This new friendship brings great influence on her.

Befriending Myra Henshawe draws Nellie into another social life she has never known. By becoming Myra's friend, she is taken into her social circles, in which she learns more about urban life than what she only heard at home. Myra teaches Nellie of manners and etiquettes in upper-middle class urban society.

“During the week between Christmas and New Year's day, I was with Mrs. Henshawe a great deal, but we were seldom alone. It was the season of calls and visits, and she said that meeting so many people would certainly improve my manners and my English. She hated my careless, slangy, Western speech” (49).

Myra here plays the role of a mentor for Nellie. She teaches her of city life and manners, which Nellie learns with enthusiasm. Her acquaintance with Myra and her circle of friends has given Nellie important inputs and influenced her way of thinking. She is re-shaped by Myra's guidance. Nellie is no longer as simple-minded as she used to be.

## **B. Part II**

Part II is set in an overgrown American West-coast city, ten years after Nellie's visit to Myra's house in New York. Myra is now fifty-five, old, lonely, and very ill. Nellie is twenty-five; she has grown into a smart young lady and

come to the city to become a lecturer in a college. Both women are now very poor and live in the same hotel apartment.

This second part with its depiction of overgrowing urbanity, mechanization and materialism, may talk about the condition of the society post World War I, which stands in contrast with the previous part, which is colored by the stability of the society in the city. In this second part, the thesis writer finds a sphere of anxiety described implicitly by the novelist to represent her concern toward the decline of spiritual values and the increase of bad morality in the society surrounding her.

### **B.1. Myra Henshawe**

Part II is mostly focused on Myra's last days. She and Oswald has fallen from grace and lost everything. Their poverty is only part of Myra's suffering. She is also dying of cancer and has no proper medication. Nevertheless, her poverty and illness bring enlightenment toward her way of life and thinking. As Nellie describes her on her first meeting with Myra after so many years: "She looked strong and broken, generous and tyrannical, a witty and rather wicked old woman, who hated life for its defeats, and loved it for its absurdities" (80).

Myra in Part II is fifty-five, and Willa Cather – when she wrote this novel – was in her early fifties. So, the thesis writer assumes that Myra's thoughts in this novel is much related to Willa Cather's ideas and opinions at the moment she wrote *My Mortal Enemy*. Willa in her fifties holds different ideas of life as compared to her early thirties when she left journalism to become a writer. It is

true that when she abandoned journalism, she decided to live in Greenwich Village apartment, together with her companion, Edith Lewis, for fifteen years. Life was not easy for her as she then lost her source of income, and she had to struggle to make her way. She really experienced the discomfort of living in a busy-city apartment with uncaring neighbors, and the thesis writer believes that Willa Cather depicts her difficult life (on the days she left her career as a journalist) through her characters. She depicts life and its sufferings more intensely by adding a lethal illness to her character, Myra Henshawe. By doing so, she really portrays the condition of the poor and marginalized people in the city and also to pour her ideas of life and suffering in the thoughts of her main character.

### **B.1.1. Myra's Thoughts**

#### **Friendship**

Although Myra has lost everything, her idea of friendship does not fade. She still remains the same loyal friend as she used to be and loves her friends as much as when she was rich. Oswald joyfully and bitterly tells Nellie on their first encounter after ten years: “What good fortune for Myra! She will hardly believe it when I tell her. She is ill, my poor Myra... What it will mean to her to see you again! Her friends always were so much to her, you remember?... Oh, I hope for her sake you are staying some time. She has no one here” (74).

Oswald, who is always by her side, knows for sure that Myra's love for her friends never stops. But there is an irony here: Myra, who is so faithful to her friends and cares for them at every time, now has no single friend in her time of suffering. At first, it does not seem fair for Myra to be abandoned by her friends in her illness. However, Nellie goes on giving her account of Myra, saying that "Myra had stopped writing to Aunt Lydia, beyond a word of greeting at Christmas and on her birthday. She had ceased to give us any information about their way of life" (75).

