

***My Mortal Enemy***  
**Book Club Discussion Questions**



1. Some critics believe that Myra’s devotion to the Catholic faith towards the end of the novel is simply a theatrical display. What textual evidence proves and disproves this theory?

“Although she had returned so ardently to the faith of her childhood, Myra Henshawe never changed the clause in her will, which requested that her body should be cremated, and her ashes buried "in some lonely and unfrequented place in the mountains, or in the sea” (83).

2. What is the purpose of telling Myra’s story through the eyes of Nellie Birdseye, a character that seems to have little contribution to the plotline of the novel? What is Cather able to do with this structure that would not be possible had the novel been written from Myra’s perspective?

3. In what ways does *My Mortal Enemy* and the character of Myra Henshawe challenge the fairytale ending of romantic love? How does Oswald represent the yearning for a comforting conclusion to a life lived solely for love? How do these two ideas play off of each other?

4. *My Mortal Enemy* is Cather’s shortest novel, and was written by Cather whilst waiting for the publication of *The Professor’s House*. In her essay, “The Novel D meubl ”, published in 1922 and printed in *Not Under Forty*, Cather expresses a desire for a new type of writing and describes “the unfurnished novel”:

“How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theater...” (51).

Praising instead:

“the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact of the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself” (50).

How does *My Mortal Enemy* illustrate this type of “unfurnished writing”?

5. There is a shift in the novel that occurs when Aunt Lydia is no longer the connection between Myra and Nellie and Lydia fades into the background. Why does Cather make this decision?
6. What parallels can be seen at the beginning and end of the novel? For example, the topaz sleeve-buttons and amethyst necklace reappear towards the end. Are these physical objects representative of something deeper?
7. The novel opens with a past-tense perspective. Why did Cather make this narrative decision? Does it reflect the nostalgia Oswald feels for his younger wife?
8. Who is Myra Henshawe's "Mortal Enemy"? Is it herself, Oswald, someone or something else?
9. Does Myra "ruin" her husband, or do they ruin each other by being together?  
Myra says: "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"(62).
10. In what ways does Nellie romanticize Myra Henshawe and how does the latter uphold, defy, or disappoint those expectations?
11. Though not set in the prairie or plains of her earlier works such as *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, Cather still involves the landscape of the West Coast towards the end of the novel. How does this coastal environment play a role in the lives of the characters?
12. Seen as a bit of an outlier from the rest of Cather's novels, how does *My Mortal Enemy* differ from her other works? What themes and ideas are similar to her other novels?