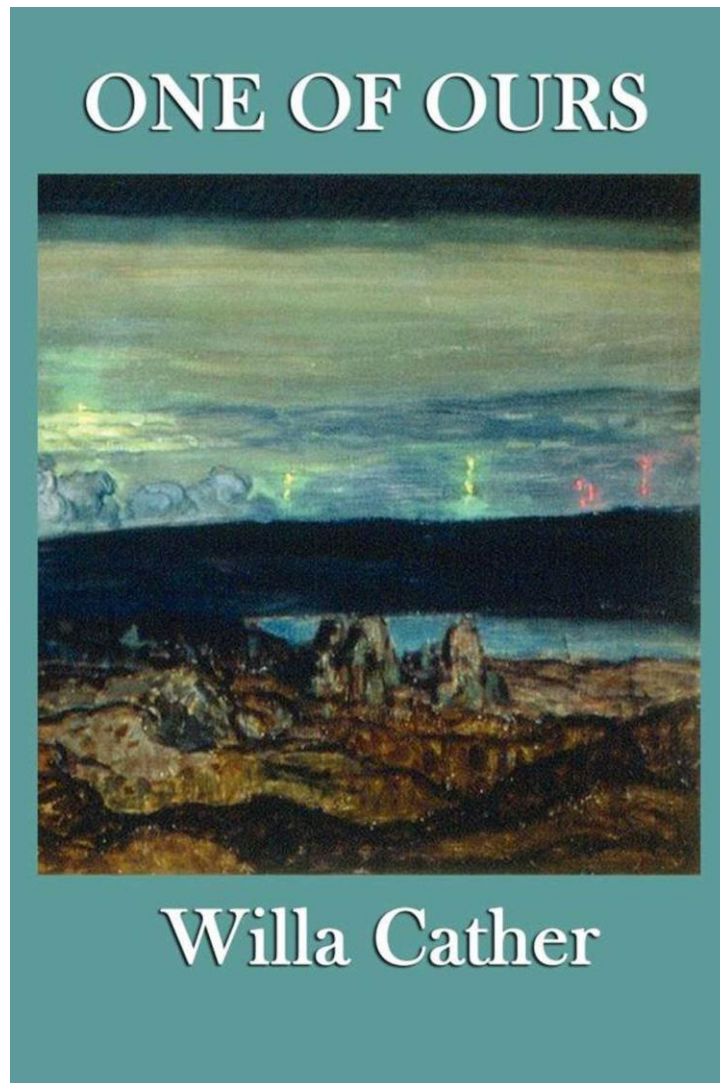


**Intuitive Intimacy with Nature in Willa Cather's *One of Ours***

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Courtesy: <http://www.simonandschuster.co.uk/books/One-of-Ours/Willa-Cather/Unabridged-Start-Publishing-LLC/9781625583710>

**Abstract**

Cather is considered as one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century. Both in her fictional worlds and in her life, Cather presented the tensions of American existence in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Her experience as an immigrant and as a writer

is a microcosm of the spirit of the time. She is rooted in the past and revered its solidity, yet is sensitive to the promise of the future in the new-found land of America. Cather's characters are rooted in deeply held values. They have the sense of who they are, who they want to be, and how they relate to each other and the living body of Earth. That amounts to a shift in consciousness, which is actually happening now at a rapid rate. It is, at root, a spiritual revolution, awakening perceptions and values that are both very new and very ancient. The ecologically conscious characters are awakened to the sacredness of life itself, in the soil, air and water, in their brothers and sisters of other species, and in their own bodies.



Willa Cather

Courtesy: <https://www.willacather.org/willa-cathers-biography>

### **Introduction**

Willa Cather (1873-1947) is the most influential American novelist of the early twentieth century and is generally graded as one of the three most eminent female writers of the time, the other two being Ellen Glasgow and Edith Wharton. Her characteristic appeal to reminiscence is that she re-established the Midwestern prairies in most of her writings, capturing and reflecting, in novel after novel, the pioneer spirit of the frontier. Her Nebraskan novels, for instance, revere the frontier settlers and portray an honest rendering of their lifestyle.

Like all honest writers she draws inspiration from her own life experience. Some prominent incidents in the life of Cather like the great transformation from Virginia to Nebraska, her life in Pittsburgh and New York as a journalist, her European tours, and her meeting with Sarah Ome Jewett and Mrs. James T. Fields have been exceptionally important in determining the gist of her creative life. All her works-both professional and amateurish - are to drive to an end in her successful making of novel which positioned her in the front rank of leading American novelists.