It is obvious from the above quotation that Myra is still faithful to her friends; she always sends Christmas and birthday cards to Lydia. However, she keeps her poverty and illness a secret from her friends. The thesis writer sees that this is a very noble trait of a true friend depicted in Myra Henshawe. Myra has always been a friend in need for her friends, but when the turn comes for her to be in need, she withdraws herself from her friends so that she will not burden them with her suffering. She does not crave for her friends' help when she falls into poverty. She does not want to trouble them in heart and in deed. She loves them so much that she does not wish to bother them by telling her present condition.

The thesis writer sees that this is Willa Cather's idea of the true love of a friend. Willa expresses her opinion that a true friend loves at all times without desiring anything in return. If "giving" in a friendship is done out of the desire to "take" something from our friends, then the love in the friendship is not true. Willa portrays Myra here as a model of a true friend, who always loves without expecting any returned-favor from her friends.

Amazingly, the thesis writer also sees that Myra's loyalty to her friends goes on beyond the border of life and death. It is clear from the incident when she calls Nellie to do her a favor:

“Will you go to St. Joseph's Church and inquire for Father Fay; tell him you are from me, and ask him to celebrate a mass tomorrow for the repose of the soul of Helena Modjeska, Countess Bozenta-Chlapowska... It is a solace to me to know that tomorrow a mass will be said here in heathendom for the spirit of that noble artist, that beautiful and gracious woman” (101-102).

Countess Helena Modjeska has died before Myra's second encounter with Nellie after ten years time. However, though the lady is dead already, Myra still keeps her faithfulness to her by celebrating masses for her every year on the anniversary of Madame Modjeska's death. It is not a trivial thing for Myra, seeing that she now hardly has enough money -- even for daily meal -- but she keeps money for such purposes. The thesis writer understands at this point that she takes friendship very seriously.

This is an outstanding trait of a friend. Most friendship would end by the time the friend passes away, but Myra here shows her different opinion. By asking Nellie to have the church celebrate masses for Madame Modjeska, Myra proposes her belief that the soul of the person remains alive -- only the body has died. When the time for her comes to depart from her body, Myra knows that her soul will meet Madame Modjeska again in the afterlife, and thus their friendship will continue. The thesis writer believes that Myra's celebrating Helena Modjeska's



death is a similar act compared to her sending Lydia greeting cards every Christmas and on birthdays. The mass here is the same bridge between the friends as do the cards.

By describing Myra's loyalty to her friends beyond death, Willa Cather proposes her idea that friendship is eternal. Death only parts people temporarily. When the time comes for someone to pass from "heathendom" to afterlife, he/she will be reunited with his/her beloved ones. Thus, the friendship and love continue.

Nevertheless, although Myra's idea of friendship is lofty and idealistic, she also learns – after suffering poverty and illness – that friendship is not the only thing that matters in the world. Now that she is ill, she often locks herself up in her room alone, sometimes for days, as Oswald tells Nellie, "Sometimes she has locked me out for days together," he said. 'It seems strange – a woman of such generous friendships. It's as if she had used up that part of herself'" (92).

As she falls into the lethal illness, Myra learns to lock herself and think about many things. When she comes to this point, she realizes that the presence of her friends will not help. She has her inner battle to confront. Any help from others will not be of use. In her loneliness, Myra learns to face her inner battle which she fights against herself. She has to struggle with her "mortal enemy," that is to fight her illness which is driving her to death. It is the struggle between the life-instinct and the death-instinct. Myra's struggle is to remain alive though her body may die of illness. It is the afterlife that counts. The illness may cost her physical death, but it should not bring her eternal death. She carries death in her body as her mortal enemy, and she has to defeat its power through inner struggle.

Willa Cather expresses in Myra's suffering that when someone carries death in his/her body, he/she will be forced to fight the power of death so that – though it may have power over the physical body – it will not triumph against the soul. People who undergo such inner struggle need to be left alone. They have to stand alone and fight their own battle without the help from others. They need to find complete victory through deep contemplation until they can know for sure that death has no more dominion over their soul. This inner fight stands in greater importance compared to true friendship.

