

Willa Cather's
The Song of the Lark



Edited by Debra L. Cumberland

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DIALOGUE
10

Edited by
Michael J. Meyer

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It is with deep sadness that I mention the passing of Merrill Maguire Skaggs, a renowned Cather scholar, a death that occurred as I began this project. While I never had the opportunity to meet Merrill in person, I held, like so many others, a profound admiration for her work. I was thrilled when Merrill expressed an interest in contributing to this volume, but unfortunately, she passed away in the very early stages of the project, leaving her essay unfinished. She will be missed.

Series Editors' Preface

The original concept for Rodopi's new series entitled Dialogue grew out of two very personal experiences of the general editor. In 1985, having just finished my dissertation on John Steinbeck and attained my doctoral degree, I was surprised to receive an invitation from Steinbeck biographer, Jackson J. Benson, to submit an essay for a book he was working on. I was unpublished at the time and was unsure and hesitant about my writing talent, but I realized that I had nothing to lose. It was truly the "opportunity of a lifetime." I revised and shortened a chapter of my dissertation on Steinbeck's *The Pearl* and sent it off to California. Two months later, I was pleasantly surprised to find out that my essay had been accepted and would appear in Duke University Press's *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* (1990).

Surprisingly, my good fortune continued when several months after the book appeared, Tetsumaro Hayashi, a renowned Steinbeck scholar, asked me to serve as one of the three assistant editors of *The Steinbeck Quarterly*, then being published at Ball State University. Quite naïve at the time about publishing, I did not realize how fortunate I had been to have such opportunities present themselves without any struggle on my part to attain them. After finding my writing voice and editing several volumes on my own, I discovered in 2002 that despite my positive experiences, there was a real prejudice against newer "emerging" scholars when it came to inclusion in collections or acceptance in journals.

As the designated editor of a Steinbeck centenary collection, I found myself roundly questioned about the essays I had chosen for inclusion in the book. Specifically, I was asked why I had not selected several prestigious names whose recognition power would have spurred the book's success on the market. My choices of lesser known but quality essays seemed unacceptable to those who ran the conference which produced the potential entries in the book. New voices were unwelcome; it was the tried and true that were greeted with open arms. Yet these experienced scholars had no need for further publications and often offered few original insights into the Steinbeck canon. Sadly, the originality of the lesser-known essayists met with hostility; the doors were closed, perhaps even locked tight, against their innovative approaches and readings that took issue with scholars whose authority and expertise had long been unquestioned.

Angered, I withdrew as editor of the volume, and began to think of ways to rectify what I considered a serious flaw in académie. My goal was to open discussions between experienced scholars and those who were just beginning their academic careers and had not yet broken through the publication barriers. Dialogue would be fostered rather than discouraged.

Having previously served as an editor for several volumes in Rodopi's Perspective of Modern Literature series under the general editorship of David Bevan, I sent a proposal to Fred van der Zee advocating a new series that would be entitled Dialogue, one that would examine the controversies within classic canonical texts and would emphasize an interchange between established voices and those whose ideas had never reached the academic community because their names were unknown. Happily, the press was willing to give the concept a try and gave me a wide scope in determining not only the texts to be covered but also in deciding who would edit the individual volumes.

When Debra Cumberland asked about a volume on Willa Cather's *Song of the Lark*, I was quite pleased to see a proposal for an initial volume that would likely discuss the contributions of an author whose gender issues were often questioned. While a volume on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was already in print, I wanted to encourage a wide range of interest in the Dialogue series. The resulting essays address many of the issues that caused the novel to be such a controversial text: In this volume's pages, such issues are not avoided but are addressed skillfully by authors with a variety of publication histories, some experienced, some neophytes. All are committed to a discussion of what earlier reviewers had determined were pluses and minuses of *Song of the Lark's* characters and plot and to addressing elements in Cather's stylistics and themes that were seen as unusual or as flaws. As you will see, some of authors break fertile new ground in the process, and offer approaches which will help readers see the novel from several new angles. This volume will soon be followed by studies on Laura Esquivel's *Like Water For Chocolate*, and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Volumes on Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are also in progress. It is my hope that as each title appears, the Dialogue series will foster not only renewed interest in each of the chosen works but that each will bring forth fresh interpretations and will open doors to heretofore silenced voices. In this atmosphere, a

healthy interchange of criticism can develop, one that will allow even dissent and opposite viewpoints to be expressed without fear that such stances may be seen as negative or counter-productive.

My thanks to Rodopi and its editorial board for its support of this “radical” concept. May you, the reader, discover much to value in these new approaches to issues that have fascinated readers for decades and to books that have long stimulated our imaginations and our critical discourse.

Michael J. Meyer
2010

Introduction

Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* was the first book I read about a talented, creative young woman who wanted to be an artist and actually followed through with it. Anne of Green Gables marries Gilbert and writes occasional sketches, and Jo marries Professor Bhaer and that seems to be the end of her scribbling in the attic. As I got older, I discovered the Talented-Young-Women-Who Drown genre. Maggie Tulliver and Edna Pontellier spring to mind. Thea does no such thing. Ray conveniently gets killed, Thea gets sent off to Chicago with the money he had set aside for her to study music, Thea struggles, Thea works very hard, and Thea achieves her dreams. Thea delivers herself completely to her art. As a young teenager with dreams of being an artist myself, I found her story of hard work, tenacity, and most of all, her triumph, mesmerizing and inspiring.

Decades later, coming back to the novel, I continue to admire the manner in which Cather's novel raises those central questions about women, artistry, love, marriage, and family. Cather's novel does not sugar coat the journey. *The Song of the Lark* fundamentally asks what it takes to become a successful artist, and what it specifically takes for a woman to achieve that success. As Cather points out, no dream comes without a price. Thea achieves her dream, but the reader of the book is left to wonder whether narcissism is the cost of artistic success. (Is it enough, or is Thea a cold shell?) Would we be asking the same question if Thea were a man?

Cather also asks questions of artistry by comparing Thea with her friends. Most of Thea's friends in *Moonstone* are artists of one type or another. Doctor Archie is, in his own way, an artist. Mr. and Mrs. Kohler and Herr Wunsch are artists, as is Spanish Johnny. But Cather, I think, makes a distinction between them and Thea. It is the distinction between an artist who approaches his or her work to lose him or herself, and an artist who approaches the work to find his or her identity.

Despite the centrality of these questions, *The Song of the Lark* has received less critical attention than many of her better known works, such as *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, or *The Professor's House*. There has, in Cather scholarship, been a relatively fashionable focus on some texts at the expense of others. This volume offers an opportunity to address this critical neglect. As Cather herself pointed out, the novel, first published in 1915, is very different stylistically

from many of her other works, and Cather herself looked back on the work and responded in the preface she wrote for the 1932 reissue of *Lark* to the chief complaints in regard to its style as well as perceptions of Thea's increasingly less sympathetic nature as she grows as an artist. As Evelyn Funda notes, while the novel reflects the strength of German culture in the US in its depiction of the Kohlers and other immigrant families, *Lark's* dearth of critical attention in comparison to other Cather novels may also have been due in part to the anti-German sentiment that broke out in the country due to the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 as well as the United States' entry into World War I in 1917. A novel glamorizing Wagnerian opera may not have set well with many readers (47). Critics have also passed over the novel in favor of works characteristic of Cather's more spare style.

Literary-critical feminism during the 1970s and 1980s helped to kindle a resurgence of interest in *The Song of the Lark*, as scholars turned to the novel to ask fundamental questions about gender and creativity. One thinks in particular of Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* and studies by Susan J. Rosowski, such as "Writing Against Silences: Female Adolescent Development and in the Novels of Willa Cather," and "Willa Cather's Female Landscapes: *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*." Many of the essays in this volume hearken back to that original criticism, but now challenge those assumptions. While some may think of Cather's work as overtaken by feminist criticism, the range of essays responding to those original critics, but asking divergent questions, shows that there is a great pluralism to the feminist scholarship out there. The Thea in the Rodopi volume emerges as a complex, multifaceted creature, while at the same time challenging the more traditional interpretation of Thea as a creative, sexual being who finds her inspiration, in Ellen Moers' words, in the "most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature" (252). Meghan L. Burke's essay, for instance, argues against traditional feminist readings of Thea as the model of female artistic empowerment, instead articulating that *The Song of the Lark* is, in fact, a pessimistic account of female artistry and sacrifice; true artistic genius for women comes at the price of their essential embodied self. Cecilia Björken-Nyberg, in her examination of the medical discourse running through the novel, argues that not only is *The Song of the Lark* not a true *Künstlerroman*, but the constant examination of Thea's throat is comparable to the obsession with the documentation of the

prostitute's body through speculum examinations in the nineteenth century. While asserting the value of interpreting *The Song of the Lark* as a *Künstlerroman*, Erica D. Galioto presents a revised *Künstlerroman*, using the lens of psychoanalysis to examine artist birth, second selves, and unconscious identities.

Other essays challenge different pre-existing assumptions about the novel. Sarah Clere, for instance, challenges traditional interpretations of Cather's positive portrayal of Mexicans and the Mexican American community, while Annette Dolph argues that "location" and "place" need to be reconceptualized in order to include the influence of the railroad. An examination of "place" is also important in the work of Tony Magagna, who convincingly articulates that, for all the triumphs inherent to cultivating a rooted sense of Western place, definitions of place in the novel can also manifest as "exclusionary, exploitative, and reactionary." Eric Aronoff investigates Cather's relationship to anthropology and the culture debates, while Danielle Russell evokes ecocriticism.

The ongoing important work of positioning Cather in relation to literary movements and her literary influences continues with essays from Ann Moseley, Richard Pressman, Julie Olin-Ammentorp, as well as my own essay.

Rodopi's Dialogue series offers an opportunity for both emerging and established scholars to explore controversies in contemporary texts. The thirteen fine, astute studies of *The Song of the Lark* are a testament to the richness found in the novel, and hopefully will provide a springboard to further study. These dialogues are not positioned strictly as paired, yet affinities between the particular essays will be immediately clear to the reader.

On a final note, one of the more moving essays in the collection, Beth Torgerson's, discusses the concept of Cather and the gift. Torgerson asserts that while Cather's novels abound with gifts, *The Song of the Lark* is unique in that it is structured upon this concept. I find that this is the perfect note to end on, for this volume is dedicated to the memory of one of the finest scholars and professors that I have known, my mentor, Susan J. Rosowski. The gifts that Sue passed on to the generations of Cather scholars and students and colleagues that she influenced is incalculable.

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**Genius and the (Un)Dead Girls:
Consumption, Artistry, and the Female Body in *The
Song of the Lark***

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In May of 1896, Willa Cather commented upon the retirement of American actress Mary Anderson in her weekly *Nebraska State Journal* column on the arts. Although Cather criticized Anderson for having had an overly-commercial career in which her “genius was asleep,” (156)¹, she nonetheless praised the actress’s choice to finally leave her profession in order to marry, writing:

[Anderson] has, perhaps, much to be thankful for. Art touched her life without consuming it, and the flame did not blacken the brand [...] To win the praise and admiration of all the world, to have fame and flattery and the most intoxicating of all successes, that is much. But to keep through all this a clear vision, a pure and untrammelled taste, to estimate all these things at their true value and turn one’s back on them and live one’s life, that is vastly more. For what shall it profit a woman if she gain the whole world and lose—what she wants? (158)

Cather went on to note that it was Anderson’s “correct estimation of the values of things that ennobled her as a woman and sadly limited her as an artist,” ending the piece with musings that expressed doubt about the existence of a woman who “ever really had the art instinct, the art necessity,” at all (158).

As a successful female artist herself, Cather expresses in this passage a seemingly self-negating view on the potential to simultaneously embrace an identity of both “artist” and “woman.” Rather, she presents Anderson as having made a choice between essentially death and life: to sacrifice herself to the all-consuming flames of Art, or to “live one’s life,” trading the possibility of epic achievement for lesser human—perhaps, more specifically,

“womanly”—values and desires. Surprisingly, these sentiments are also not isolated to Cather’s column on Anderson; in additional pieces for the *Journal* and other publications, she would further expound this view, repeatedly implying that hetero-normative femininity more often than not proves antithetical to genius.²

What are readers to make, then, of Cather’s 1915 novel *The Song of Lark*, which tells the story of the rise of the musical genius Thea Kronborg and the development of her decidedly “embodied” art: her astounding operatic voice? Particularly in recent decades, the critical consensus on the novel has viewed Thea’s story as a model of female artistic empowerment, one in which Cather’s early ambivalence and suspicions about the duality of femininity and artistry are at last resolved. Linda Pannill, for instance, has argued that *The Song of the Lark* demonstrates Cather’s arrival “at a conception of the woman artist which reconciled the conflict because [...] she conceived of the woman artist in distinctly ‘womanly’ terms—as an instrument, the instrument of her own genius” (223). Steven Shively sees in the novel “Cather’s switch from a negative, patriarchal, deadly view of female artistry and sacrifice” to a “beneficent, redemptive” one (83), a change through which Cather “opens the doors of the Kingdom of Art to women” (85). Other critics like Sharon O’Brien emphasize the ways in which many of the novel’s scenes, particularly those taking place in the womb-like space of Panther Canyon, “strengthened [Cather’s] associations of femaleness with creativity” (416). Importantly, many of these feminist readings see Thea’s artistic genius as located in, and even dependent upon, both her biologically and culturally-determined “female” body. In Thea’s comparisons to various wombs or “vessels,” in the novel’s obsessive attention to “natural” female forms (i.e. the numerous conversations about Thea’s disavowal of stays), and in the maternal metaphor that is repeatedly invoked to describe how an artist must “make herself born,” *The Song of the Lark* arguably privileges woman and the “womanly” body as the ultimate “instrument” for creativity in a way that Cather’s earlier columns seem to deny.