Cather was born in Virginia, lived in Nebraska from the age of eight until after graduation from college, shifted to Pittsburgh to try as a journalist, editor, and educator, toured Europe several times, and then moved to New York. An impressive literary influence in her writing is the advice of Sara Ome Jewett that she write from her own upbringing; the Nebraska fiction of pioneer and immigrant life that followed are among the most notable fiction of America.

At the age of ten Cather finds herself in a new world when the Cather family moved from the green Virginian valleys to the grey Nebraskan plains in 1883. A disturbing experience, the shift from the pleasant, enjoyable and elegant life of Virginia into the arduous, clumsy, and unstable life on a farmland near Red Cloud in Nebraska is not too delightful to her. She is in revolt against this shift throughout her university life and during the beginning stage of her journalistic career, but later she begins to recall the prairies with nostalgia and love.

The years that Cather spent in Virginia (1875 to 1883), and in Red Cloud (1883 to 1890) are the formative years in her life. She makes use of the experiences of these years in her works in later days and they always remained a valuable treasury of raw materials for her novels. What inspired her most profoundly in the new ambience are the places, the seasons and people. In Virginia an enchanting world of the Whites and the Negroes is open to her, and in Red Cloud the polyglot society of settlers provided a still more alluring world to the young artistic acumen of Cather. She trekked along the valleys, met the old pioneer women and men and listened to their unceasing stories, which ignited her artistry. Her thrilling experiences with her brothers in the Republican River and on the valleys unveil the remarkably phenomenal calibre in her.

### **Less Focus on Pioneers**

Among the new generation a new class of selfish villains surfaces up in contrast to the group of the ineffective and weak supporters or devotees of the pioneer ethics. The prairie too are extremely changed and depleted by the new class of villains and a new age of consumerism crawls in as, the West declines and falls. The novels of Cather of the middle stage, *A Lost Lady*, *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, and *My Mortal Enemy* focus on these components, recreating as they do the changed scenario of man-land relationship.

The year 1922 marks a break-up from the pioneering West in the novels of Cather. The West is still there in her fiction: but it has lost much of its lustre and grandeur. The pioneer is lacking, or too frail to face the challenges of the West. Cather's disappointment in the present is echoed in her novels.

### **One of Ours and Other Novels**

In the novel *One of Ours* Claude Wheeler, discontented and restless, uncovers no peace in his battle with the soil; and emancipation ultimately comes to him in the form of war. In *A Lost Lady* Marian Forester, highly active and spirited, moves with the waves: she lacks the longevity and heroism of the prairie heroines, Niel Herbert, the narrator of the novel, concentrates on the loss of the lady which is, indeed, a loss of the pioneer values. *The Professor's House* presents the tale of a disillusioned professor, St. Peter, who cannot enjoy the pleasure of worldly success, but is nostalgic for the endeavours of ancient times. In *My Mortal*

*Enemy*, Myra Henshawe is dissatisfied with love and worldly triumph, and search for peace in religion. The healthy and refreshing air of the prairie changes into something suffocating and stuffy. The affinities which connect these novels together and the conflict they have with the novels of the earlier and the later stage urge the concern of these novels in a somewhat comprehensive manner.

### ***One of Ours***

*One of Ours* is the narrative of Claude Wheeler who is a farm-boy of unique nature, but of no unique gift or strength of will. Self-conscious and meek, he goes on puffing and fuming, longing for things which cannot be attained. Claude's family, specifically his father, do not notably motivate him in any way and are even inimical to him: they stress on dictating to him on all matters and stand in the way of Claude executing his dream. He cannot have his way even in simple matters like going to the circus. When he likes to go to the circus, his father appears to have a cruel pleasure in sending him in the farm wagon instead of the car, with the hired men to sell cowhides in the market. When he seriously yearns to study in History in the State University, his father gets him pinned on the farm. He gets no fulfilment out of farm life, though he is wasting the whole of his animal energy whenever he works on it, and though he has felt a sense of belonging to the farm whenever he is away from it. The cynicism of his father and the frigid materialism of his elder brother Bayliss are shocking to him. Temperamentally he is distinctive from his younger brother who has a passion for machines. From the beginning he has been the favourite of his mother and Mahailey, the old-servant people in the neighbourhood, despite their liking for Claude, never think that he can do something helpful.