From the above discussion, the thesis writer may sum up Willa Cather's ideas of friendship as seen from the thoughts of Myra Henshawe:

- A friend's true love lies in giving and not asking for returned-favor.
- Friendship is eternal; it does not stop after one's death, but continues in the afterlife.
- Friendship is not the most important matter, for there are some matters which cannot be solved by the bond of friendship, such as death and inner struggles.

### **Love and Marriage**

Myra's opinion of love ten years before was realistic, but now it seems that her idea of love has turned into a bitter irony. She regrets having loved Oswald and marrying him, for in the end their love causes them too much pain and suffering. She tells Nellie how she regrets her youthful love, as if it was a

folly to love in her youth: “People are always talking about the joys of youth – but, oh, how youth can suffer! I’ve not forgotten; those hot southern Illinois night, when Oswald was in New York, and I had no word from him except through Liddy, and I used to lie on the floor all night and listen to the express trains go by. I’ve not forgotten” (103-104).

In Myra’s opinion, youthful love seems so wonderful at first, but later on it will develop into a disappointing realism, and in the end it turns into bitter irony. She goes on by saying, “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... In age we lose everything, even the power to love” (105).

Myra now thinks that youthful love is just a mirage and that one has to suffer the pain afterward when their power to love has faded. She regrets of bringing such ruin for both she and Oswald. Had she known their love would end in pain and suffering, she would not let him marry her at the first place. At this point, she proposes the idea that people (couples) can be lovers and enemies at the same time. They can be lovers, because they love each other so much and desire to please one another by showing their love and affection in the marriage. But they can also be enemies. Myra sees that couples can be enemies because by marrying each other they have no idea that they are ruining themselves. Myra sees that when the marriage in the end runs into calamity, it is better for the couples not to be married to one another at all. The husband and the wife can destroy one

another. They do not realize that they have become enemies through ruining their life by marrying. This is a bitter irony Myra holds against love and marriage.

However, through this bitter irony, the thesis writer can see a trace of a refined quality in Myra's love toward Oswald. In the past, she was a very dominant wife, as Lydia once said, "Everything is always for Myra. He never gets anything for himself. And all the admiration is for her; why shouldn't he have a little? It isn't good for any woman to be humored and pampered as he has humored her. And she's often most unreasonable with him – most unreasonable!" (45)

Myra, who used to be very selfish and dominant, has changed a great deal. She wishes Oswald did not marry her, so that he need not suffer as he does at present. Myra blames herself in this matter. She does not blame Oswald of not being able to suffice all her needs. Instead, she takes the blame and admits that it is she who causes all their suffering: "No, my poor Oswald, you'll never stagger far under the bulk of me. Oh, if youth but knew!" She closed her eyes and pressed her hands over them. '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).

Though she now holds the opinion that marriage causes much pain and destruction, Myra's inner quality has heightened because she now does not desire to be pampered as she used to be. She is no longer selfish. She does not control Oswald in everything he does anymore. She has learned through their poverty and her suffering that people who love each other should not bring harm to one

another. She never wishes to harm Oswald, but now she realizes that she has – and it makes her feel really sorry. She now realizes how much she actually loves him, because she never wants him to suffer.

Willa Cather, as discussed in the previous chapter, remains unmarried till the day she dies. Miss Cather's idea of being unmarried can be seen from the portrayal of Myra Henshawe. Willa has the opinion that, instead of dragging their lovers into pain and destruction in marriage, it is better for people to stay away from it. That is why she prefers friendship to marriage. Friendship is much safer. In marriage there is a great probability that the couples would hurt each other, cause harm to each other, and even drive themselves into calamity. If people, by marrying, would bring harm to each other, then it is better and safer to remain unmarried.