However, the morbid language and fatal choice at the heart of Cather’s musings on Mary Anderson—a Pyrrhic victory in art, or a life of wasted genius—haunts the pages of *The Song of the Lark*, so much so that what at first seems to be an affirmation of specifically female artistic empowerment emerges, upon close analysis, as something quite different. In fact, I tend to agree with Mary Titus’s

statement that “*The Song of the Lark* represents more a continuity with than a break from Willa Cather’s earlier writings” (28).³ Embracing artistic genius remains, even in Cather’s most extended exploration of a woman artist, essentially antithetical to simultaneously embracing physicality, sexuality, desire, and, in particular, any kind of embodied femininity. It is true that the rise of a single genius, the figure who in the final section of the novel is called “Kronborg,” is indeed celebrated in *The Song of the Lark*. However, this rise and celebration of the “artist” who is Kronborg is coupled with, and in fact specifically dependent upon, the fall and destruction of the “woman” who was Thea. In *The Song of the Lark*, I believe that Cather depicts not only the necessity of rejecting potentially confining female scripts, such as marriage, children, and other “values” that she saw as having “enboded” Mary Anderson as a woman but limited her as an artist, but, moreover, in order for her heroine to realize her genius, demands the rejection of the physical female body as well.

Throughout the course of the novel, Thea is diminished rather than elevated by her vocal achievements. She gradually abandons personal desire, sexuality, and even identity, not in active assertion of her own uniquely female genius but as an instrument of all-consuming, de-gendered Art. Indeed, Thea reads more like a creature possessed than a woman empowered. The “genius” that drives and drains her has a distinctly parasitical, even vampiric cast; it devours Thea as its host (and through Thea, others who pose obstacles to full artistic realization), pushing her onwards towards the isolating immortality of fame while transforming her once vibrant, physical, life into a kind of waking death. In fact, throughout *The Song of the Lark* Thea is alternately aligned with a series of characters whom I will call “(un)dead girls” who come to represent the impossibilities of life as both woman and artist. The (un)dead girls can be divided into two camps: some consumed, literally dead or dying girls who appear as walking corpses, losing physical battles with ill bodies; others consuming, “fallen” creatures who in acting upon base desires emerge as monstrous succubi in the text, draining the life of those around them. All serve as models and warnings of Thea’s possible futures as she deals with complex negotiations of female body, artistry, and desire. By repeatedly indentifying her heroine with or against these haunting figures, Cather emphasizes how Thea must choose either a “bodily” death that will allow the artist to be born, or a “spiritual”

death which will maintain her “womanhood”; she cannot, Cather seems to say, have both.

It is only fitting, then, that the reader’s introduction to Thea Kronborg (arguably her moment of textual “birth”) comes at her first sort of “deathbed,” when Dr. Archie discovers the eleven-year old girl laboring to breathe under a severe case of pneumonia. Thea’s illness is almost fatal, as Dr. Archie fears “that his patient might slip through his hands, do what he might” (*SL* 14), and significantly occurs against the backdrop of her mother’s seventh successful childbirth. It is the excitement over Mrs. Kronborg’s “natural” condition that overshadows Thea’s dangerous one, and nearly results in her death.⁴

Many critics have connected these opening moments with Thea’s later struggle to “birth herself” as an artist, arguing, as Susan Rosowski does, that this “scene announces Cather’s preoccupation with double birth: a biological one is an accidental thing and highly overrated, the narrator says, while the far more important ‘second self’ necessary for creative life is ignored” (63). Similarly, Demaree Peck states, “Cather implies that her heroine possesses a divine birthright that her mother never brought into the world” (110). At its most basic level, then, with its devaluing of biological birth, this scene sets up the direct opposition between the female body—here personified by the “fine mother” Mrs. Kronborg, whose über-maternal reproductive body has literally endangered Thea’s life—and Thea’s “true” life and identity, which will come to be defined by de-gendered Art.

The presence of Dr. Archie in this first scene—the character who will come to be both Thea’s most consistent critic and fan, and whose continual struggle to both “diagnose” Thea’s body and aesthetically judge her art reveals how these two processes cannot seamlessly work together—further emphasizes the opposition between female physicality and artistry. Archie expresses acute disdain for bodily “performances” in place of true creative ones. Reluctant to play midwife to Mrs. Kronborg “in functions which she could have performed so admirably unaided,” Archie wishes that “he had gone down to Denver to hear Fay Templeton sing ‘See-Saw’” (*SL* 9). Furthermore, the doctor is distinctly unable to locate what he instinctually recognizes as Thea’s genius potential in her physiognomy. “No,” Cather writes, “he couldn’t say that it was different from any other child’s head, though he believed that there was something very different about her” (*SL* 12).

Dr. Archie does not find the source of Thea's "difference" on her skull specifically because it is *not* a part of her; rather, as Cather traces Thea's growth from a child into maturity, she increasingly emphasizes her heroine's sense of the "thing" that exists within, but is distinctly separate from, her physical body. Upon moving into her own room just before her thirteenth birthday, Thea begins to "live a double life" in which "at night she was a different person" (SL 53); shortly after this change, Thea also begins to recognize the signs of a "different person" within, seeing "it" as a "companion" that is always with her, "more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself" (SL 71). Always referred to in genderless terms as a "creature," a "thing," or "It," Thea's "companion" greatly resembles one of the oldest definitions of the word *genius*, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, connects to classical pagan beliefs in a "tutelary god or attendant spirit allotted to every person at his birth, to govern his fortunes and determine his character, and finally to conduct him out of the world."⁵ In both this early definition and in Cather's representation of "It," Thea's genius is attendant to her female body, but is in no way an inherent function of it.

It is also important that Thea first recognizes the duality of her genius and her bodily self at the moment she is on the cusp of sexual maturity. Thea begins the novel sleeping in the gender-neutral nursery of her little brothers. However, upon being given her own room, Thea (and in turn, the reader) experiences an acute awareness of her physical being. Cather spends several pages focusing on the ways in which Thea consciously generates her own bodily heat each night in her icy attic bed, until she "glowed like a little stove with the warmth of her own blood" (SL 52). The sexual implications of the teenage girl working her "internal fires" into the ecstasy of "a warm wave [that] crept over her body and round, sturdy legs" is fairly blatant, particularly as the description is coupled with her would-be suitor Ray Kennedy's subsequent pronouncement, "That girl is developing something fine" (SL 53). It makes sense, then, that Thea's attendant "genius" would begin to make more obvious appearances at this time in her life, not necessarily because it is stimulated or dependent upon her awakening sexuality, but because it is explicitly *separate* from it. Thea only begins noticing her genius because it can finally be distinguished from her now-sexualized bodily self. Later, when the adult Thea observes of her childhood, "I am more or less of an artist now, but then I was nothing else" (SL 381), it is as if she recognizes

this important divide. Prior to sexual maturity, she was able to be “all artist” because she was *not* all female “body.”

In Thea’s first vocal performance of the novel—the first exhibition of what will become her defining art—the separateness of her physical self and her artistic genius is further emphasized. Cather points out that while singing “the character of [Thea’s] voice changed altogether [...] it was a nature-voice, [...] breathed from the creature and apart from language” (*SL* 69-70). However, Thea’s dual nature is not only evident in her altered voice, but in the very subject matter of her first song: Thea’s changed, “nature-voice” (the voice that arguably belongs to the genius “creature” within her) sings the (male) part of the mythical musical genius Orpheus as he laments losing his wife Eurydice in the underworld. In these moments of song, where the genderless musical “creature” first sings out of Thea’s body, it is tempting to see the living girl Thea as perhaps aligned with female figure of Eurydice, lost by a musician in the world of death.

The brief reference to Eurydice in *The Song of the Lark* is perhaps most striking because she is merely the first of several arguably (un)dead girls who appear in the novel, a group to which I believe Thea eventually belongs. One reoccurring type of this character is what Susan Meyer calls “coughing girls;” that is, the series of “several adolescent girls in the novel who [are] slowly dying of tuberculosis” (27). Ostensibly, Thea is juxtaposed with these girls—the first of whom appear variously at her father’s prayer meeting as “sickly girls who had not much interest in life [...] indeed, were already preparing to die” (*SL* 111)—in order to emphasize Thea’s opposing strength and vitality. Certainly, on her first train ride home since going to Chicago to study music, Thea recognizes her own health and power in comparison to another consumptive female passenger. Cather recounts Thea’s reactions:

How horrible to waste away like that, in the time when one ought to be growing fuller and stronger and rounder every day [...] She put her hand on her breast and felt how warm it was; and within it there was a full, powerful pulsation. She smiled—though she was ashamed of it—with the natural contempt of the strength for weakness [...]

Nobody could die while they felt like that inside. (*SL* 185)

Touching her own physical body, Thea receives assurance that she will not die like the walking-dead “coughing girl” behind her, and that their fate is not the same. However, in the same scene, Cather

explicitly aligns the consumptive girl's fate—death—with Thea's fate—genius. Cather writes that Thea's "companion," her "genius" spirit, was "moving to meet her and she was moving to meet it;" in fact, "that meeting awaited [Thea], just as surely as for the poor girl in the seat behind her, there awaited a hole in the earth, already dug" (*SL* 184).

With these lines, Thea's meeting with genius is exactly equated to the consumptive's meeting with the grave; genius and death appear almost interchangeably. Notably, the very Chicago trip that directly benefits Thea's "genius" is afforded by another bodily death in the tragic killing of Ray Kennedy. His legacy of six hundred dollars pays for Thea's formal training, while his demise also provides the additional benefit of conveniently erasing his "threat" of impending marriage, with all its implications of full feminine sexuality, for Thea. The associations between death and artistry do not end there, but crop up repeatedly over the course of the novel. For instance, later Thea's genius will be also inextricably linked to another dead girl in the form of "Dreary Maggie Evans," as the two are remembered in tandem in *Moonstone* for the former's performance at the latter's funeral.

While Thea's growing musical prowess is shadowed, and in the case of Ray, even facilitated, by death, Cather undeniably emphasizes the young woman's physical strength and beauty. Because of such careful authorial attention, this healthy body has often been read as the very source of Thea's artistic empowerment. For instance, in her analysis of the "coughing girls," Meyer connects the dying girls' tuberculosis with "a morbid preoccupation with sexuality, with rigid social rules about female behavior, and with narrow, commonplace lives" (27), arguing that both Thea's health and artistic development are facilitated in contrast by the heroine's insistence on bodily freedom in form of fresh air, low or uncorsetted dresses, and unconstrained social behavior.

However, a general insistence on bodily "freedom" could also verge on (or could be misinterpreted as) insistence on sexual freedom. In fact, such misinterpretation repeatedly happens to Thea, particularly in Chicago, where she treats men "with a careless familiarity which they usually misunderstood" (*SL* 219). One particularly striking instance in which her behavior is subjected to unwanted sexual construal occurs after Thea attends her first symphony concert. She is completely overpowered—consumed, even—by the music, feeling suddenly that "she was too much excited to know anything except that

she wanted something desperately” (*SL* 169), and “scarcely knowing where she was, because her mind had been far away” (*SL* 170). Emerging out of this disembodied, purely musical realm, however, Thea is immediately assaulted by the sheer physicality of life around her. Her very body is pummeled with reminders of “reality” as “people jostled her, ran into her, poked her aside” (*SL* 170), and, in a shocking coincidence, two separate men accost her with the belief she is a prostitute. Suddenly faced with the sordid physicality and sexuality of the world, Thea’s reaction is one of defense; she believes “they were there to take something from her” (*SL* 171). It is as if Thea’s sudden re-recognition of her bodily existence (particularly as a potentially sexual woman) directly threatens her possession of the “art” she just received.

In response to this seeming threat posed to her genius, Thea makes a grave promise to herself and the elusive “It” that inhabits her: “She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height” (*SL* 171). Overwhelmed by a sense of conflict between her physical nature and artistic desire, Thea is forced to choose sides and fiercely opts to dedicate her entire life—even to the point of actual death, she insists—to the eternal, ephemeral realm of art. Furthermore, although the scene ends with an image that seems to speak of sudden sexual maturity, as Thea “pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl’s no longer” (*SL* 172), what has actually begun to mature and awaken at this moment is Thea’s disembodied, de-gendered artistic self. In a sense, the bosom is no longer “a little girl’s” because it is now neither a girl’s nor a woman’s, but merely the sheath or shell (both repeated metaphors throughout the novel) of an inner artist.

I want to emphasize, then, that Thea’s artistry is never truly facilitated by any hint of actual sexuality, and is in fact apparently hindered by it. Thea recognizes this with her post-symphony promise (which one can read as even a sort of vow of chastity⁶), and thereby makes her first steps towards the full sacrifice of embodied self and desire—the bodily “death” that has always been associated with her art in some form or another—that her “genius” companion requires to thrive. Furthermore, the sheer health and strength of Thea’s body, so often emphasized by Cather and noted by critics, does not contradict this reading of the woman’s personal diminishment or figurative “death” in the name of Art. As a singer, Thea’s body is crucial only in its superior mechanics of lung power and vocal chords. It must be

strong to serve as a perfect vehicle for vocal artistry. However, any personal connections or desires that Thea harbors within and about her female body inevitably interfere with her creative destiny. She must learn to recognize it as simply a well-crafted instrument to be played by her attendant “genius,” no longer an extension of her personal identity or agency. In truth, from the very moment of her vow, readers become increasingly—and perhaps uncomfortably—aware that Cather shows little room or reason for the existence of the “woman” Thea, with all her human capacity for personal desire, relationships, or needs, in this kind of utilitarian body-as-instrument equation at all.