### **Resistance and Love towards Nature and Land**

In the first part of the novel, *One of Ours*, there is both resistance and love towards nature and land. Claude is longing for something beyond the prairies something luxurious about life. In spite of the strange sense of belonging he feels for the country and the open space, he is unhappy. The prairies cannot wholly content his inner craving, and the best, enduring trait in him cannot be drawn by the environment he is surrounded by. In Book II Claude is estranged from Gladys, who ought to be a better match for him, and draws closer to Enid Royce. His relationship with Enid fastens following an accident. But during their conversation one can feel that Claude is not sure of himself. Claude makes sophisticated preparations for his marriage with Enid. He is delighted and enthusiastic about his plans and construction of his new house.

### **Claude and Enid**

Claude and Enid get married and he is prepared to risk his far away dreams for the sake of Enid. But Enid is immersed in Prohibition work and religious ideas and she is uncaring and rigid to Claude and his desires and dreams. Eventually she leaves him for missionary work in China. Gladys has known it beforehand. He would go about strong and heavy, like Mr. Royce; a big machine with the springs broken inside. As H. L. Mencken has pronounced in "Four Reviews":

Claude... finds all that he knows of human society in a conspiracy against him-his father, his brothers, the girl he falls in love with, even his poor old mother. He yields bit by bit. His father fastens him relentlessly to the soil: his wife binds him in the chains of Christian Endeavor; his mother can only look on and sigh... (11)

War rolls up, and for Claude and his mother it is a war of ideals, and they are thrilled by the events of the war whereas Nat Wheeler attempts to make gain out of the war. Towards the end of Book III Claude leaves home for joining the war after recruitment.

### **Sea-Voyage**

Book IV consists of the portrayal of the sea-voyage which is predominantly drawn from the diary of a local doctor who has worked as medical officer of a troop ship when a serious epidemic broke out. Book V is set in France, and thrives in the presentations of France and the war. His connection with David Gerhardt, the violinist, who is modelled on David Hochstein, a young violinist, flavours to the romantic portrait on the foreign land. War ultimately comes as a salvation, and he meets with a heroic death. As his mother later remembers that for him the call is clear, the cause is glorious. He died trusting his own country better than it is and France better than any country can ever be. And those are splendid beliefs to die with.

### **Claude with No Roots to Fix Him**

Whatever the background or the landscape is, all countries are alike; all people are alike. Though Claude is supposed to prove himself by becoming a soldier, and dying for a noble, splendid cause, he does not strike one as a heroic figure. In spite of his nostalgic feelings about his home country, he seems to be drifting in the air with no roots to fix him to the ground. If he had not closed his sensitivity to the notes of harmony dormant in the land his life would have been more meaningful. The instinct for observing the beauty, grace, and the magnitude of the land is not dead in him: but he fails to cultivate it. He does not emerge in epic dimensions as Alexandra and Antonia, the pioneer farmers, and Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant, the pioneer missionaries do.

### **Nat Wheeler**

Nat Wheeler who has been a pioneer in Nebraska is much changed in the present. He ties hands with the worldly group of the present generation, and he is no model for the youngsters like Claude to get inspiration from. Lacking the heroism of the pioneers, he has the image of a prosperous businessman. His perspective is made apparent in his remark to Claude: "It's always been my notion that the land is made for man, just as it's old Dawn's that man is created to work the land" (67).

### **Ralph**

Ralph, his younger brother, is extravagantly fond of machines. He always speaks of newer and newer machines and brings home a lot of appliances. Though they are meant to be labour-saving machines for his mother, Mrs. Wheeler can rarely approve of them. Even Claude cannot support Ralph's modern point of view concerning the mechanical devices. The story begins with a fine summer day. As Claude catches up his cap and runs out of doors, down the hillside toward the barn, early in the morning, the sun appears over the edge of the prairie like a broad, smiling face: the light poured across the close-cropped August pastures and the hilly timbered windings of a clear little stream with a sand bottom that curled and twisted blissfully about through the south part of the big Wheeler ranch.

### **Claude in France – Becoming a Captive of the Country!**

France is an ideal country for Claude just as the Erlichs home is the ideal home for him. The deeper and deeper he gets into the flowery France, the more he becomes a captive of the country. He is attracted by the beauty of the familiar cottonwood growing everywhere in France. At Frankfort people have been cutting down their cottonwoods because they are considered common and they have been planting maples and ash trees instead. Never mind the cottonwoods are good enough for France, and they are good enough for him. He felt they are a real bond between him and this people.

