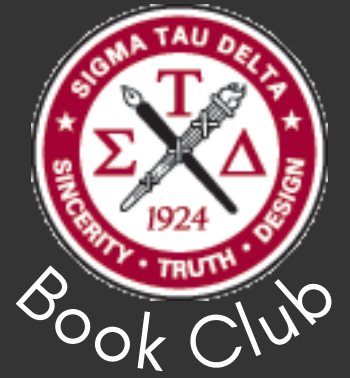


One of
Ours

Willa
Cather



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How to use this kit

This kit contains a variety of sheets to be used for discussion. It begins with an introduction to Willa Cather and a discussion of the novel's context to jumpstart book club conversations. Then there are four pages that focus on one theme or element. You can discuss all four or pick which ones you would like to use. Each of these sheets includes discussion questions, interactive activities, and sparks to inspire service-related conversations. At the back of the kit, there is a list of community resources for chapters interested in pursuing service projects related to the collection's themes. Once you've completed your book club experience, don't forget to share it on social media with Sigma Tau Delta!

Introduction

Willa Cather wrote *One of Ours*, her fifth novel, in 1922, in the wake of the First World War. Inspired by one of her cousins and her time living on the plains, the book follows Claude Wheeler, a discontented Nebraskan who longs for a greater purpose. Over the course of several years, we see Claude go from a young man from a rural farming family to a soldier overseas. Cather's book would go on to receive the 1923 Pulitzer Prize for the Novel, cementing her as a celebrated author and key figure of American regionalism.

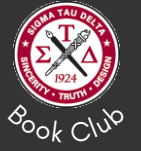
Poetics

A preliminary discussion of the historical context of *One of Ours* is a great way to start thinking about the setting and backdrop of the novel. World War I clearly plays an important part in the book's second half, but the twentieth-century Nebraskan landscape is just as important when trying to understand Cather's cultural commentary. With this in mind, use these questions to begin thinking about the novel's place in American and world history:

1. Why does Cather spend most of the novel in Nebraska when so many important events ultimately happen overseas? What is she trying to establish in this American setting?
2. Where is the American frontier at the time of this story? How is Nebraska's position in the U.S. different from what it was in the nineteenth century?
3. What do you know about America's involvement in World War I?
4. Aside from its geography, how is this story told from a uniquely American perspective?
5. How does knowing the result and the timing of the war's end play into how we read the end of the novel and Claude's story?
6. Why does Cather decide to separate the novel into five books? In what ways do they help to mark the progression of the story?
7. If you have read this novel before, what do you think about Claude's journey this time around? Do you have a new perspective on his trajectory?

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Ours

Setting



Introduction

As is often the case in Cather's writing, this novel's settings are integral to its narrative. The places the characters find—or do not find—themselves in act as significant driving forces in their stories.

Questions

1. How does the narration, particularly when channeling Claude's thoughts, characterize the various settings? How and why do these characterizations differ when Claude visits other towns or travels overseas?
2. What internal push and pull factors move the characters to the various locations? What could these different settings represent for the characters in the novel?
3. Think about the plains region in the context of American history. How are the experiences of earlier settlers and the characters in other Cather books different from the ones in this story? How does this factor into characters' decisions?
4. How does the meaning of the book's title change given the context of its settings? How does it stay the same?

Activities

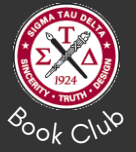
1. Write a diary entry from the perspective of Claude about a typical day around Frankfort or the farm. Consider how his feelings about his hometown may reflect or differ from your own.
2. Reflect on the time you were the farthest away from home. Write down what you thought about this new setting and how it made you feel about the place you came from.

Sparks for Service

1. Think of the communities you belong to. Consider what it means to be "one of" the people within it and how you can potentially be more involved.
2. What are the biggest issues in the particular place you live, and what are ways you could give back to those in your communities?

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The Search for Meaning



Introduction

The Search for Meaning is a main theme in *One of Ours* that is explored primarily through the novel's protagonist, Claude Wheeler. His search for purpose, fulfillment, and a sense of belonging shape his life and drive the story forward. His struggles represent the larger human condition of seeking personal purpose in a world that emphasizes societal expectations.

Questions

1. How does Claude's sense of emptiness and disconnection at the beginning of the novel shape his decision to enlist in the war? What does this decision reveal about his search for purpose?
2. Claude's search for meaning leads him to different forms of fulfillment. How do his various pursuits (education, romantic relationships, and military service) reflect the different ways people try to find meaning in life?
3. How do Claude's internal struggles mirror the larger social and historical context of the novel?
4. At the end of the novel, how does Claude's understanding of meaning and purpose evolve? Does he find the fulfillment he was searching for?