This is not to say that from this moment in the text Thea’s subsequent vocal performances do not contain sexual imagery; often, they do. However, the eroticism others attribute to and perceive in Thea is often “unconscious and non-volitional” on her part (Meyer 29). In several extended passages, including the pivotal scene in which Thea performs in Mexican Town, Thea’s singing seems to inspire sexual excitement in her (male) listeners; Thea and her female body, however, remain distinctly “hands off” (Boutry 193). Furthermore, Cather seems to suggest that those who do negatively interpret the heroine’s performances as intentionally, physically sexual (as the prudish Mrs. Livery Johnson and Anna Kronborg both do) are no more than antagonistic misreaders (Meyer 29).⁷

Of course, Mrs. Johnson’s and Anna’s associations between a woman’s public performance and the rhetoric of “falleness” are not without historical precedent. Deborah Nord has outlined the cultural associations between actresses or singers and the prostitute in Victorian culture, as both “lived as ‘public’ women who displayed themselves, performed for men, and were paid for doing so” (5), and the notion eventually endured transatlantically. Barbara Cutter explains how “fallen” women (who were overwhelmingly conceived like Thea as “white, rural, native-born young women from ‘respectable’ families” [41]) were portrayed in popular American literature as “consumed with desire,” especially the desire to “bring others to the same level” (45). This portrayal also recalls Thea’s seemingly identical driving force throughout the novel, that “one big thing—desire” (*SL* 68). In a rather paradoxical formulation, then, the fallen girls who were “consumed” with desire were largely seen as *consuming* beings. “Ruined” women were constantly surrounded with devouring, contaminating associations, as their sexual “performances” threatened to infect the public both physically (with potential disease)

and spiritually (with untoward “desire”). Furthermore, after “falling” from the only socially-sanctioned paths for females, ruined women were described in distinctly “undead” rhetoric, haunting the fringes of respectable society like specters. Often, the actual death of a fallen woman was depicted as a welcome relief to a life that had figuratively “ended” long ago.

While Thea’s enemies falsely assume that her musical performances have made her one of these “fallen” women, there are undoubtedly at least two other ruined, performing female figures in *The Song of the Lark*. Just as the novel is populated by a number of “consumed” girls, the characters of Belle White Archie and Edith Beers Ottenburg appear as monstrous, “consuming” women. Both the cruel wives of Thea’s most important male “patrons,” Mrs. Archie and Edith are each depicted as devouring, parasitical creatures, who are presented as less alive themselves than as grotesquely feeding off the living. Mrs. Archie is compared to a scavenging insect, living off “miserable scraps and shreds of food” (*SL* 33) and introduced in the text with the ironic comment, “She won’t bite you” (though from her portrayal, however, it is clear she *might*). Edith, who in looking like a “slim black weasel” (*SL* 280) is distinctly equated with disease-carrying vermin, repeatedly exhibits her rabid consumption with great “extravagance” (*SL* 280) and “wastefulness” (*SL* 282). While neither Mrs. Archie nor Edith actually consume any positive sustenance (Mrs. Archie apparently survives only on “canned salmon” [*SL* 33] and Edith is similarly shown eating “nothing but alligator-pear salad and hothouse grapes” [*SL* 280]), both completely consume the men with whom they live. Mrs. Archie literally starves Dr. Archie out of the home, compelling her husband to travel to Denver “chiefly because he was hungry” (*SL* 33). Meanwhile, Edith drives Fred to recklessly drink. Both distinctly “lamia-like” (Titus 34), neither women receive any sympathy from the narration.

What is most interesting, however, about the consuming Mrs. Archie and Edith, is their shared role as performers. It seems as though the true root of both women’s “ruin” lies in the false, predatory performances they used in order to entrap their husbands in loveless marriages. As Belle White, Mrs. Archie was a virtual actress. While she had originally seemed to be “one of the ‘pretty’ girls” whom suitors “thought very spirited” (*SL* 34), Cather later writes,

Her reputed prettiness must have been entirely the result of determination, of a fierce little ambition. Once she had married, fastened herself on some one, come to port,—it vanished like the ornamental plumage which drops away from some birds after the mating season. (SL 34)

Just as Mrs. Archie's very prettiness emerges as theatrical artifice, so too does Edith Beers's initial attractiveness. Like Mrs. Archie's costuming "plumage," Edith uses a "mask of slang and ridicule" to hide her true "ignorance and fatuous conceit" (SL 282).

Mrs. Archie and Edith seem to receive such harsh treatment by the narration because of the specifically sexual and physical nature of their "performances." Unlike Thea's desire for disembodied, artistic performance, Mrs. Archie and Edith temporarily become public "entertainers" out of predatory marital motivations. However, while Thea's ambitions as an artist are distinctly contrasted with the petty, bodily, and seemingly gendered ambitions of these wives, it seems that both these consuming women also loom over Thea's life as potential shades of her future self—indeed, a future kind of "death"—just as the consumed girls do. That is, *The Song of the Lark* implies that if Thea fails to devote herself wholly to the genderless genius that resides within her, she will be doomed to be no more than a physical, female, "fallen" kind of "performer." Mrs. Archie's existence in a crypt-like house and Edith's "life [like] a desert" (SL 283) will become her fatal, "undead" habitations as well. In fact, Thea threatens *herself* with this fate, crying one evening to a shocked Dr. Archie, "And if I fail, you'd better forget about me, for I'll be one of the worst women that ever lived. I'll be an awful woman!" (SL 207).

And so, Thea Kronborg must join one camp of (un)dead figures: either the consumed girls, who in "wasting" away lose the physical body that is so problematic to Thea's ultimate genius, or the consuming ones, who are all grotesque physical artifice and embodiment and therefore "dead" to art or transcendent spirit. Cather has offered her protagonist no other models by which she can envision a synthesis of body and art, female self and de-gendered genius. Following the symphony scene and her formal "vow," Thea appears to throw herself into the former camp, pushing her body to the point of exhaustion and illness in an attempt to cultivate her artistry, until her music instructor realizes that, "If she knew how, she'd like to—diminish" (SL 164). Cather begins noting her heroine's attempts at "evaporating" (SL 151) and her growing "coldness" (in sharp contrast

to the sexual “warmth” of her adolescent nights). By the time Fred Ottenburg meets her, she appears “as gray as the weather,” with “skin [that] looked sick” and a deathly pallor (*SL* 241). Fred, whose primary desires for Thea are from the first sexual, rather than aesthetic, takes it upon himself to repair the body that Thea’s genius has wasted. He suggests she leave Chicago—where, despite bodily illness, she is receiving the proper musical training and attention—to physically reenergize in the sensual landscape of Arizona’s Panther Canyon.

Even before this suggestion, Fred stands in opposition to Thea’s development as a true “genius.” Interestingly, he does not consciously intend to interfere with Thea’s singing career; in fact, despite his immediate sexual interest in her, Fred’s initial conception of Thea as someone “equipped to be an artist, and to be nothing else” (*SL* 284) is largely in keeping with the singer’s own understanding of what kinds of personal sacrifices her “art instinct” truly requires of her. He also recognizes the utilitarian drive of Thea’s genius, never predicting that “she would grow more fond of him than his immediate usefulness warranted” (*SL* 284). However, despite his ostensible position as one of her patrons, Thea actively rejects associating Fred with her disembodied art, decisively stating, “I don’t want him for a teacher [...] I want him for a sweetheart” (*SL* 240).

Therefore, when she accepts Fred’s offer to go to Panther Canyon, Thea can be seen as turning back on her decision to physically “die” for her art, the central promise of her fierce post-symphony vow. Immediately upon entering the canyon, Thea’s first reactions are ones of genuine relief. She feels that the “personality of which she was so tired seemed to let go of her,” (this being the same “personality” that the narrative later explicitly equates with her “genius”⁸), and that she has been “completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world” (*SL* 248). This “enslaving desire,” which has driven Thea away from a sustained connection to her physical being and world in pursuit of ethereal heights of pure artistry, is replaced by a deep contentment in pure visceral *being*. While inhabiting the canyon, Thea rarely sings, instead reveling in the “power of sustained sensation” and becoming a “mere receptacle” for natural elements like heat, color, and sound (*SL* 251). Having abandoned the decision to “die,” she finds in Panther Canyon a sensual rebirth.

Numerous critics have traced Thea’s artistic success to her identification with the Native American female artists who once occupied the canyon cliffs. O’Brien, for instance, argues that Thea’s

discovery of the native women's pottery allows her to view herself as "the heir of a female artistic tradition" (415); likewise, Pannill sees the women of the canyon as important symbols for a form of artistry that is simultaneously "exalted and female, a resolution of the conflict of woman and artist" (229). Thea undeniably gleans a new understanding of art from the shards of the pottery she discovers, seeing in the ancient women's vessels a perfect synthesis of the everyday and the eternal. As domestic artifacts, the water jars represents both the physical realities of women's lives—their bodily toils, their connection to elemental nature—as well as beautiful "fragments of their desire" (*SL* 269). In these remnants of ancient artists, Thea perhaps finds her first truly positive "(un)dead" model: the women's selves and spirit "haunt" Thea as she explores their long-empty houses and art forms, until "a certain understanding of those old people came up to her," not in words but rather "translate[d] into attitudes of body" (*SL* 253).

I would argue that these passages, in which ancient female "understanding" establishes itself in Thea's very physical being, suggest that Thea's identification with the Native American women does less to help her assimilate her second-self genius with her own identity than it does to explicitly reconnect her to the sexual female body her genius had been struggling against, and distances her from previous fierce aesthetic, and ascetic, dedication. Living within the shaded pink cliffs of the canyon—a setting Ellen Moers refers to as "the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature" (252)—Thea realizes that what she truly "wants" is to wake "up every morning with the feeling that your life is your own, and your strength is your own, and your talent is your own; that you're *all there*" (*SL* 266, my emphasis). While this realization doesn't deny Thea's "talent," it also indicates her new acceptance of a more coherent sense of self, one in which the all-consuming category of "genius" does not have claims upon her life or her bodily strength, but in which *she* does. The consumption or death of her physical being no longer seems like Thea's only fate. Similarly, while on the ancient women's trail, Thea "found herself trying to walk as they must have walked, with a feeling in her feet and knees and loins which she had never known before [...] she could feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed" (*SL* 253). Thea's new "feeling" in her "loins" coupled with the phantom maternity that overtakes her reads like a rediscovery of her physical, female nature, one that lends itself to her

eventual decision to elope to Mexico with Fred specifically *instead* of going back to Chicago, where she is expected to return to her work. In fact, she explicitly equates such a return to her past way of life as a kind of “death or unconsciousness” (*SL* 278), as if fully recognizing her deadly “genius” drive for the first time. In the place of previous self-sacrifice, Thea now makes a romantic, passionate, and sexual choice that rejects her earlier dedication to complete abstinent artistry.

The hopeful reconciliation between “woman” and “artist” that appears so promising and possible in Panther Canyon, however, proves ultimately unsustainable in Cather’s narrative. Rather, Thea learns that the sexual relationship she has chosen—the elopement with Fred that she expected to end in their marriage—has in fact fulfilled her doom as a “fallen woman.” Unbeknownst to Thea, Fred is already married to the poisonous Edith, and so the heroine’s newfound positive, sexual, feminine identity is abruptly converted to a conventional one of ruin, shame, and indecent consumption. Thea attempts to explain the devastating ramifications of this new “fallen” identity to an incredulous Fred: “You say I was too much alone, and yet what you did was to cut me off more than I ever had been” (*SL* 300).

Despite Fred’s dim protests, Thea’s reaction to the ordeal is to run back to the stage, the only place where her appearance and performance will now ever be devoid of sexual disgrace—if, that is, she allows the “genius” to at last fully consume her (now “contaminated”) physical being.⁹ Although it might be argued that Thea’s sudden journey to Germany to study music merely fulfills a plan she had first conceived in Panther Canyon, it is difficult to read her decision as anything but a despairing flight from a now-shattered life. While earlier content in her new choices of self- and sexual-exploration, Thea had pushed aside the plan to immediately return to work, and had asserted confidently before her elopement to Fred, “I have no plan [...] Now that I’m with you, I want to be with you” (*SL* 277). Therefore, the emphatic language (and hurried means via telegram) of Thea’s insistence to Dr. Archie that study “can’t be put off any longer” (*SL* 290) only days after the ill-fated Mexico trip casts the venture as desperate escape, not artistic fulfillment. While longing for a literal death, in which she could “lie down in that little bed, to cut the nerve that kept one struggling, that pulled one on, to sink into peace there” (*SL* 317), Thea opts instead to die into art.

In the final scenes, then, readers are introduced ten years later to “Kronborg,” the genius figure into which the “dead” Thea was reborn. Framed through the experiences of Dr. Archie, Thea’s longest ally (and, notably, one long familiar with and admiring of her explicitly physical body), Kronborg’s first operatic performance of the book is equated with both a “military funeral” and the mythology of the phoenix: “something old died in one, and out of it something new was born” (*SL* 343). Archie is shocked at how literally Thea has been “consumed” by this genius; looking at the performer, he realizes “this woman he had never known; she had somehow devoured his little friend, as the wolf ate up Red Ridinghood” (*SL* 343). Later, searching for signs of “Thea” in the diva “Kronborg,” Archie will assert that she “seems pretty well used up” (*SL* 348), as though she were “running away from the other woman down at the opera house, who had used her hardly” (*SL* 345).

I want to stress that the success of Kronborg’s genius as an artist is undeniable; her sense of fulfillment and happiness, is, while tempered, no less in question. Thea’s decision to sacrifice herself to art was a conscious choice, a point she matter-of-factly explains in yet another conversation with Dr. Archie: “Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does. It’s like being woven into a big web [...] it takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life. Not much else can happen to you” (*SL* 378). In the same conversation, Thea also indicates she would have saved herself “a lot of trouble” had she died from pneumonia as a child. While this statement appears superficially as a mere wry remark from the world-weary diva, Thea may actually be expressing an insightful truth. After all, she has been going to the “trouble” of dying for her genius ever since then.