Thus, the thesis writer may sum up Willa Cather's opinion of love and marriage:

- Youthful love is but a mirage, because after the power to love has faded, people will learn that behind it lies much pain and suffering.
- If people may harm and ruin each other in a marriage, then it is better for them to remain unmarried.

### **Religion/Spirituality**

During her days of illness, Myra's focus on religion and spiritual life has grown more intense than ever. She knows that her malady is lethal and that she

will soon face death. Living her last days, Myra contemplates deeply about life, her past sins, and reconciliation with God.

Myra's first realization is her condition as a sinner. She has asked Nellie to read her poetry every day and, as Nellie reads, Myra would meditate on every word and its meaning. Once, she asks Nellie, "Look for a little short one, about the flower that grows on the suicide's grave, *die Armesünderblum*, the poor-sinner's flower. Oh, that's the flower for me, Nellie; *die-Arme-sünder-blum!*" (96).

Myra's interest in the poem is driven by her realization that she is going to die soon and that she knows she is a sinner. She wants to reconcile herself with God before she dies. She confesses in her heart of all the sins she had done in the past. This is obvious by her statement which admits that she is a poor-sinner. She humbles herself and no longer maintains her arrogance. The flower that grows on the poor-sinner's tomb also serves as a symbol of continual life after death. Myra believes that though she is a poor sinner, her sins will be forgiven if she now reconciles herself to God, and that after her death she will gain hope into everlasting life, just like the flower that sprouts out from the poor sinner's tomb – out of death, comes eternal life.

The thesis writer sees that Willa Cather has put her idea of *sin – reconciliation with God – redemption of the soul – eternal life* in the mind of her main character. This shows that Willa is a devout believer in the Christian faith. She believes that people who believe in God for the remission of their sins have hope beyond death and will be exalted into eternal life. The religious teachings

she has learned through childhood prove to play an important role in shaping her superego.

Aside from asking Nellie to read her poetry every day, Myra also often asks her to take her out for a drive along the shore. She has a favorite place under a cedar tree by the cliff, where she can see the sunset. When Myra contemplates on the beauty of nature, she is more enlightened in her soul.

“Light and silence: they heal all one’s wounds – all but one, and that is healed by dark and silence. I find I don’t miss clever talk, the kind I always used to have about me, when I can have silence. It’s like cold water poured over fever’... ‘I’d like to see this place at dawn,’ Myra said suddenly. ‘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 absolution. You know how the great sinners always come home to die in some religious house, and the abbot or the abbess went out and received them with a kiss?’” (88-89)

In the above quotation, Myra’s perception of life, death, and redemption is much related with the cycle of nature. The light and silence heal many wounds: all the sufferings she has undergone, the pain of disappointment and contempt, harsh feelings in the past, jealousy and anger, etc. But there is one wound which light and silence cannot heal, which only dark and silence can heal, and that is the fear of death. The dark (night) represents Myra’s inner struggle with death, which lives

in her as her mortal enemy, and she has to triumph against it. When she wins over the power of death, then her redemption will shine forth like the sunrise. All her sins will be pardoned. They will no longer have power over her. Her wish to see the sunrise actually represents the moment when she will pass from mortal life into eternity. When she passes from the physical world like a great sinner who has been pardoned from all her sins, then she may triumphantly enter eternal life where there are no more shadows of the bitterness and pain of the past. All the wrong doings her superego blames on her will all be pardoned.

In this part, the thesis writer sees Willa Cather's deep perception of life and the cycle of life and death as connected to one's faith. She beautifully depicts the idea of darkness as the power of death which overpowers people, the dawn as the victory of people in their struggle against death, and the sunrise as the representation of everlasting life for those who triumph. Willa Cather portrays this idea of hers in the mind of her main character, Myra Henshawe.

Though she had abandoned her childhood faith, in her last days, Myra Henshawe returns to her faith as a Catholic. She tells Nellie, "I broke with the Church when I broke with everything else and ran away with a German free-thinker; but I believe in holy words and holy rites all the same" (102).