Activities

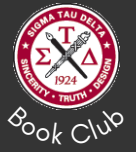
1. Spend a few minutes reflecting on your own personal search for meaning. What helps you find purpose in your own life? These things might include relationships, hobbies, or goals. How have these things or your search for meaning evolved over time?
2. Create a timeline of key moments in Claude's life that shaped his understanding of personal meaning. It may also be beneficial to create a timeline of your own life to contemplate your purpose and meaning.

Sparks for Service

1. Many people find personal meaning and fulfillment through helping others. What small steps can you take to help others in your community?
2. On his search for meaning, Claude enlists in the war, which ultimately leads to his death. In what ways can you honor and serve veterans?

One of Ours

Family



Introduction

Family is a central theme in *One of Ours*. Claude Wheeler's relationship with his family plays a significant role in shaping his worldview and sense of self. The expectations, values, and roles his father imposes on him lead him to long for something more. He struggles to reconcile his desire for independence with the pressures of family loyalty and tradition, and this conflict drives his search for meaning.

Questions

1. In what ways does Claude's longing for independence stem from the roles and expectations his family places on him? How do these expectations reflect broader societal values of the time?
2. What role do family values and traditions play in shaping the social and emotional struggles that many of the characters face? Are family expectations helpful or harmful in Claude's journey?
3. Compare Claude's relationship with his family to other characters in the novel (such as his wife). How do these relationships differ or remain the same when it comes to supporting his quest for fulfillment?
4. Claude feels isolated from his family, often because they don't seem to understand his deeper emotional struggles. How do you think this sense of disconnection shapes his identity and decisions, particularly his enlistment in the war?

Activities

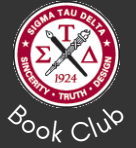
1. Generational expectations often occur in real life, not just in the novel. Reflect on what traits, values, or beliefs have been passed down to you by your parents, grandparents, or other ancestors.
2. Create a visual representation (such as a collage) of your family legacy. What do you associate with your family history?

Sparks for Service

1. Organize a community service project to support families in need. What project will help them the most?
2. Family relationships often have a deep impact on personal identity. Are there organizations you can volunteer at that offer family counseling or other support services? What can you do to provide this support in another way?

One of Ours

War & Masculinity



Introduction

Writing this book in the immediate aftermath of World War I, the reverberations of that event clearly shape the narrative. However, Cather also stated that the novel is not simply a “war story” and instead suggested that the characters’ progressions were her central concern. This page asks you to also consider how war functions as a mechanism for exploring Claude’s character.

Questions

1. What are Claude’s perceptions of masculinity? What is “manly” and “unmanly” according to him?
2. Why does Claude’s marriage with Enid not work out well? Compare this relationship with the ones he makes with his fellow soldiers.
3. What do you think Claude would have done without the war? What other options do you think he had?
4. How does Claude change as a *man* from the start of the story to the end?

Activities

1. Interrogate your own ideas about masculinity. Ask yourself what makes someone “a real man.”
2. Research or ask your relatives about people who have gone to war. What was their reason for doing so, and how did it affect them and their families?

Sparks for Service

1. Who is currently being affected by war? In what ways can you support those who have experienced loss due to geopolitical conflicts?
2. What would it look like to embody “masculinity” in healthy, helpful, and productive ways?

Community Resources

Exploring the following websites will provide valuable resources for how to better understand many of the issues addressed in contemporary literature. Chapter members should consider the many ways that researching these sites may inspire individual or chapter actions. Remember: no project and no action is too small! Volunteering time and skills is also a valuable resource. Hosting open discussions about issues raised in Book Club is a way of serving individuals, groups, and communities. Service through words is an important part of raising awareness.

Big Brothers Big Sisters: <https://www.bbbs.org/>

The American Legion: <https://www.legion.org/>

Operation Homefront: <https://operationhomefront.org/>

Veterans of Foreign Wars: <https://www.vfw.org/>

National Rural Health Association: <https://www.ruralhealth.us/>

International Committee of the Red Cross: <https://www.icrc.org/en>

Doctors Without Borders: <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/who-we-are>

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy:

<https://www.aamft.org/>

Feeding America: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank>

AmeriCorps: <https://americorps.gov/>

You might also consult various Literacy Programs and Literacy Councils in your community. Valuable resources can also be found by visiting the websites of some of our Society's sponsors and partners, including:

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC): lulac.org

Lambda Literary: <https://lambdaliterary.org/>

National Council of Teachers of English/National Center for Literacy Education (NCTE):

<https://ncte.org/contact-us/>