In fact, in its final, most successful incarnation, Thea’s genius is completely disembodied: it has become commodified and collectible in the form of phonograph records. The experience of Thea’s genius no longer requires Thea or her physical female presence in the least. Furthermore, Thea’s alliance with one (un)dead group, those coughing, consumed girls, is celebrated through the art that likewise consumes her, with her listeners recognizing in her performances the echo of something “as homely as a country prayer meeting: might be any lonely woman getting ready to die” (*SL* 372). Meanwhile, the other (un)dead girls who tempted Thea to their fate are essentially punished with violent “consumptive” deaths that match their

consuming tendencies: the parasitical Mrs. Archie breathes in fire while trying to keep other “parasites” out of her home while the wild Edith dies in an asylum under the consuming, syphilitic-based ravages of “general paresis” (*SL* 377).¹⁰

Despite her similarities to the zombie-like consumptives and vampiric consuming women, Thea’s fate is ultimately not quite the same as their (un)dead existences. She rejects the desires of the potentially “fallen” body that drives characters like Edith and Mrs. Archie, and, as Dr. Archie’s later observations confirm, becomes a mere phantom of her former self. However, unlike the “coughing girls,” who wither before the world’s eyes simply to leave nothing behind, Thea subsumes herself into her attendant artistic genius until only that genius remains. In this way, Thea can perhaps be seen as not (un)dead, but rather *immortal*. Like the Native American women of Panther Canyon, when Thea the individual disappears, she nonetheless leaves behind a “vessel” of art, one in which careful observers, like Dr. Archie, may still catch haunting traces of her former self. The physical Thea can die (and, arguably in some way, already has), and the genius of Kronborg will play on, giving all the world the great gift of true art. This notion may help explain Cather’s strangely distanced, nearly parenthetical, reference to Thea and Fred’s eventual marriage at the conclusion of the novel. As Thea stated earlier, “Who marries who is a small matter, after all” (*SL* 387). As opposed to such “small matters” as romantic love and desire, art can live on autonomously after “Kronborg” condescends to a “woman’s” position in marriage. Once again, the novel reminds readers that *artistic* desire is the only true “big thing.”

In his study of nineteenth-century American conceptions of genius, Gustavus Stadler identifies genius characters who “are victims of consumption (in the word’s many senses) who burn themselves out, leaving their companions behind in a situation of cultural and (hetero)sexual happiness founded on the mourning of the lost genius figure” (117). In this manner, Stadler suggests that an individual’s self-sacrifice to “genius” and their willingness to be “consumed” creates productive fruits for their audiences and in turn society at large. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronborg does exactly this; she destroys her independent, female sense of “self” to ensure the productive work of her “genius,” that thing which allows her audiences to appreciate “all the stream of life” (*SL* 396) that she, in a way, has had to forego.

It follows then that although Thea subsumes herself in genius, becoming “the thing which was truly herself” (SL 393) and aiding that “thing” in its ultimate success, *The Song of the Lark* is not the story of any feminist triumph. The “self” that achieves artistic empowerment has no body, no gender, no discernible identity as a representative of “woman.” Rather, it is the sexless, ethereal “spirit” or “creature” of genius for which Thea’s womanly body was a mere instrument. This “genius” is also the thing which, by the novel’s own definition of “art,” has “imprison[ed ...] the shining, elusive element which is life itself” (SL 254). What it has in fact imprisoned, one could argue, is Thea’s once-exuberant, now interned, individual life and female identity. In her most extended musing on female artistry, then, Willa Cather has not reconciled femininity to creativity and has not finally bestowed genius upon her gender. Instead, Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* still demands the female “die” in order that the artist may live.

Notes

¹ All quotations of Cather’s early journalistic writings are taken from Bernice Sloté’s edited collection *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896*.

² For instance, Cather praises the actress who has “no man whom she loves, no woman whom she trusts [and] is utterly alone upon the icy heights where other beings cannot live” (*Kingdom* 153), and elsewhere suggests that women who do have artistic talent “usually make such an infernal mess of it” that they produce little more than a “rank morass of misguided genius and wasted power” (*Kingdom* 408-9). For these and more of Cather’s early critical statements on female artistry, see *The Kingdom of Art*.

³ Titus locates this continuity in Cather’s use of “sustained attention to male authority and use of male approbation” (28), arguing that *The Song of the Lark* is more about the male spectator’s contributions to and experience of a woman’s creative growth rather than any kind of celebration of female creativity.

⁴ All subsequent references are from *The Song of the Lark*, New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1999.

⁵ “genius” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 1 January 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50093688>>.

⁶ For an interesting and related discussion of Thea’s art in connection to a specifically Nietzschean concept of “chastity” and its paradoxical goal of “sensuous spirituality,” see Sherrill Harbison’s introduction to the 1999 Penguin Edition of *The Song of the Lark*. Harbison also discusses Thea as a Wagnerian androgyne who achieves artistic ecstasy and artistic productivity in place of normative sexual desires.

⁷ In her essay “Between Registers: Coming In and Out through Musical Performance in Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*,” Katherine Boutry offers an extended reading

of the ways in which “aural sex” is substituted for actual “passionate relationships” in Cather’s fiction, demonstrating how for characters like Thea Kronborg, “art is a more satisfying and faithful lover than romance” (188).

⁸ Near the novel’s close, Thea’s accompanist Landry attempts to account for the diva’s gifts by repeatedly emphasizing the enigmatic concept of *personality*: “It’s personality; that’s as near as you can come to it. That’s what constitutes real equipment [...] It’s unconscious memory, maybe; inherited memory, like folk-music. I call it personality” (*SL* 372).

⁹ In her discussion of another contemporary “genius” story (Mary Austin’s 1912 *A Woman of Genius*), Elizabeth Klimasmith notes this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon in which women turn to the public stage as an escape from existing shame. Austin’s own protagonist states that “self-respecting women are not driven away from the stage by the offences that hedge it; they are driven deeper and farther into its enfoldment. There is nothing to whiten the burden of its shames but the high whiteness of its ultimate perfection” (qtd. in Klimasmith 142).

¹⁰ While Cather does not specify that Edith has syphilis, her diagnosis of “general paresis” would have been a clue to her contemporary readers. For example, in his 1913 medical text *General Paresis*, Prof. Emil Kraepelin writes that the public “must regard syphilis as the only essential cause of paresis” (153). Furthermore, the neurological effects of this wasting disease resemble vicious parodies of Edith’s early “indecent” behavior, as symptoms were thought to include “the telling of lewd stories, the seeking of doubtful companions and shameless debauchery [and] more and more the impression of coarseness and unrestraint” (Kraepelin 15). For more, see Emil Kraepelin. *General Paresis*. New York, NY: Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co, 1913. It is also notable that Dr. Archie disdainfully remarks that “a woman with general paresis ought to be legally dead” (*SL* 377), thereby demanding Edith’s now officially (un)dead state be recognized, for Fred’s benefit (and touching on the societal prejudice that all “fallen” woman are as good as dead).

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**Anatomy Is All: The Pathology of Voice in
*The Song of the Lark***

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In Willa Cather's *Künstlerroman* "*The Song of the Lark*" (1915), we follow in great detail the development of Thea Kronborg's career as an opera singer. According to Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, few novels since *Robinson Crusoe* dedicate "so many pages to the protagonist's work as Cather's *Song of the Lark*" (18-19). They look upon the novel as "an antidote to the appropriated voice" (97) and see Thea Kronborg as a self-made woman whose concentrated and arduous work involves her mind as well as her body. Still, readers have been sensitive to the length of the novel, particularly to the final section, but not enough attention has been drawn to the foregrounding of the male characters in accounting for this lengthiness. Mary Titus suggests that if we decenter Thea's development as an artist and focus instead on "the male spectator's participation in and experience of [her] creative growth, the final fourth of the novel becomes more climactic" (27).

Titus's suggestion to decenter Thea is a valid one. I argue that she is a character constructed at the intersection of different discourses. At the same time as she is as an opera singer in the making, she is also a female patient undergoing an examination carried out by male physicians. If such a duality is granted, the novel can be read as a narrative focusing either on Thea as a subject of her own musical career or as the object of corporeal examination. In their categorization of literary divas, Leonardi and Pope place Thea among the "avenging sirens," who manage to break away from surveillance and detect the pathological symptoms in the very discourse that serves to keep them under control. However, if Thea is denied this subject position and is ranged instead with female singers who fail to rise above their bodies, she remains a passive object. For such singers, anatomy is all, and their independent voices are silenced as they are "confined in the pathological" (72).

Whereas Cather's detailed account in her novel has been claimed to delineate Thea's artistic trajectory, I hold that the length of *The Song of the Lark* is determined by the space required for the male examination of the female patient. In fact, a masculinist discourse appears particularly apt for defining Thea Kronborg as a diva in the making and as a subject for pathological interest. More specifically, I assert that the keen interest in Thea's opera voice is to be understood in the context of medical speculum examinations through the throat/genitalia parallelism. According to cultural historian Thomas Laqueur, the examples of this parallelism were "legion" in antiquity and were still being made well into the nineteenth century (36). After a long period of disuse, the speculum was rediscovered in the early years of the nineteenth century and remained throughout the century a representation of medical, moral and legal surveillance. As Ornella Moscucci claims, the opposition to this form of examination within medicine only waned in the last quarter of the century. Interestingly, however, the changing attitude to the speculum was not due to a decreasing use of it; in fact, it became widely popular in the true sense of the word. As early as 1810, the speculum ceased to be a purely medical instrument and was passed into the hands of the Paris police for the purpose of regulating prostitution. As such, it became an effective tool in the struggle to contain venereal disease and thus came to be associated with illicit sexuality as manifested in the populace.

In 1850, the *Medical Times* published a letter establishing a connection between a medical examination and an opera performance:

A box might be engaged at the top of the house for a moderate price, which would hold the whole fraternity. Between the acts there would be abundance of time, and no lack of ladies, who would be delighted with the exhibition. At the close of the season the Committee would be expected to furnish a report, for the satisfaction of the public. (qtd. in Moscucci 117)

The idea to make an opera house the site of medical practice is not as farfetched as it may seem at first. The actress and the opera singer alike were generally seen as prostituting themselves to a nineteenth-century audience, but the singer was more specifically defined through a gynecological discourse due to the association of the female singer's throat with her genitals (Leonardi and Pope 20). In addition, as Cori Ellison points out, the singer was early connected with the prostitute;

in fact, in eighteenth-century Naples the words “virtuosa” and “prostitute” were more or less synonymous (14). This web of associations may actually be what the pseudonymous letter writer “Pudor” has in mind, especially since it is likely that he is a medical practitioner himself and therefore well acquainted with literature published within his profession. He would probably have read *Practical Observations on Diseases of Women* in which William Jones states that there was “no more harm in the use of the speculum than in the use of a spoon to ascertain the condition of the throat” (afore-mentioned letter qtd. in Moscucci 116). He may also have come across medical sources suggesting that syrups and preparations for the treatment of inflammation of the throat should be applied on analogy to gynecological complaints (Moscucci 112).

The connection made between woman as performer and woman as a pathological case provides a context for the acute, almost scientific, interest in Thea Kronborg’s throat. In fact, I argue that Thea has no real autonomy at all; she is merely a specimen to be examined through the medical lens. The fear that the female opera singer, like the prostitute, may be contagious is reason enough to make her throat, her “organ,” the object of careful study.¹ Interestingly, the pathology of the throat is hinted at only a few pages into the novel when Dr. Archie gives Thea’s father, the minister, a troche for his cough: “‘Have a troche, Kronborg,’ he said, producing some. ‘Sent me for samples. Very good for a rough throat’” (SL 9). So far the throat specialist is nothing but a vague and distant figure and is only mentioned in connection with Thea’s father and not herself. Treacherously enough, the significance of this seemingly harmless reference to the throat specialist may be realized only in retrospect and therefore Dr. Archie’s integrity as the respectful provincial doctor with a genuine interest in his patients remains unchallenged.

However, Dr. Archie’s cursory allusion to the throat specialist in the early stages of *The Song of the Lark* is made in connection with a scene that is of crucial importance for both inscribing the novel in a pathological discourse and for making the doctor demonstrate the extent of his professional vocation. Dr. Archie offers Mr. Kronborg the troche just before Mrs. Kronborg is to give birth to their seventh child. Although it is reported that “[i]f any one was very sick, [the doctor] forgot himself” (SL 16), that does not seem to be the case on this particular occasion:

It did seem that people were stupider than they need be; as if on a night like this there ought to be something better to do than to sleep nine hours, or to assist Mrs. Kronborg in functions which she could have performed so admirably unaided. He wished he had gone down to Denver to hear Fay Templeton sing "See-Saw." Then he remembered that he had a personal interest in this family, after all. (SL 9)

The picture of Thea's mother "performing" in a highly intimate situation is juxtaposed with the professional singer performing in public. This juxtaposition confirms the image of woman as being defined through her body in general and establishes a link between the throat and the reproductive organs in particular.

This connection is further developed into a parallelism between the reproductive organs and the respiratory apparatus in the passage detailing the mother giving birth and the daughter struggling to breathe. The parallelism is activated in Dr. Archie's mind even before he enters the Kronborg household. The doctor has officially been summoned to help Mrs. Kronborg deliver her child, but he remembers that his "personal interest" in the family is Thea. While more or less just passively observing Mrs. Kronborg "perform" the "functions" of giving birth, he is instantly alerted by the sound of "rapid, distressed breathing" (SL 10), reminiscent of a woman in labor, but finds Thea who has fallen very ill in pneumonia. Dr. Archie attends to her with utmost care and although she has her chest and no other part of her body examined, it is as if the gynecological attention is subtly transferred from mother to daughter. It is perhaps only in retrospect that the reader sees the full significance of the passage discussed above in which a nexus is created between three women: Fay Templeton, Mrs. Kronborg, and Thea. The respiratory organ of a young girl is made subject to a pathological study, which is contextualized by woman's reproductive function and the professional female singer's situation.

Once the parallelism between the reproductive functions of the mother and the respiratory apparatus of the girl has been discerned, it is not easily disregarded in the description of Dr. Archie dispensing medicine and wrapping Thea's chest in plaster. The fact that the passage describing this activity is partly focalized from a child's point of view adds to the sense of exposure. The childish abandon with which Thea welcomes the medical attention of Dr. Archie, in particular the notion that "the pleasant thing which was going to

happen was Doctor Archie himself" (SL 11), evokes uncomfortable associations with the sexual fantasies young women were reported to indulge in under the power of anaesthetics.² Being only half-conscious, Thea behaves as if anaesthetized, and consequently she cannot object any more than a drugged woman undergoing a speculum examination. At first Thea appears to enjoy being looked after by Dr. Archie, but gradually this pleasant feeling dissolves and she expresses uneasiness; the whole thing is "strange," "perplexing," and "unsatisfactory," and she "wishe[s] she could waken up and see what [is] going on" (SL 12).