Myra's spiritual journey also reflects Willa's spiritual search. She was a devout Protestant who, for her spiritual search, joined the Episcopalian Church (a branch of the Church of England, which holds the Protestant doctrine through the application of Catholic order and some of its sacraments). Willa had gone through her spiritual search until she realizes the meaning of life, the purpose of it, and the



aftermath beyond the veil of life. She mirrors it in Myra's spiritual search for eternal redemption.

Willa Cather also seems to be exposing the fact that, when people are young and adventurous they will care little about religion and thus follow their desires and risky options – their instinctual drives. However, when they have grown old, lonely, and sick, they will learn that the underlying matter which means the most is their faith in God. They will return to their faith when all seems lost. This is the nature of people. When they are strong, they abandon God. But when they are weak and hopeless, they will turn to Him. When they have finally decided to return to God, they will realize how important religion really is for their souls.

Myra has not only returned to her childhood faith, but as her death approaches, she relates her suffering with the suffering of Christ.

“Myra kept beside her now an ebony crucifix with an ivory Christ. It used to hang on the wall, and I had supposed she carried it about because some friend had given it to her. I felt now that she had it by her for a different reason. Once when I picked it up from her bed to straighten her sheet, she put out her hand quickly and said: ‘Give it to me. It means nothing to people who haven’t suffered’”  
(109).

Here, Willa exposes a beautiful symbolism through the suffering of her main character. The ebony crucifix (dark) and the ivory Christ (bright) talk about the triumph of redemption over sins. Myra always carries the crucifix around to

strengthen her in her days of pain. She relates her suffering with the suffering of Christ, believing that the struggle she has to go through at present is similar to Christ's suffering on the cross. In the end, Christ wins over death and sins. He brings redemption to sinners who have faith in God and in His power to overcome death. Likewise, Myra believes that she has to overcome the power of death which is consuming her body. She holds on to the crucifix for strength in the time of her suffering. By constantly contemplating the suffering of Christ, she believes that she will make it in the end.

Willa Cather seems to propose her idea that the suffering of Christ is meaningful only for those who suffer. People who have not suffered have no idea and no appreciation of Christ's suffering. But those who suffer gain strength from the example of Christ. He is the role model for endurance and patience for those who are in trouble and pain. And, most of all, He is the hope for those who are facing death. He gives hope of eternal life for the dying people who beg for remission of sins before the hour of their death.

In her last days, when her illness has become worse, Myra's realization of religion and spirituality heightens the more. She says, in her delirium – as Nellie listens, “Religion is different from everything else, *because in religion seeking is finding*’... She seemed to say that in other searchings it might be the object of the quest that brought satisfaction, or it might be something incidental that one got on the way, but in religion, desire was fulfillment, it was the seeking itself that rewarded” (111).

This actually echoes Willa Cather's opinion of what religion really is for her. Willa's searching proves that in religion, seeking is finding. It is not the ultimate goal that matters the most, but the process. People gain enlightenment and improvement through following the way, and not by reaching the end already. The searching in religion helps us to find more and more each day, and the ultimate goal will be the summing up of all the findings and the rewards people has gathered by following God's way.

When the day of her death has come very close, "On the following day, Mrs. Henshawe asked to be given the Sacrament... The nurse we had sent away that day at her urgent request. She wanted to be cared for by one of the nursing Sisters from the convent from now on, and Father Fay was to bring one tomorrow" (114).

Myra asks for the Sacrament, or the Holy Communion. In Christianity and Catholicism, the Holy Communion is the sacrament to unite one's soul with God. People do this sacrament to acknowledge their faith in God and to unite their souls with Him. It also means to commemorate the sacrifice of Christ, and by doing so, they solidify their redemption. In this case, Myra asks for the sacrament as the summit of her process of reconciliation with God. She has united herself with God and prayed for complete remission of sins. Now, she is ready to surrender her spirit to God and leave her mortal body.