The war has destroyed much of its plantation. The ground is left and they are making it again. Claude visits the place kept by two French ladies at a French town. Among the flowers which grow there Claude finds a group of tall, straggly plants with reddish stems and tiny white blossoms,-one of the evening primrose family, the *Gaura*, that grew along the clay banks of Lovely Creek, at home. He had never thought it very pretty, but he is pleased to find it here. He has supposed it is one of those nameless prairie flowers that grew on the prairie and nowhere else. He feels at home there and the French ladies are no strangers to him.

### **Different Traits of Friends**

Of the three friends - Claude, Ernest, and Leonard, Claude is resisting and unyielding to the country, Ernest meekly adapts himself to it; and Leonard makes successful business of it. Ernest is never uncertain, is not pulled in two or three ways at once. He is simple and direct. Claude felt that his friend lived in an atmosphere of mental liberty to which he himself could never hope to attain. He is interested in politics, history and in new inventions, but as he tells Claude, he has made most of the little things he had, and never dreams of a big future which is too big a word for him. As he keeps a harmonious relationship with his farm, he feels peace and contentment in the alien soil.

### **The Worldly and the Spiritual**

As in almost all the novels of Cather, *One of Ours* also makes a distinction between two groups - the spiritual, moral, and non-materialistic group of people like Claude, Mrs. Wheeler, Mahailey, and Jason Royce and the worldly, materialistic group of Mr. Wheeler and Bayliss. Mrs. Wheeler from Vermont, who is the Principal of the High School when Frankfort is a frontier town, must have been changed by her married life with a man having entirely different tastes and ideas, and when the story begins she appears as an over-pious, over-religious woman keeping the very soft feelings for her favourite son Claude. Mahailey is simple and illiterate but she is capable of comprehending the turmoil within Claude. Enid is too religious for Claude, and her missionary work and preoccupation with Brother Weldon do not make him any good. Gladys shares Claude's sentiments and ideas, and, though a woman of inherent values, she drifts in search of comforts and worldly position. She believed that all things which might make the world beautiful-love and kindness, leisure and art - are shut up in prison, and that successful men like Bayliss Wheeler held the keys. The generous ones, who would let these things out to make people happy, are somehow weak, and could not break the bars. Even her own little life is squeezed in an unnatural shape by the domination of people like Bayliss. There are people, even in Frankfort, who have imagination and generous impulses, but like Jason Royce, they are inefficient and failures.

### **Miss. Livingstone**

Miss. Livingstone, the fiery, emotional old maid who cannot tell the truth: old Mr. Smith, a lawyer without clients, who reads Shakespeare and Dryden in his dusty office: Bobbie Jones, the effeminate drug clerk, who writes free verse and movie scenarios and tends the soda-water fountain. Claude is one hope and Gladys thinks he will emerge and prove himself. But if he is too many Enid, Gladys is sure he is likely to end up as a broken man.

### **Growing Ethnic Rivalry**

The community which used to live together amicably in Frankfort is driven to ethnic rivalry by the First World War which is happening in far away, alien grounds. A memorable vignette is of one Mrs. Voigt, a German woman, who runs a restaurant by the railway platform, and who is harassed for being a German as Germans are their enemies. Claude tries to settle the problem and to pacify her, but the woman cries piteously. A crowd of young boys have snatched the bell which she is ringing to announce the dinner, and they are laughing and shouting in disagreeable jeering tones. They ask Claude not to enter and eat there. Between sobs, the woman speaks of her old country and all the nice things there and a deep tone of homesickness rings in her voice while she speaks. Claude finds out the gang of her tormentors and makes them return the bell with an apology.

### **Two French Ladies**

The two French ladies whom Claude comes across in France, Mlle de Courcy and Madame Barre also stand vivid in our memory, proving that people of gentle hearts fall in a group, whatever their nationalities be. Whatever the background or the landscape is, all countries are alike; all people are alike. Though Claude is supposed to prove himself by becoming a soldier, and dying for a noble, splendid cause, he does not strike one as a heroic figure. In spite of his nostalgic feelings about his home country, he seems to be drifting in the air with no roots to fix him to the ground. If he had not closed his sensitivity to the notes of harmony dormant in the land his life would have been more meaningful. The instinct for observing the beauty, grace, and the magnitude of the land is not dead in him: but he fails to cultivate it. He does not emerge in epic dimensions as Alexandra and Antonia, the pioneer farmers, and Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant, the pioneer missionaries do. No land is there heroic enough to instil hopes in them: no background large enough to interact with; no sanctuary to rely their hopes and dreams on.

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