I argue that Dr. Archie's "personal interest" in Thea is not primarily an expression of his professional care for a child suffering from pneumonia, but is an indication that he sees the body of a 12-year-old girl as a future investment. This is suggested in the passage referred to above, where he is reminded of his interest in Thea through both her mother "performing" in a highly intimate and private situation and the professional singer performing in public. Thus, the consideration with which the doctor treats Thea's pneumonia is deceptive and questionable at best. To some extent, it could be seen as just a thinly disguised attempt to check the raw material, that is her lungs, before shipping her to Chicago for further examination of her throat.

The surveillance Thea is subjected to through the male gaze is carried out through the sense of vision, which may appear slightly odd in a narrative tracing the perception of voice and listening technique. However, the visual and auditory senses come together in the activity of mediate auscultation. This term was coined by R. T. H Laennec, the inventor of the stethoscope, and refers to the practice of listening to the body by using instruments (thus mediate) to obtain knowledge about internal physical phenomena (Sterne 90). Due to the invention and the growing use of the stethoscope during the nineteenth century, medical education aimed at turning doctors into virtuoso listeners. According to Jacalyn Duffin, mediate auscultation and the stethoscope led to a whole range of medical tools being designed, one of which was the speculum (in Sterne 100-101). In the passage describing the parallel activities of witnessing Mrs. Kronborg giving birth and treating Thea's pneumonia, Dr. Archie appears, however, to use neither the stethoscope nor the speculum. Still, mediate auscultation serves as a nexus between the medical and musical discourses;

whether he is listening to a professional singer or observing Thea's breathing, he is practicing to become a virtuoso listener.

One result of the technique of mediate auscultation was mistrust in the human voice. Prior to this audile development, knowledge about the body was gained by the doctor listening to it with his ear unaided by medical instruments and above all by considering the patient's own account of her symptoms as a reliable source of information. Sterne writes:

In other words, audile diagnosis shifted from a basis in intersubjective speech between doctor and patient to the objectification of patients' sounds—in mediate auscultation, patients' voices existed in relation to other sounds made by their bodies, rather than in a privileged relation to them. (117)

Diagnosing the patient then came to mean listening to the sounds of her body through mediate auscultation rather than through her own voice. This shift from the patient's subjectivity to the apparent objectivity of the physician's trained listening is directly related to the concept of reliability. While the inability to correctly distinguish the various sounds of the body from each other may lead a doctor to misdiagnose a symptom, the patient's own voice comes across as even less reliable since it may utter any lie, no matter how trustworthy it sounds. This change in audile technique is reflected in *The Song of the Lark*. Thea's singing voice is defined in minute detail by being subjected to an objectifying medical scrutiny whereas her narrative voice, which would have expressed subjectivity, had we been allowed to hear it, is silenced. The reader wants to listen to the unmediated voice of Thea Kronborg but is only occasionally granted this wish due to the doctor's mediation.

What we mostly hear is a male voice-over since the novel is heavily focalized through Dr. Archie. Four out of the novel's six parts open with a comment on Dr. Archie's professional status; in fact, he is so important for setting the tone that we may ask ourselves if we are reading a fictional account of a male doctor or a female opera singer. Mary Titus touches upon this problematic division into male subjectivity and female objectification in the novel by arguing that the male spectator is granted a privileged position in relation to the female artist (28). When we look at their respective roles through mediate auscultation, though, Dr. Archie's function as a spectator is specifically established through the agency of audile technique. Thus,

point of view and what we are actually allowed to see in the novel is mediated through voice and what we hear.

The politics of voice is a key theme in the novel. It is not only associated with the suppression of Thea's voice in the telling of her story but is also a crucial aspect of the characterization of Dr. Archie. The upright Dr. Archie is a respected general practitioner in Moonstone, victimized through an unfortunate marriage to a caricature of a woman who, despite being hot-tempered, remains an enigmatic and shadowy character without a voice until she suddenly dies. One can only speculate as to how the favorable image of Dr. Archie would have changed if this mute virago had been given a voice. In fact, it may have coincided with a less reputable picture of Dr. Archie, which is provided by another female caricature, Thea's sister Anna, who, in contrast to Dr. Archie's own wife, is given a voice and produces a plethora of verbal evidence testifying to his immoral conduct: Anna "ha[s] a whole *dossier* of evidence about his behavior in his hours of relaxation" (SL 116) and seems to know that "when he went to Denver or to Chicago, he drifted about in careless company where gaiety and good-humor can be bought" (SL 77-78). But the fact that Anna is described as a priggish and prejudiced girl prone to "shocking habits of classification" (SL 116), effectively undermines her authority, and she comes across as an unreliable source.

However, the reader should be wary of rejecting outright the information Anna provides. Instead, it may be worthwhile considering that the character of Dr. Archie, the upright as well as the "fast" (SL 116) aspect of him, is constructed through the agency of two female stereotypes, the bitter wife and the gossipy young woman. Suggesting that neither is worth listening to implicitly endorses an androcentric approach. In order to challenge this view, Anna's voice should not be dismissed as simple gossip but acknowledged in its own right. If this is done, Dr. Archie appears to be something of a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde" figure. As in Stevenson's novel, the reader is misled into believing that the two halves of the same man operate in different geographical and social settings. However, Dr. Archie's Denver/Chicago self may be inextricably bound up with his Moonstone self, and although he may appear to play an important part in an edifying process, he might, in fact, be cynically engaged in the undoing of the female protagonist. The "intimate" and "penetrating"

“glance” Thea feels she is the object of may be his way of categorizing her as a potential member of a “careless company.”³

There are thus clear hints suggesting that Dr. Archie is leading a double life, but it is explicitly stated that Thea does too: “During the day, when the hours were full of tasks, she was one of the Kronborg children, but at night she was a different person” (*SL* 53). Since the cold air in the loft room has an immediate effect on her throat and voice, her singing comes out of her “night” self. Seeing that Thea’s singing is intimately associated with her dark side and realizing that a husky voice is detrimental to a career as an opera singer, Dr. Archie tells her “that a girl who [sings] must always have plenty of fresh air, or her voice [will] get husky, and . . . the cold [will] harden her throat” (*SL* 52). According to Dr. Alexandre Jean Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet, who established a taxonomy of the prostitute, the main defining trait was considered to be the quality of her voice (Bell 46).⁴ In fact, Judith Walkowitz states that Parent-Duchatelet’s work was of key significance for British investigations of prostitution between 1840 and 1880, and Alain Corbin claims that Parent-Duchatelet’s anthropological study served as the main source for the construction of the character traits of the nineteenth-century prostitute (45). This stereotypical figure “spoke in a harsh voice” (48). Bell argues that Parent-Duchatelet turned the diversity of prostitutes “into a single visual-acoustic image in which ‘she’ is elegant until ‘she’ opens ‘her’ mouth, even though it is a different ‘she’” (49). Thus, when Dr. Archie points out to Thea that she runs the risk of having her voice turn husky in the cold of the loft room, he may be defining her in prostitute terms, which would imply that her body is corrupt from the start. Parent-Duchatelet and analysts such as Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, who continued to document the prostitute body after him, held the view that prostitution was an innate vice. Since, according to Shannon Bell, this line of reasoning turned all women into potential prostitutes, female anatomy was by definition tainted and became a legitimate object of scientific interest.

The idea of prostitution as inborn vice destabilizes such binaries as innocence/sin and nature/artifice and, by inscribing *The Song of the Lark* in a medical discourse, the notion of the sublime, as it is expressed through the female singer’s voice, is subverted. Sublime singing could be seen as consisting of angelic sounds without limits. Since the sublime resides in formlessness, auditory experiences are particularly prone to convey sensations of it, as Edmund Burke

suggests in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Thea's first music teacher, Professor Wunsch, a great Romantic, hears what could be defined as the sublime in her singing voice: "It was a nature-voice, Wunsch told himself, breathed from the creature and apart from language, like the sound of the wind in the trees, or the murmur of water" (SL 69-70). Defining her voice as a "nature-voice" is most certainly intended as praise; it suggests unlimited expansion. However, having her voice characterized through comparison with nature endorses the very conventional idea of woman being pure matter. Wunsch may very well be transported to the sublime beyond corporeality, but the effect on the listener should not be confused with the fact that the singer herself is indeed limited by her body. When Wunsch then declares that "[f]or a singer there must be something in the inside from the beginning" (SL 70), he may deceive both himself, Thea, and the reader into believing that a rather vague "something" suggests a spiritual dimension. However, in a medical discourse a singer's "inside" has an alternative meaning; it takes on physical properties and becomes more or less synonymous with the throat, and by association, a woman's genitals.

Like Wunsch, Dr. Archie wants to believe that there is "something in the inside" which is not mere anatomy; to him, the human body is just an instrument, a vessel for an intangible force being capable of reaching the sublime. But does not Dr. Archie realize that Thea is defined, limited, and even imprisoned by her anatomy? And despite his attempts to scientifically explain why Thea is "different," does he not understand that not even she can transcend this state of things? Treating her pneumonia, he is intrigued by her being "different" from other children. He feels her head with his fingers, but has to admit that he is still at a loss: "No, he couldn't say that it was different from any other child's head, though he believed that there was something very different about her" (SL 12). Looking for signs that Thea is indeed different from other children, he touches the part of her body that is least likely to yield this information, her head, the concrete manifestation of abstract thinking and transcendence.

A series of photographs teaching correct breathing in *What Every Singer Should Know*, a singing manual from 1910 discussed by Wayne Koestenbaum, appears to confirm the notion of the singer as being primarily physical matter. The pictures are cut at the female

singer's neck; Koestenbaum comments that "without a head, [the woman] seems pure ground, deprived of mind and transcendence" (161). Felicia Miller Frank, who has studied the representation of the female voice in nineteenth-century French narratives, comes to the conclusion that the woman's "voice functions as a vehicle of the sublime" (6), but as we move towards the end of the nineteenth century, she is no longer associated with nature through her singing. Instead she comes to represent art and artifice through her mechanical reproduction of sound. In short, "she [becomes] a machine for sublime production" (183). I argue that Thea is such a machine.

The Chicago setting is apt for accentuating a mechanized and commodified approach to both voice production and the female body. Shortly after arriving in this city, Thea is introduced to people through the agency of the throat specialist Hartley Evans. First, she meets Mr. Larsen, a parson at the Swedish Reform Church, situated "in a sloughy, weedy district, near a group of factories" (*SL* 140). This industrial site suggests rank growth evocative of illicit sexuality and prostitution. Mr. Larsen refers to the women in his church choir in the terms of a brothel-owner stating that he "he [has] his four voices" (*SL* 141). Moreover, he explains that "[his] soprano is a young married woman [who] is temporarily indisposed" and that "she would be glad to be excused from her duties for a while" (*SL* 143). Thus, the female singer is framed in this industrial area by her functional purpose; her body is perceived as commodified property.

The mechanization of Thea's voice is further enlarged upon when Dr. Archie literally leaves her in the hands of her piano teacher, Andor Harsanyi whose interest in Thea is of the same physical nature as Dr. Archie's. Although not trained in singing, Harsanyi tries to teach her the right technique: "He kept his right hand on the keyboard and put his left to her throat, placing the tips of his delicate fingers over her larynx" (*SL* 159). Paying such close attention to Thea's vocal organ, he is fascinated by this "crude" girl's voice and thinks of it in terms of a machine, which "[is] so simple and strong [and] seem[s] to be so easily operated" (*SL* 160). Having listened to her singing for a while, Harsanyi's energy is spent while Thea seems unaffected by her singing and is not tired at all: "At last Harsanyi threw back his head and rose. 'You must be tired, Miss Kronborg'. . . . 'No,' she said, 'singing never tires me.'" From Harsanyi's point of view, she is no more than a machine that can continue producing sound perpetually without loss of energy.

This passage, placed half-way through the novel, is of key significance. In the first half the reader has been waiting to hear Thea's voice and therefore her performance at her singing lesson with Harsanyi has a climactic function. But the passage referred to is also proleptic through the choice of focalization. Since the power of Thea's singing is almost exclusively focalized through Harsanyi, she remains firmly defined through her body alone, a feature that is greatly stressed in the novel's last part. The female voice we hear is that of an object and not an experiencing subject, and the choice of focalization appears ironically logical; Harsanyi is assigned the subject position while Thea is no more than a machine, incapable of experiencing anything.

It is not really surprising that voice production is dealt with in terms of sound reproduction since the novel is set in the days of the phonograph and was written in the age of the gramophone. One of the great advantages of the phonograph was that the operatic voice no longer had to be shared with the audience of the public opera house but gave each listener in his private home the illusion that it actually belonged to him and could be enjoyed repeatedly (Koestenbaum 50). Harsanyi owns Thea in this way; he marvels at the easy operation of "the machine" in his own home. Their respective roles, his as listener and operator of the machine and hers as the mysterious matter of voice, are gendered in the same way as those of the doctor and his patient. In *The Phonograph and Its Inventor*, Thomas Alva Edison, Frederick J. Garbit refers to an 1878 pamphlet praising the merits of the phonograph and underscoring this parallelism; it was argued that the phonograph could capture voices "with or without the knowledge or consent of the source of their origin" (qtd. in Koestenbaum 48), a statement reminiscent of the male advantages of performing speculum examinations with the use of anaesthetics. The implicit connection between phonograph recordings and gynecological examinations was made explicit when the medical benefits of the phonograph were enumerated in a medical journal. As reported by Roland Gelatt in *The Fabulous Phonograph*, the phonograph was said to "reproduce the sob of hysteria, the sign of melancholia, the singultus of collapse, the cry of the puerperal woman in the different stages of labor" (qtd. in Koestenbaum 49).