The following day, Myra runs away from home and heads toward the shore, where she died peacefully under the cedar tree on the cliff where she and Nellie used to visit. "We found her wrapped in her blankets, leaning against the

cedar trunk, facing the sea. Her head had fallen forward; the ebony crucifix was in her hands. She must have died peacefully and painlessly. There was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn” (117).

After her reconciliation with God is completed, Myra goes alone to fulfill her desire to die on the spot she wishes to die. As she had said previously, great sinners always come home to die in some religious house, and the abbot or the abbess went out and received them with a kiss. The tree is the religious house and the sun is her abbot. All her sins have been pardoned through the sacrament. The mortal enemy has been defeated. As the sun rises, its rays kiss her and give her absolution – then in the sunrays, her soul leaves the mortal body and returns to the Father of Light. Just like Christ has triumphed over death, so has Myra triumphed over her mortal enemy and returned home to God in peace. Her death instinct finally leads her to finish her struggle-bound-life and grants her eternal peace and satisfaction. This proves that actually the death instinct is the complement of the life instinct. Life and death in their essence is one.

Willa Cather has expressed her beautiful idea of the death of a faithful person. Death is not terrible for people who have faith in God. On the contrary, it is a beautiful incident. People, who die in their faith in God, leave the mortal life with all its pain and suffering to enter a glorious and everlasting life, where they can find eternal peace and happiness. This is Willa Cather’s belief, which she portrays wonderfully in the death of her main character, Myra Henshawe.

Thus, the thesis writer may sum up Willa Cather’s idea of religion/spirituality as seen in the character of Myra Henshawe:

- People have to reconcile themselves with God in order for their sins to be redeemed and for them to gain eternal life.
- The idea of life – death – afterlife can be seen in nature, especially in the cycle of the sun: sunset – darkness (night) – sunrise.
- It is the nature of people to abandon God in their days of youth and happiness, and to seek Him in their old days when they are weak, lonely, and in pain.
- The suffering of Christ has become a model and the source of strength for people who are struggling in pain and suffering.
- In religion, seeking is finding, because it is the process of following God's way that counts the most.
- People, who die in their faith in God, will receive everlasting life and joy in the afterlife.

### **B.1.2. The Influence of the Society**

The setting of Part II is in a “sprawling overgrown West-coast city which was in the throes of rapid development” (71). It is not stated clearly what city it is, but in the year 1926 (the year in which this novel was written), the standard of life in the States has decreased badly as the impact of World War I. Most big cities have become overcrowded and filled with insecure tenement buildings. They are not well ventilated, cannot be well lighted, not safe in case of fire, and completely not healthy. People migrate to the big cities and overcrowd it, so that the standard of the economy and social life declines and noble values fall apart. The citizens,

who were once so gay and well-mannered, have turned into selfish, indifferent, and wayward people. The gap between the rich and the poor widens, and people who win the best facilities are those who can pay the most. Money becomes a standard of prestige, and people are fighting and craving for it.

The poor, like Myra and Oswald, can do nothing but to accept others' treatment over them. Even in her days of illness, Myra does not get proper medication and proper housing because they cannot afford any. Oswald tells Nellie, "These new houses are poorly built, and every sound carries" (81). They have ignorant neighbors living over them who trample the floor like cattle – and cause Myra's illness to grow even worse. "I've talked to that woman and to her son, but they are very unfeeling people," (83) says Oswald to Nellie.

Willa Cather depicts here the suffering of the poor in big cities post-World War I. They have to bear the unfriendly neighborhood, the insecure apartments, and the harm which the environment may cause them. Willa probably does not experience such suffering as Myra is undergoing, but she makes the depiction of the poverty in the city very intense in order to evoke the reader's concern. Her point is that the poor and the sick should have proper attention from the government and the society in general.

The environment which surrounds her in the days of her poverty makes Myra's physical condition even worse. However, through this physical suffering, she comes to the realization that it is the inner being which needs more attention. As Myra suffers suppression from the neighborhood and her own body, her inner eye is opened to see the longing of her soul for spiritual reconciliation with God.

complement of the life instinct and that through death people gain eternal peace and rest from all their labor.

