

SYNOPSIS OF WILLA CATHER'S *MY MORTAL ENEMY*

My Mortal Enemy centers on the main character, Myra Henshawe, seen through the eyes of the main-supporting character, Nellie Birdseye. Myra Driscoll is a high-spirited, courageous, intelligent, strong and witty woman who was born and raised by her very wealthy uncle in Parthia, Illinois – Nellie's hometown. For years, Nellie has heard stories of how young Myra left all her possession and hometown through her elopement with Oswald Henshawe, a poor German free-thinker whom her uncle detested, and ran off to start a new life in New York.

Nellie finally gets the chance to meet Myra herself, now forty-five, on her business visit to Parthia. Myra is now totally independent and quite well-off. She and Oswald have settled a comfortable life in the city, and invited Nellie and her aunt Lydia to spend their Christmas holiday in New York.

Thus, on Christmas, Nellie and her aunt Lydia spend their holiday in the Henshawe's place. Young Nellie is astounded to see how graceful and marvelous New York is. She is amazed at the beauty and dynamic rhythm of the urban life. She also becomes Myra's favorite and she takes her to meet her friends. Among Myra's friends, Nellie learns a lot about social circles in the city, the manners of the high-class society, and also the arts – in music, poetry, and prose. Furthermore, Nellie becomes dearly attached to Myra, learns about her deep character and shares her thoughts.

After that visit to New York, the Henshawes' economic condition declines. The couple moves to San Francisco and starts a new business. The

business fails and they lose everything. Myra, however, conceals this fact from Lydia, trying not to burden her, and stops giving her information of their present well-being. She no longer sends letters to Parthia beyond birthday and Christmas greetings. Nellie automatically loses contact with the Henshawes. And, for worse, things also go ill with her family and they become very poor as well.

Ten years after she last saw the Henshawes, Nellie happens to be moving to a West-coast city to start a career as a lecturer. She is now twenty-five, young, intelligent, and highly motivated, though life seems hard on her. She rents a room in a lousy apartment – and, there, she meets Oswald Henshawe, now a sixty-year-old man, poor, but still neatly-dressed. Oswald is so surprised and glad to see Nellie, and informs her that Myra is very ill at present. Nellie then visits Myra, now fifty-five, old, lonely, fatally ill and weak, but she still has the same high spirit and smartness. The two women are very delighted to reunite once more. Nellie is glad that she can accompany Myra and comfort her during her unfortunate days.

Myra's illness grows worse every day, and death is inevitable. Nellie and Oswald nurse her during her last days. It is during these last weeks of her life that Myra returns to her childhood faith and finds deeper meaning of life (and the afterlife) through her readings and deep contemplation. She becomes more concerned with religiosity and spiritual thoughts. Nellie is there for her, witnessing her struggle with the power of death consuming her from within. Myra's inner struggle during her last days is very intense, and this influences Nellie a great deal, giving her enlightenment of the journey of life – death –

afterlife. At the end, Myra finally triumphs in her inner struggle and departs from the mortal world in peace. Nellie knows for sure that her spirit has gone to heaven. She is glad because all goes well for Myra, and she continues her life, one step far wiser than she used to be.