Harsanyi knows that his singing technique would not stand close examination by a third party. In fact, the piano teacher's "cracked finger" may be evidence of his transgression: "One afternoon

wants to “satisfy personal curiosity” (239). Thus, like medical practitioners using the speculum, he is driven by an interest in the pathology of the female body and like them, “[h]e . . . exceed[s] his rights” in relation to the female patient. Recovering from her illness, she receives flowers from Fred Ottenburg: “They were the first hothouse flowers she had ever had” (SL 240). This statement is an implicit prolepsis; in her future career as a diva, having such flowers sent to her will be part of the daily routine. Moreover, the quoted sentence serves as an important nexus; not only is Thea constructed as a prostitute in the ambiguous passage about the examination of her throat, but, in her sickness, she is also taking on diva status. Koestenbaum argues that the diva revokes natural laws by forcing her voice to such an extent that “the successfully produced voice is perceived to be a sort of sickness” (102). Thus, Thea’s illness and the examination she undergoes are important component parts for inscribing her in a discourse which paradoxically defines her, on the one hand, as a pathological case similar to that of the nineteenth-century prostitute, and on the other, as just any woman whose body testifies to a state of innate vice and decay.

In “Kronborg,” the last part of the novel, Dr. Archie goes to the Metropolitan Opera House to finally hear Thea sing. During the performance, he realizes that he “[k]nows] no more about her than [do] the hundreds around him” (SL 343) and, when he stands face to face with her afterwards, it is as if he had come upon an anonymous woman on the street: “There was still black on her eyebrows and lashes. She was very pale and her face was drawn and deeply lined. She looked . . . forty years old” (SL 344). Moreover, when he addresses her, she replies “in [the] hoarse voice” so characteristic of the nineteenth-century prostitute. It is evident that Thea Kronborg has learnt how to use her throat in order to provide pleasure for as many people as possible. However, in the process, she destroys her voice and is no more than a mechanical doll in the end. She can thus very neatly be fitted into the commodification aesthetics that Rita Felski sees as such a significant feature of modernity and can become a “figure of public pleasure” (19).

From the very beginning, the novel has moved towards this climactic point where Thea becomes the explicit object of a scientific discourse. As a consequence, the last part detailing her “success” shows an obsessive interest in her as pure physical matter, inanimate

even. In my view, “The Ancient People,” the part set in Arizona where Thea believes she truly finds her voice, has fatal significance because here she internalizes the idea that woman is primarily defined through her body. Finding pleasure in the canyon “gorge” (French for throat) is a means of visualizing her own *gorge* and becoming one with it. Debra Cumberland also sees the Arizona part as being of crucial importance for Thea’s career as a singer. She argues convincingly that Thea develops artistically by gradually abandoning the anti-physiological vocal technique (advocated by, for instance, singer and teacher Clara Kathleen Rogers) to welcome the physiological methods embraced by such singers as Olive Fremstad and Geraldine Farrar. This change in technique is dependent on the singer’s knowledge of anatomy (65). Cumberland associates the objectified Thea with the anti-physiological vocal technique and the liberated subject Thea with the physiological method. The mechanical aspect is then only a manifestation of a failed physical connection in singing. But whereas I see no redeeming potential in the Arizona experience, Cumberland does, stating that “Thea is in a symbiotic, natural relationship with her singing” (63) and thus capable of escaping objectification by being made aware of her own sexuality. However, the question whether Thea finds pleasure in a greater awareness of her own sexuality is rather pointless since she is ultimately constructed along male lines turning her into a mere object. Having made the Panther Canyon her artistic foundation, she has resigned any claim to being treated as an experiencing subject.

In fact, the process of objectifying Thea Kronborg reaches a decisive point when after the performance at the Metropolitan, Dr. Archie more or less tells Ottenburg that he considers her dead: “Well, if you’ll believe me, I had the brutality to go to see her. *I wanted to identify her*. Couldn’t wait” (*SL* 348, emphasis added). Thus, Dr. Archie chooses the same approach as Laennec. Through mediate auscultation it became possible to gain information about the interiority of a body, which meant that physicians could “autopsy a patient while still alive” (Sterne 123). This is an activity Dr. Archie has been engaged in throughout the novel. Like Laennec, who could not wait to have his diagnosis confirmed as soon as the patient was dead, Dr. Archie is impatient to do the same with Thea Kronborg. He wants to identify the body so that he can use a metaphorical scalpel to find visual proof of his diagnosis since “only in the patient’s death

could vision again take hold as the primary sense used by doctors for diagnosis” (Sterne 122).

The Song of the Lark may be read as a protracted medical examination; although the patient is the same, the identity of the examiner is not; a whole fraternity of male figures is allowed to probe Thea Kronborg’s body. The novel resembles a report expected “for the satisfaction of the public” after a speculum examination. Once the report has been filed away, the patient ceases to exist except as a number on a medical journal. Still, we know very little about the “patient” Thea Kronborg. If *The Song of the Lark* is a female *Bildungsroman* at all,⁶ it is one which leaves us with nothing but fragments of a dismembered anatomy. Olive Fremstad, the soprano who is said to have inspired the character of Thea, knew what she was doing when she placed on her piano “a pickled human head sliced in half so she could show students the vocal and breathing apparatus” (Koestenbaum 103). By pointing out the exact location of the value of each aspect of the vocal production and never allowing them to forget that they would forever be defined by it, she was indeed teaching her students a bittersweet lesson.

Notes

¹ A statement made in connection with the literary diva Pellegrina Leoni in Isak Dinesen's story "The Dreamers" can be applied to Thea Kronborg too: "But what the text suggests is that 'great soprano,' 'diva,' 'prima donna,' and 'Pellegrina' are themselves public performances no more and no less 'real' and authentic. The 'essential' Olalla/Lola/Rosalba/Pellegrina is performance" (Leonardi and Pope 84).

² As the speculum examination of prostitutes developed into a routine procedure, the initial sensitivity among physicians wore off towards the end of the century. Thus, according to Moscucci, it became an act of "instrumental rape," but the growing use of anaesthesia in the second half of the century dulled what moral scruples remained within the medical profession to carry out this procedure. Medical practitioners reported that anaesthetics "produced sexual fantasies in the patient; in some cases it even induced displays of sexual excitation" (126-27).

³ Studying the influence of George DuMaurier's *Trilby* on *The Song of the Lark*, Mary Titus implies that although none of the male characters in Cather's novel actually hypnotize her, the numerous instances of the male gaze on Thea may be associated with a hypnotic effect (31).

⁴ The account in this paragraph is based on Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*. Consequently, all the page references are to this source.

⁵ For my presentation on singing technique, I am indebted to Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*. Hence, the quotations in this paragraph are from this source.

⁶ As Susan Rosowski has pointed out, the novel comes across as a male, rather than female, *Bildungsroman* (69).

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***Künstlerroman* Revised:
Doubleness and Catharsis in Willa Cather's *The Song
of the Lark***

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“That afternoon nothing new came to Thea Kronborg, no enlightenment, no inspiration. She merely came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long,” writes Willa Cather at the end of *The Song of the Lark* (1915) to describe Thea’s penultimate artistic achievement (*SL* 395).¹ At this precise moment, Cather’s unfurnished prose points to her own definition of artist as one who, like Thea, brings body, mind, and soul into alignment through an artistic medium. As *Sieglinde*, Thea simultaneously opens to her own desire, called “passion” by her instructor Harsanyi, and ignites the desires of the admiring spectators who are captivated by both her powerful voice and her complete self-possession. Cather, originally intending to call the novel *Artist’s Youth*, eventually decided to emphasize Thea’s struggle to become an artist over this ascension to “Kronborg,” as she reveals in her 1932 preface to *The Song of the Lark*. In that same piece she also criticizes the novel’s downward slope and finds it overdone in relation to the theory of undecorated writing she puts forth in 1922 in “The Novel D meubl .” Despite her negative reaction to her third novel, Cather met her goal to portray a self-awakening to art, but in so doing, she also *created* Thea as an artist who could begin that awakening in others and *became* the same kind of artist herself as a writer who awakens her readers.

Due to its reference to an artist’s method and product, “The Novel D meubl ” is often employed by critics who analyze *The Song of the Lark* as a many-faceted *K nstlerroman*. Most make excessive use of the following famous passage:

The material investiture of the story is presented as if unconsciously; by the reserved, fastidious hand of an artist, not by the gaudy ingers of a showman or the mechanical industry of a department-store windowdresser. As I remember it, in the twilight melancholy of that book, in its

consistent mood, one can scarcely see the actual surroundings of the people; one feels them, rather, in the dusk. Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there — that one might say, is created. It is 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 or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (“ND” 49-50)

Since the passage and the novel explore the birth of the artist, the second self, and the unconscious, a triangular relationship among the three has been established, and I would like to offer an alternative to some long-standing interpretations of *The Song of the Lark*.² As the arguments currently stand, by using the “fastidious hand of an artist” Cather is born as a writer at the same time as the novel heralds the birth of a musical artist in Thea Kronborg. On their parallel journeys, Thea as an opera singer and Cather as a fiction writer confront the dual identity of female and artist while also grappling with “the thing not named,” or the second self. Presented inexplicitly through the absence in language, whether sung by Thea or written by Cather, this unnamed thing is thought to be lesbianism, or at the very least gender ambiguity: their supposed unconscious creative source. While I also see the value in analyzing *The Song of the Lark* as a *Künstlerroman*, I would like to present a more psychoanalytic analysis of artistic birth, second selves, and unconscious identity. After all, Cather herself conveys the idea that true art is “presented as if unconsciously.”

Contrary to the prevailing interpretations summarized in the previous paragraph, I seek to explain how both Thea and Cather acknowledge a doubleness that provides powerful catharsis for those moved by their art. My explanation of doubleness relates to internal, not external, doubleness, and so I first distance myself from the overwhelming emphasis on Cather’s lesbianism to focus on her (and by extension Thea’s) close relationship with her own unconscious. Next, I illustrate how the author’s awareness of her internal unconscious gives both women more direct access to art that has a cathartic quality. Finally, I show how Thea and Cather become therapists for those who remain open to being moved by hearing Thea’s voice or reading Cather’s fiction. Their “patients,” in my view, experience an arousal of their own unconscious minds when faced with the exposed unconscious channeled through cathartic art. This desire is not sexual, but, like clinical therapy, it drives the audience

members to seek their own unconscious “second selves.” My revision of this *Künstlerroman* is significant because I offer a much-needed psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Song of the Lark*, and I extend the concept of rebirth to the audience of both Thea and Cather. Acknowledgement of internal, as opposed to external, doubleness fuels their art and inspires the audience’s therapeutic catharsis.

1. Cather and Catharsis

Extending the Greek “katharsis,” or purification through ritual, and the medical “catharsis,” or digestive purgation, Freud begins using the term in 1909 to describe the overflow of emotions that often occurs when patients allow buried feelings and memories to come to the surface. Once these feelings are made conscious and worked through, their underlying tension can be released and occasion a fresh start or at its most extreme, a rebirth. While Freud sought to enable this process of emotional release through the “talking cure” of psychoanalysis, he found that catharsis can also occur due to overwhelming moments in everyday life and powerful experiences with art. Greek theatre, after all, demanded the same release and purgation of its spectators long before Freud made his analyses. Whether in therapy, everyday life, or art, the moment of catharsis comes as a surprise; it cannot be manufactured, nor can it be explained immediately. Like Thea’s complete self-possession, catharsis overwhelms the individual who is open to it.

Cather herself was extremely interested in art and what makes it good. As opposed to cheap art used to amuse the masses, true art for Cather has an unnamed quality that occasions an emotional response from the reader, viewer, or listener that can be termed cathartic. We know this from Cather’s descriptions of her experiences, but we also know it from her own artistry and what she achieved through it. In the passage from “The Novel *Démeublé*” above, Cather champions Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as exemplary art. She recalls her own experience as a reader of the nineteenth-century masterpiece and remembers being prompted *to feel* as a result of a nameless quality; the same nameless quality can be found in other examples of the kind of literature that Cather privileged.

Along with Hawthorne, she also held Katherine Mansfield in high esteem. In her article of the same name, she writes, “The qualities of a second-rate writer can easily be defined but a first-rate writer can only

be experienced. It is just the thing in him which escapes analysis that makes him first-rate” (“KM” 134). What is experienced, Cather continues, is solitary to each reader, as well as to the author: “. . . his timbre, this cannot be defined or explained any more than the quality of a beautiful speaking voice can be” (“KM” 135). Constitutive of the author, unable to be falsely manufactured, this artistic quality is both there and not there. A reader can, like Cather did, experience powerful emotions when reading, but be unable to point to the words that inspired them. The unconscious, as it is theorized by Freud and Lacan, carries many of these same qualities. Though it is invisible, the unconscious is widely acknowledged to be a forceful determinant of individual human behavior. Cather points to the same paradox of an absent presence when she describes cathartic art and its ability to rouse emotions previously unknown to the spectator as “high quality”: “It is 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 or the thing or the deed” (“ND” 50).

Cather’s catharses also moved beyond her own experiences with the written word as a reader and a writer. In fact, Cather had powerful experiences with both vocal and visual art that contributed to her own creation of *The Song of the Lark*. As has been well-documented, Thea Kronborg’s growth into a leading opera singer has strong autobiographical ties to Cather’s relationship with Olive Fremstad, the Metropolitan Opera’s leading Wagnerian soprano in the early twentieth century. As James Woodress describes in his comprehensive biography, after seeing Fremstad sing on March 12, 1914, “[Cather] wrote Sergeant a week later that ever since she went to see Fremstad she had been choked up by things unutterable” (253). Cather’s emotional overflow is not only obvious in her private correspondence, but in her inability to clearly articulate the experience days after the event as well. As she sets to earnest work on *The Song of the Lark* through the remainder of 1914 and through 1915, Thea Kronborg becomes the amalgamation of Fremstad and Cather herself. Thea intertwines Cather’s autobiographical experiences as a child in the west, her own burgeoning artistry as an author, and Fremstad’s rise to her then current level of operatic success. For Cather, it seems that the working-through of her conscious emotions after seeing Fremstad takes the form of her own artistic production, which also happens to be about the growth of an artist.

Cather insinuates that one other personal catharsis finds its way into *The Song of the Lark* by way of title, as well as emotional undertow. In her 1932 preface, Cather admits that the title was based on her own experience as a viewer of Jules Breton's *The Song of the Lark* (1860) at the Art Institute of Chicago: a painting of a strong young girl who temporarily stops her field-work to listen to the sound of birds heard but not seen. Chastising readers who misinterpreted her title too literally, Cather writes, "The title was meant to suggest a young girl's awakening to something beautiful" ("Preface" 433). This explanation suggests that Cather identifies with the field girl's awakening just as she wants her readers to identify with Thea's. For Cather, art has the nameless quality, like the bird unseen but felt, to occasion the individual awakening of the reader, viewer, or listener who is open to it. She experienced these moments of catharsis herself and sought to create them for her readers through Thea, who is also moved by the painting.