### **B.2.1. Nellie's Thoughts**

#### **Life and the Future**

Nellie has grown up. She is no longer dependent on her family. She is now an independent woman with a future to pursue. Although her family has turned bankrupt, and she becomes very poor, she knows that she will survive into the future. She moves to the city where she lodges in an insecure hotel apartment which does not seem promising. "All this made me melancholy – more than the dreariness of my own case. I was young, and it didn't matter so much about me; for youth there is always hope, the certainty, of better things" (73).

Nellie here is very optimistic of the future. Though she feels concerned of the present condition of the city, her insight into the future is filled with hope and certainty. She knows that for young people like her, who is filled with energy, intelligence, and talents, there will always be a way out from the difficulty of life.

Nellie's hopeful and optimistic way of thinking represents Willa Cather's optimism in her own career. She was young when she left her previous career in journalism and started a new one in writing. She believes what the future holds for her, though the result is not yet visible. She knows that with her talent and intelligence, she will find her place in the society. She can sense success waiting

Her outer and physical sufferings drive her to dig deeper into her psyche, and finally she is able to find her way to triumph over worldly matters. She no longer heeds the desires of her id or the realistic facts proposed by her ego. What matters to her is the refined moral of her superego and the way to reach the spiritual aim.

This is Willa Cather's idea that when the environment is so bad and oppressive, people may end up acquiescing to it – following the current, or keep their silence and dig deep into their own souls. She chooses for Myra the latter option. This is because Myra represents Willa and her ideas. Willa would not acquiesce to the moral and social degradation happening in the city. She stands up against it implicitly through her writings. Though she cannot change many things, she digs into her mind and represents her ideas through her character.

## **B.2. Nellie Birdseye**

Nellie is depicted in Part II as a smart young woman. She is married already, to someone named Casey, but the account on her husband is never mentioned in the novel – and neither is their marriage.

The character Nellie Birdseye in this Part II seems to be withdrawn to the background because Willa Cather focuses more on her other main character, Myra Henshawe. Nellie here functions as Myra's companion who nurses her during the last months of her life. Nellie sees a lot of things through the eyes of a healthy and intelligent young woman. And, once again, she learns plenty of things from Myra, but this time she no longer learns about life. Instead, she learns about death and how Myra, with dignity, confronts it. She learns that the death instinct is the



ahead of her. Her optimism finally leads her to real success, and now she reflects her optimism in the character of the twenty-five-year-old Nellie Birdseye.

On her first reunion with Myra (after ten years of not seeing one another), Nellie shares her insight in her career as a lecturer. She teaches “in a college – a college that was as experimental and unsubstantial as everything else in the place” (72). However, with her optimism she believes that she will find her way in this career. She has now found her determination. She knows what she wants to be and what steps she should take to fulfill her dreams. Nellie has proven that she is a woman with good self-confidence who can control her independent life. She defends herself when Myra tells her:

“Ah, but teaching, Nellie! I don’t like that, not even for a temporary expedience... Why not journalism? You could always make your way easily there.’

“Because I hate journalism. I know what I want to do, and I’ll work my way out yet, if only you’ll give me time” (78-79).

From the above quotation we can sense that Willa Cather is comparing her two previous careers: as a teacher and as a journalist. From Nellie’s words, the thesis writer sees that, though journalism is very promising, and she herself a talented and intelligent writer, Willa actually hates being a journalist. She basically prefers teaching from journalism. However, her mind persuades her with the fact that journalism is an easier way for her to gain recognition and a good place and career in the society. So Willa finally chooses to follow her mind instead of her heart. She gives up teaching to become a journalist. However, deep

inside, she regrets her options, and wishes that she had not left teaching. She would make her best effort in teaching although the rise of her career would be slow. That is because she does not love journalism. That is why in the end she finally gives up journalism to become a writer instead – a career that is even more risky, but which gives her satisfaction and success through enjoyment and patience.

