

ANALYSIS

One of Ours (1922)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“*One of Ours* (1922) is Miss Cather’s war novel; its title suggests that the hero is typical of the many midwestern boys who went to France in 1917 to ‘save the world for Democracy.’ The hero, Claude Wheeler, is first seen as a Nebraska farm boy. The chief characters of the early part of the book are his father, severe and insensitive; his understanding and sympathetic mother; the illiterate but cheerful and wise hired woman Mahailey; and Claude’s free-thinking, realistic, somewhat cynical Austrian friend Ernest Havel. Claude, seeking for a better life, goes off to Lincoln to his education, although his father obliges him to go to a shoddy denominational college instead of the University of Nebraska which Willa Cather herself attended.

In Lincoln, however, he meets the Ehrlichs, a cultivated family of German background, and is introduced to the world of culture. His responsibilities to family and farm force him to give the colorless and excessively religious Enid Royce, who is more interested in prohibition work and entertaining preachers than she is in her husband. When a missionary relative in China falls ill Enid goes off to take care of her, and Claude goes back to live with his family.

The second half of the novel concerns the First World War and its impact both on the farm community and on Claude himself; the changing attitudes of the region toward the impending war are described with skill and exactitude. Claude is commissioned in the army and goes to France, where he forms a friendship with the talented violinist David Gerhardt as well as with two separate French families who serve to introduce him to European culture. The war, France, David, and his French friends open Claude’s eyes; in his mind he rejects his crude frontier background, and now knows what he wants to be. But his awakening is also his destruction; he is killed in a conventional heroic incident, leaving his mother and Mahailey to mourn him in Nebraska....

The difficulty with this novel is that the two halves do not fit together. The first half is obviously the better, yet the section describing Claude’s war experiences is a remarkable *tour de force*; it is hard-minded and masculine, although free from profanity, and is in every way comparable with such first-hand male accounts of the war as Dos Passos’ *Three Soldiers*. Some of the best characters in the novel are the minor figures: Mahailey, Ernest Havel, the Ehrlich family, and Claude’s thin-blooded, dyspeptic, puritanical, and materialistic brother Bayliss, a farm-machinery salesman who seems to Claude the personification of all that is sordid and dismal in the world.”

Donald Heiney

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“*One of Ours* is a good novel and a bad novel in one. The first half, the Nebraska half, is superb. Nowhere else in Cather are the beauty of the world and its sheer capacity to disappoint balanced with such mastery. The problems come in the second half, the war half. Claude’s transformation from dismayed farm boy into valiant infantryman is too quick, unreal. More important, Cather seems never to have made up her mind about the war. Sometimes, as in Claude’s dying-for-an-idea epiphany, she believes in it; elsewhere, no.... John Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers* was published in 1921, E. E. Cummings’s *The Enormous Room* in 1922, both of them vividly detailing the absurdity and butchery of the war. Then came *One of Ours*, with Claude giving his life for an idea...

In *Vanity Fair* Edmund Wilson raised his eyebrows over Claude’s finding his salvation in ‘the dubious crusade of the war’ and pronounced the book ‘a pretty flat failure’.... Mencken...turned on *One of Ours* with fury, claiming that Cather’s idea of war was basically that of ‘the standard model of lady novelist’...

Even Sinclair Lewis, a great admirer of Cather's, found the war half of *One of Ours* a collection of clichés, 'a romance of violinists gallantly turned soldier, of self-sacrificing sergeants, sallies at midnight.' Not everyone panned the book, only the sophisticates.... Cather understood that World War I had some purpose. Unlike those other novelists, she realized that there were 'worse things than war'... The book became a bestseller."

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 18-19

Michael Hollister (2015)