2. Internal Doubleness

As a *Künstlerroman*, *The Song of the Lark* depicts more than the birth of an artist, because in Thea Kronborg, Cather describes a female artist who gives birth to herself through an internal awakening. This internal awakening allows Thea, and by extension Cather, to succeed as an artist by "delivering himself completely to his art" ("Preface" 433).³ Thea describes her delivery to art in the following way: "Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does. It's like being woven into a big web. You can't pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the big picture" (SL 306). For both Thea and Cather, the true artist is one whose identity cannot be separated from one's art. Before Thea is woven together with her art, though, she struggles with how to deal with her hidden second self, her internal double. Like the geographical Divide of which Cather writes, Thea experiences an internal divide that simultaneously thwarts and facilitates her artistry until she reconciles the disjuncture. Though she does not produce art every time she sings, when she does, Thea crosses the divide and melds both sides; borders between inside and outside become permeable. "This afternoon the closed roads opened, the gates dropped," Thea thinks when she takes the role of *Sieglinde*, for instance (SL 395).

Much of the scholarship devoted to Cather's life and work has focused on how the action and product of her own writing can be analyzed through the lens of sublimated emotions or psychological symptoms.⁴ Readers and critics alike argue that her fiction attempts to reconcile her conflicting identities and so directly map her own life onto her proliferation of doubling and division. Thea Kronborg, especially, has become one of these figures because many of her particularities resemble Cather's own. Though their vocations differ immensely, Thea and Cather both make the journey to artist despite conflicts. The first, most obvious, conflict that comes to mind for both Thea and Cather is that in the early twentieth century, the unique pressures and characteristics of an artist's life made it incompatible with the espoused feminine identity. Woman and artist were thought to be mutually exclusive, and despite evidence to the contrary, female space was not an acceptable venue for creativity. Another conflict that has been at the forefront of Cather scholarship for the last twenty-five years is her sexuality.⁵

For many like Sharon O'Brien who first wrote about it 1984, the biographical material that supports Cather's lesbianism, combined with her concealment of it, points to a conflicted sexual identity equipped with doubleness. O'Brien describes how the slippage between culturally-accepted identity and personal identity may have fueled Cather's writing when the critic writes, "If so we may be faced with the irony that the necessity both to disclose and to conceal lesbianism contributed to the pleasure Cather found in the creative process . . ." (1984, 598). Lesbianism becomes "the thing not named" because it cannot be, but it constantly finds itself implicitly in her fiction through characters like Thea, who many describe as asexual, or through male narrators Cather creates. As Cather inhabits these male characters, some argue that she is revealing yet another conflict of her own gender ambiguity. Her sustained cross-dressing as William Cather throughout late adolescence challenged gender expectations and revealed her own discomfort with the female identity.

The conflict between public identity and private identity also serves as a general umbrella to encompass all of Cather's supposed conflicted identities of vocation, sexuality, and gender. To emphasize this general division, James Woodress writes, "Cather too believed in the two selves in every person, the private self that belongs to family and friends, and the public self" (268). However, in her own words, and especially in Thea's words in *The Song of the Lark*, Cather seems

to believe in an even more private self. Filtering the discussion of personal identity through her praise of Katherine Mansfield's art, Cather lauds the author's ability to convey what lies beneath the portrayed self; this is a self that is other to the family self to whom Woodress refers. Cather explains, "One realizes that even in harmonious families there is a double life: the group life, which is the one we can observe in our neighbor's household, and, underneath, another — secret and passionate and intense — which is the real life that stamps the faces and gives character to the voices of our friends" ("KM" 136).

Calling human relationships "the tragic necessity of human life," Cather privileges the internal life of each person over the interpersonal relationships one may have with friends and family ("KM" 136). This internal life drives conscious existence, but it is concealed from view. Beyond the banal separation of public and private life, this internal life is itself split, a doubling few acknowledge. This double identity is *not* the reconciliation of female and artist, homosexual and heterosexual, or female and male, but rather the conflicted relationship between the unconscious and conscious halves of each person. This doubling is the one to which Thea refers; her internal life also includes a second self which is twice-removed from public display.

Hermione Lee in *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (1989) also recognizes that Cather's doubleness exceeds the divide between public and private. Focusing her attention on Cather's fascination with doubling, she writes, "The obsession belongs not just to her interior life, but to a powerful tradition in American writing" (Lee 84). These doubled characters, for Lee, represent Cather herself, as well as the generalized tension between rugged individualism and modern cultivation: the "Westerner gone East, creative energies trapped by desk work, the pioneer feeling his age" (84). Cather's characters, struggling to reconcile incompatible identities, manifest this general conflict, but Thea represents something different altogether. Thea's internal life stands apart as something else, an "it" or a "thing" that resembles the unconscious.

For Lee, and for me, *The Song of the Lark* is unique because in it "Thea is Cather's 'second self'" (120). Both self and other, "remote and intimate" to use Lee's terminology, Thea makes Cather's own unconscious corporeal as Thea struggles to represent her second self through her voice (120). When Thea channels her unconscious vocally, as Cather does through her writing, "The great artist turns

something secret and concealed into something public and impersonal” (131). This display of one’s unconscious prompts the catharsis Cather finds indispensable in what she considers good art. Lee’s argument that Thea represents Cather’s unconscious certainly reflects the author’s own admission that she inhabited her characters, since she was keen on “dissolving the boundaries between self and other” (O’Brien, 1987, 82). But ultimately, Lee does not go far enough because she fails to address the relationship between the unconscious and artistic awakening. Through a closer examination of Thea’s “thing not named,” we can better understand Cather’s revised *Künstlerroman* in *The Song of the Lark*.

Cather first points to Thea’s doubleness after she moves into the cozy room upstairs in her childhood home. From that point on, “Thea began to live a double life. During the day, when the hours were full of tasks, she was one of the Kronborg children, but at night she was a different person” (*SL* 53). While this initial description points to the superficial division between family life and internal life, Cather quickly moves Thea away from an identity where the private, inner, truthful self comes into conflict with the public, outer, inauthentic self. Settled on the train intended to take her to study piano in Chicago, Thea recalls how little she leaves behind in Moonstone, Colorado, with her family and community. She thinks, “Everything that was essential seemed to be right there in the car with her. She lacked nothing. She even felt more compact and confident than usual. She was all there, and something else was there, too — in her heart, was it or under her cheek? . . . that sturdy little companion with whom she shared a secret” (*SL* 136). This double life is decidedly different than the one she lives in the chilly eaves of a conscious self and a little more, an unconscious secret companion coming intermittently into view. Thea’s doubleness is most accurately approached from a psychoanalytic perspective, not as the confrontation between inner and outer identities but as the experience of inner identity felt simultaneously as outer identity, where the self is felt to be both familiar and strange.

Predicated on the logic of the Lacanian Mirror Stage, this doubleness arises in part because identity is formed through misrecognition. If our first notion of self arises when we recognize our reflection in the mirror, then we (falsely) take that flat image literally to be the self. The doubling between the reflected self and the self looking in the mirror establishes a sense of two-ness that is repeated

through the internal division between the unconscious and conscious.⁶ Though the surface appearance may bear its trace, we are constantly separated from what Cather calls the “real life” (“KM” 136). Thea, on the other hand, sees her second self clearly in the mirror: “. . . she frowned at herself for a long while in her looking-glass. Yes, she and It must fight it out together. The thing that looked at her out of her own eyes was the only friend she could count on” (*SL* 202). She recognizes her own self-difference; she sees more than the conscious self in her looking-glass. Contrary to the emphasis on sexuality in the current scholarship, this doubleness is about one’s relationship to the self.

Thea ascertains that her double is both her and not-her at once, both familiar and alien within one body. Calling her “second self” alternately “it,” “the thing,” and “that feeling,” Thea has no solid name for the being dwelling within her, yet she acknowledges this unconscious presence in her own life. In this regard, Thea, via her creation by Cather, is extremely unique. Cather frequently uses the word “unconscious” and “unconsciously” in the text of *The Song of the Lark* to refer to actions that are done without thinking, but she also vividly displays Thea as an individual with a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious as a concept. Referred to as a cut, the unconscious separates us from the imagined fullness with which we are all born when we are in a state of complete union with the mother. Before the unconscious is formed, there is no desire because there is already complete satisfaction.

At the moment when the mother turns her desire from the child to respond to an outside force, such as a love interest, the unconscious is formed. When the mother turns, she leaves a cut, or a metaphorical hole, in the child. Once that hole is formed, the child tries to fill it, and so desire is born. In other words, this first cut, initiates the economy of desire; as a lack, it is invisible but powerfully determines behavior. Along with desire, the formation of the unconscious also leads to the child’s initiation into language, as well as to a troubled relationship to one’s own body. The unconscious thus becomes an inaccessible site of early desires, but it also becomes a repository of memories and feelings that would be painful to face. The conscious individual, called the ego by Freud, tries to erect strict boundaries between the conscious self and the unconscious mind for self-preservation.

Cather too acknowledges the ego’s guarded stance toward the rest of the world when she writes, “[human relationships] can never be

wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them” (“KM” 136). As Cather elucidates, the ego’s main function is to keep the unconscious with its repressions at bay; while human relationships may be consciously fulfilling, they also work to dislodge unconscious repressions. These unconscious repressions occasionally do break through the surface of consciousness and demand working-through in forms such as dreams, psychological symptoms, and repetitions. While most individuals allow their egos to deny the force of an unconscious on their lives, Thea’s acceptance of her second self proves that she has a close relationship to her unconscious. Freud admits that willing the unconscious to emerge is a fruitless endeavor, but if it does emerge, integrating its truth into conscious life should be one’s main goal. I maintain that Thea’s close relationship to her own unconscious awakens herself to her own artistry, as well as those around her. In my reading, Thea’s unconscious is *not* her art, but her awareness of her unconscious allows her to access her art more directly. According to psychoanalytic thinkers such as Freud and Lacan, as well as important artists like Cather herself, awareness of the unconscious brings the individual tremendous power. For Thea, “Her voice, more than any other part of her, had to do with that confidence, that sense of wholeness and inner well-being that she had felt at moments ever since she could remember” (*SL* 184). Thea registers her unconscious, and so she is able to focus on *wholeness*, rather than her *hole*.

3. Thea’s Rebirth through Desire

Thea’s artistic rebirth focuses on her sense of internal completion, rather than overcoming the external conflicts typical of the traditional *Künstlerroman*. As such, Thea’s rebirth centers on her awareness of her own unconscious and its manifestation in her relationships to both her body and to language. When the unconscious is formed and the child is initiated into language, part of the original, full body is forever inaccessible. The body can never be completely named according to Lacan because part of it is barricaded in the primal memory of union with the mother, and “the primordial Real . . . suffers from the signifier” (Lacan, 1960, 118). This separation contributes to the philosophical mind/body dualism and leads most to think that the body is, even if only occasionally, an other. Thea, by contrast, has a

fluid, seamless relationship with her body that becomes more and more unified as her voice gets further developed. Cather describes this symbiosis by writing, “Thea’s body was often curiously expressive of what was going on in her mind . . .” (*SL* 204). Furthermore, her body parts often display a malleable quality usually attributed to minds, not bodies. Early on, “[h]er body had the elasticity that comes of being highly charged with the desire to live” (*SL* 190), and repeatedly throughout, her back is described as “plastic” (*SL* 227).

The typical disjunction between mind and body only exists for Thea when she is either physically ill or psychologically drained, such as the ennui that prompts her revitalizing trip to Panther Canyon. Just as her body communicates to others, it also communicates itself to Thea. She describes, in part, her rejuvenating trip by explaining, ““And you can’t know [the inevitable hardness of human life] with your mind. You have to realize it in your body, somehow; deep. It’s an animal sort of feeling”” (*SL* 384). Thea rediscovers her body during this trip — along with her voice and her childhood memories — a rediscovery that fuels her vocal force. Like Harsanyi’s earlier description of Thea as a “fine young savage” (*SL* 174), this “feeling” emphasizes the primal relationship between an animal and its immediate surroundings, an immediacy lost to most when the unconscious is formed. Both Thea’s wild voice and uncultivated body point to her proximity to the primordial. Silently thinking, “When men lived in caves, it was there,” Thea rejoices her link to the ancient past when she once again feels the fluidity between her mind and body at Panther Canyon (*SL* 269).

Along with desire and a physical body, we also receive access to language when the unconscious is formed; we name “mother” because we can no longer have her. Yet the distance between signifier and signified is a tremendous gulf. Beneath what we really say, lies so much that can never be said. Thea’s close relationship to her own unconscious also gives her special access to language’s inadequacy; she knows that she wants to communicate more than words allow her to say. While she feels at one with her body as a tool of and for communication, she is always acutely aware of language’s failure to communicate all the meaning that supports the words. After she begins studying piano with Harsanyi in Chicago, “Nothing that she could say about her studies seemed unqualifiedly true, once she put it down on paper” (*SL* 150). Neither could she communicate verbally with her new teacher: “Thea told them very little about herself. She

was not naturally communicative, and she found it hard to feel confidence in new people” (*SL* 153). Thea’s inability to use language effectively in communication with her family and her teachers, along with her own inability to name “the thing” residing inside her, illustrate her awareness of language’s insufficiency.

Only other artists, like Harsanyi (or those close to their unconscious second selves), understand Thea’s frustration with articulation. ““There is no use my talking, Mr. Harsanyi. I can’t tell you,”” says Thea (*SL* 180). But he does understand. Once a source of relaxation for them both at the end of her piano lessons, Thea’s voice begins to emerge simultaneously as her vehicle of communication, her tool of artistry, and her reflection of second self. Tapping into her prelinguistic past, Thea literally carves out a new way to communicate with her voice. Like her bodily metamorphosis, she cements this transformation at Panther Canyon, where she uses vocal sound in place of insufficient language. “[Her ideas] had something to do with fragrance and color and sound, but almost nothing to do with words. She was singing very little now, but a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged” (*SL* 251). Thea is able to reconnect to a time when language was unnecessary because being at one with the universe, or with the mother’s body, was the natural state. Feeling rather than understanding dominates this landscape.