Thus, the thesis writer can sum up Willa Cather's idea of life and the future as seen from the eyes of Nellie Birdseye as follows:

- For young people there is always hope for a better future; therefore young people should be optimistic of what the future holds for them.
- Young people should choose careers which suit their inner calling – and they should follow their calling with patience and optimism.

### **Friendship**

In Part I, Nellie has learned about kindness in friendship from Myra. Now that Myra is in poverty and illness, Nellie finds a way to show her kindness to Myra. Her understanding of the true meaning of friendship now is not in theory only, but in practice. Nellie does not stand and act from the point of view of her ego any longer; she has learned to use her superego in showing her attention and affection to Myra. She learns to give Myra something (food, affection, becoming a patient listener, etc.) although she herself is also in need. Nellie has learned not to mind her own problems and to prioritize others who are needier than she is. "I

found that one of the kindest things I could do for her was to bring her some little sandwiches or cakes from the Swedish bakery to vary her tinned biscuits... Mrs. Henshawe got great pleasure from flowers, too, and during the late winter months my chief extravagance and my chief pleasure was in taking them to her” (86).

This expresses Willa Cather’s idea of how people should help one another in the days of necessity. A friend should be able to share what he/she has with them who are needy. When we see our friends in need of something, it is best for us to show our friendship by helping them.

Nellie’s affection for Myra is not only shown by her bringing her things or nursing her during her illness, but also by standing up for her. Nellie has the courage to defend Myra from the Pointdexters upstairs who have no feeling toward Myra and Oswald who occupy the room beneath theirs.

“I’ll go up and see those people tomorrow, Mrs. Henshawe, ‘I promised. ‘I’m sure I can do something.’

‘Oh, don’t, Nellie!’ she looked up at me in affright. ‘She’d turn a deaf ear to you. You know the Bible says the wicked are deaf like the adder. And, Nellie, she has the wrinkled, white throat of an adder, that woman, and the hard eyes of one. Don’t go near her!’”

(90)

This shows Willa’s idea that real friends do not only help each other by giving what one another needs, or to be there when a friend needs someone to talk to, but also to defend when other people disturb, offend, or harass our friend. Courage is also needed in friendship. Many people claim themselves as friends,

but when trouble from outside comes, they cowardly flee. It is not so with Nellie. She has the courage to defend Myra, not only because she is weak and ill, but also because she is her friend and Nellie loves her very much. Her bravery in defending Myra proves that Nellie is qualified as a trustworthy friend.

The thesis writer sees that through Nellie Birdseye, the novelist wants to express her ideas that:

- People should share with their friends who are in greater need, although they themselves are not in prosperity.
- True friends have the courage to stand for one another.

### **B.2.2. The Influence of the Society**

The society in which Nellie lives as depicted in Part II is similar to Myra's (they live in the same tenement building). They both experience poor housings, unhealthy environment, unfriendly neighbors, etc. However, Nellie's reaction to the poverty and the poor standard of urban living is rather different from Myra's. This is because Nellie is young. She is bright and has a future to pursue. Aside from that, she comes from the country to the city with a certain determination to struggle for a living.

Here, Nellie's hidden trait of a pioneer begins to emerge. She comes to face the physically and psychically unhealthy urban living with her values and way of thinking which she has inherited from her previous country life. Of course, the city also shapes her, but it does not change her values. Instead, the hardship she finds in the city helps her to develop her pioneer traits. It forges her to be

tough, to stand as a survivor, to endure and make her way until she can reach success.

Willa Cather describes the toughness of a pioneer woman not only in Myra Henshawe, but also in Nellie Birdseye. An independent pioneer woman should be able to survive any situation and to make her way toward accomplishment though it may take plenty of time, energy, and patience. Urbanity is as untamed as the Wild West, and it is the trait of every pioneer to be able to cultivate the best and come up with success through hard work and endurance.

# **CHAPTER V**

# **CONCLUSION**