Exceeding her body and language itself, Thea’s voice includes “the thing in it which responds to every shade of thought and feeling, spontaneously, almost unconsciously” (*SL* 349). Thus bodily intuition and her disappointment with language both push her to explore her second self, her unnamed companion. Rather than extinguishing her second self by allowing the external world to infiltrate her inner sanctum and silence her, Thea pursues her further. Her desire blossoms as a hole to be filled and directs her toward conscious integration of her unconscious self. As psychoanalysis postulates, and Wunsch instructs Thea, ““There is only one big thing — desire”” (*SL* 68). Thea takes this maxim literally and begins living her life by her desire, her internal pulsing to develop a relationship with her second self. For most, pursuing a want seems nothing more than uncalculated whim, but Thea instinctively feels herself as a person with desire. Using terminology that mirrors psychoanalytic descriptions of the unconscious, Thea articulates the fulfillment of her desire as meeting up with the missing part of herself:

She took it for granted that someday, when she was older, she would know a great deal more about it. It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere. It was moving to meet her and she was moving to meet it. That meeting awaited her, just as surely as, for the poor girl in the seat behind her, there awaited a hole in the earth, already dug. (*SL* 184)

In this passage, Thea describes her search for her second self as a hole to be met or an absence to fill; like death's certitude, she is positive this coalescence will take place. Just as the unconscious is described in these terms, Thea's second self takes on the qualities of an absent presence to her identity. In a similar fashion, Thea also describes herself as an "abyss" (*SL* 317) and as a "cavern" (*SL* 366) that needs to be filled. It would be a mistake for us to place emphasis on her emptiness; rather, we need to focus on how her inner void, or lack, contributes to her desire to know her unconscious self. Through this search, Thea is able to reconnect her internal divide and produce art that has a cathartic effect on others.

Thea's desire is to follow this desire to completion: to meet her second self in the depth of her being. Her pursuit of this desire is considered ethical according to Lacan's famous psychoanalytic injunction to "not cede one's own desire," as he begins to theorize it in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan charges that we may only be true to the unconscious if we never give up our desire; when we give up on desire, we betray the self. Lacan explains that "the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one's desire" (1960, 321). Far from ceding her desire and betraying herself, she pursues it diligently as a model of ethical action, and, in this way, Thea becomes a modern Antigone, the ancient female figure who epitomizes ethical action from Lacan's point of view. He describes Antigone using terminology that fits Thea as well; she is "'inflexible,' 'something uncivilized,' 'something raw'" (Lacan, 1960, 263). Like it does for Antigone, Thea's desire becomes primary, and, as the burgeoning opera singer learns, other things must be given up to facilitate its course. Thea's desire is neither sexual nor selfish in the traditional sense, but it is self-ish: the desire of her conscious self to learn more about her unconscious second self. As Mrs. Nathanmeyer rightly observes, and I concur, "'She is very much interested in herself — as she should be'" (*SL* 234). Thea allows herself to be directed by her own self-interest; she experiences a pleasure that is free of

external duty-bound imperatives to anything or anyone other than the self. “I only want impossible things,” she admits, and pursue the impossible knowledge of the unconscious she does (*SL* 205). Undeniably, she “is borne along by a passion” in the same manner as Antigone (Lacan, 1960, 254).

Ultimately, her internal duty to this impossible desire leads Thea to her art and to the relationship with her unconscious self that she wants. Through this relationship, she reaches the internal transcendence of her artistic birth: the experience of being united with one’s art. “Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and longer,” says Harsanyi (*SL* 150). Since Thea’s relationship to her unconscious provides the force of her art, it is deep within the self where Thea must go to improve her artistic vocation. Harsanyi instructs, “I believe that the strongest need of your nature is to find yourself, to emerge *as* yourself” (*SL* 178). By seeking the self, she will give birth to her art.

Artistic birth in the way Harsanyi describes is akin to the ego annihilation known as “an act, a true act” of internal transcendence (Lacan, 1964, 50). Lacan explains, “The subject in himself, the recalling of his biography, all this goes only to a certain limit, which is known as the Real” (1964, 49). In the “true act” of internal transcendence, one exceeds beyond that “certain limit” and coalesces with the unconscious directly, albeit temporarily. Internal, as opposed to heavenly, transcendence is not permanent, however; it is a temporary state that puts one squarely in the midst of life. This rebirth delivers an individual more clearly to his/her purpose; Lacan calls this experience an “encounter with the Real” because it grants temporary access to a part of the self from which we are usually barred (1964, 52). When we return from that experience with an intact ego, we are reborn with a more self-aware authenticity because “any conception of the unity of the psyche, of the supposed totalizing, synthesizing psyche, ascending towards consciousness, perishes there” (1964, 51). By following her desire to meet her unconscious second self, Thea experiences this act of internal transcendence. She is then wholly herself, and as Cather writes, “the [R]eal . . . is hers” (*SL* 352). Through this awakening, she is reborn as an artist, but also as a more authentic self.

As Thea pursues her desire toward artistic rebirth, she has her own unforgettable catharsis at the Chicago Symphony. Though she previously acknowledges music’s power to activate her second self,

she does not experience a significant emotional outpouring until her night at the symphony. For Thea, this evening marks a life-altering event, as strong cathartic experiences often do. Not only does her own unconscious emerge and propel powerful emotions, but she also promises to achieve the same effect with her own art in due time. “All had a stimulating effect,” for Thea, as she sits alone and passively experiences the sights and sounds of the Chicago Symphony (*SL* 169). Her senses are heightened; her past memories are ignited; she loses control, and so she has difficulty concentrating on the music itself. With intense sensuality, she rather feels the experience at the core of her being. Allowing her past memories and emotions to come to the surface, “She sat still, scarcely knowing where she was, because her mind had been far away and had not yet come back to her” (*SL* 170). Through her catharsis at the symphony, Thea loses herself through momentary annihilation; she temporarily loses her conscious ego and accesses her unconscious.

As her emotions are integrated into conscious awareness, Cather describes Thea as “too much excited to know anything except that she wanted something desperately . . .” (*SL* 169). Her catharsis leaves her with the pulsation of wanting. She may not know what she wants, but she is dilated with desire and open to experience. Thea’s openness in this scene is characteristic of all cathartic moments that push people to feel new desires. Some emotions dislodge from unconsciousness to conscious awareness and make room for the desire for more. By the end of the evening, in the harsh world she resolves in a frenzy, “As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height” (*SL* 171-2). Indeed, Thea would, and she resolves to give birth to herself to do just that. She is desperate to hold onto the experience: the pleasurable ecstasy makes her feel alive. Rather than being merely open to musical catharsis, Thea wants to be a creator, not merely an interpreter.

Thea’s catharsis spurs her artistic development further, and soon she resolves to make a clean break from her family in Moonstone as she pursues rebirth. Like her first trip, Thea has an overflow of emotion on her trip back to Chicago the second time, but this time she mourns her past to make room for her present desire. “Something pulled in her — and broke. She cried all the way to Denver, and that night, in her berth, she kept sobbing and waking herself”; she wakes herself to the present, not the past (*SL* 208).

On her path of rebirth, Thea must align herself as closely as possible with her second self, with the unconscious thrust of desire that directs her movements. Beyond honing her craft and pushing her voice, Thea channels the childlike disposition she attributes to all artists. Like Cather, she believes, “A child’s attitude toward everything is an artist’s attitude. I am more or less of an artist now, but then I was nothing else” (*SL* 381). If artists are able to access their unconscious second selves more readily, this access is similar to that of children who have not been fully repressed by the pressures and expectations of the external world. Once again, Thea’s time at Panther Canyon successfully allows her to achieve this youthful regression. While there, she reconnects with the collective ancient past and her individual undivided self. To an outside observer far away, she appears like a “boy” (*SL* 259), and internally she thinks, “Here everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood . . . She felt united and strong” (*SL* 257). This childhood regression gives her the inspiration she requires as well as a closer bond with her second self. Indeed, before her penultimate artistic performance much later, she will use this same strategy to open her unconscious. Thea channels her own childhood past internally without change of geographical location. She remembers her family, her house, and most importantly how she felt in it. Her second self — her unconscious — is beckoned and welcomed. For artists, the specific memories recalled mean not as much and the feeling initiated: the recollection of an internal life that was undivided, “united,” as Thea describes.

Rather than sublimating her sexuality or representing it symptomatically, her art, then, gives shape to her unconscious, to her pulsing desire, to her second self. Privileging art that gives shape to nothingness like Cather herself, Thea questions natural beauty and man-made creation by asking, “What was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself — life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?” (*SL* 254-5). The forms these molds take are various: she constricts her throat while the Indian women formed pottery and Cather uses words. All are attempts to give shape to a lack, to encapsulate and display the unconscious in an appealing way: “They had not only expressed their desire, but they had expressed it as beautifully as they could” (*SL* 256). When Thea moulds her throat into her sheath, her voice represents her own desire: her own second self. When she does, she is

more than herself, and her unconscious power awakens others. Mr. Thomas, a character mentioned only once, attests to this power as he recalls to Harsanyi his own transformative experience hearing two female singers in New York in 1851: ““It was not voice and execution alone. There was a greatness about them. They were great women, great artists. They opened a new world to me”” (*SL* 176). Not only did they open a new world to him, but they opened him to a new world through a beautiful container that encases intangible unconscious desire.

4. Thea as Therapist

Reborn as an artist, like the women who moved Mr. Thomas, Thea is also born as a therapist — in the psychoanalytic sense — who is able to move her listeners to awareness of their own unconscious minds, of their own desires. In the case of Thea and her vocal art, her “patients” just happen to be men, but the desire she awakens in them is not sexual, for she enables catharsis for those who feel disconnected from their own second selves. Dr. Archie, Ray, Spanish Johnny, Wunsch, Harsanyi, and Fred Ottenburg all experience deep repression that contributes to a conscious deadening in their own lives. Though Woodress maintains that “Dr. Archie, Ray Kennedy, and Fred Ottenburg . . . contribute selflessly to her success,” this interpretation is not entirely accurate (271-2). While it is true that each man participates in the birth of Thea as an artist, each gains something valuable in return. They may not intend to benefit from the help they provide Thea along the way, but they certainly do. When Thea represents her unconscious in her art, their unconscious minds are similarly drawn out. This overlay of two unconscious minds mirrors the goal of therapy Freud champions in his second essay on the transference called “Observations on Transference-Love” (1915). Though the transference can occur in the real world, Freud notes that it is the primary goal of analysis. Through transference, the patient projects emotions directed toward someone else onto the analyst in an effort to work through complex psychological processes that manifest in relationships.

Rather than responding to these emotions, the analyst should remain steadfastly neutral against the eruption of his/her own emotions. For Freud, the position of the analyst is the most important factor of therapy and his charge for neutrality becomes the hallmark of

psychoanalytic professionalism. Freud harshly advises against the analyst's return of any feelings and instead teaches that the analyst must instigate emotions without responding to them, without covering over the hole that emerges. The analyst strives to allow the patient to experience catharsis "but he must just as resolutely withhold any response to it" (1915, 166). The analyst's refusal to react depends on the rise and suspension of the analyst's lack that dilates the patient's own; in other words, the analyst's own emergent unconscious propels the patient through a vacant stance. As I've already shown, Thea's art depends on the arousal and suspension of her own unconscious, which she then represents to others through her voice. In this way, she becomes the neutral analyst espoused by Freud; she enables the catharsis of others by reflecting her own unconscious.

Thea's "teachers," (*SL* 240) as she labels them, become her patients, not exactly "whistling-posts," as Fred Ottenburg calls her male admirers (*SL* 315). They may alert others to her talent through their high-pitched praise, but it is they who benefit from having known Thea, and over time each does acknowledge Thea's effect on his life. Alternately, each man describes Thea as wholly herself, plus a little extra in form and sound. Bodily, "She existed in more space than she occupied by measurement" (*SL* 310). Like this one description, their larger-than-life assessments of Thea show their subliminal understanding that she embodies more than her physical form when she becomes a vessel for her art. She transcends the body, and this alludes to her unconscious on display. Vocally, she exceeds herself as well. "It's the same voice, only more so," Fred explains as he prepares Dr. Archie for Thea-as-artist after long absence (*SL* 330). Paradoxically and in an ambiguous way, just as Thea appears more than herself, she seems less than herself as well. Her voice exudes an "impersonal" quality that seems disembodied from Thea's particularities (*SL* 234). She is herself with a difference, herself with a nearly imperceptible excess; she is her second self incarnate. She is the psychoanalytic object voice, the sweet-sounding timbre of the lover spoken only to the beloved.

Lacan adds the object voice, along with the gaze, to Freud's list of partial objects — breasts, feces, phallus — as another desire-arousing object on the side of what is heard and seen by the subject. The object voice does not belong to the body though it originates there; rather, it points to unconscious excess. Thea's male patients perceive this added component when they fail to articulate clearly what they see and hear

in the presence of her body and voice. They acknowledge a *more* without being able to give the *more* precise content. Thea's embodiment of the object voice through her singing is significant according to Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, who both write on music's relationship to the object voice. Through its representation of what escapes articulation and its manipulation of silence, music points to the gap in subjectivity for both the artist and the audience. Žižek explains, "[M]usic 'seizes' the subject in the real of his/her being, bypassing the detour of meaning: in music, we hear what we cannot see" (94). Feeling, rather than knowing, is primary to this musical experience; the collective failed signification of Thea and her admirers shows that they have not heard/seen the object voice, but merely felt it. Dolar theorizes that this reaction comes along with musical apprehensions of the object voice because "this gesture is always ambiguous: music evokes the voice and conceals it, it fetishizes it, but also opens the gap that cannot be filled" (10). This gap is the same unconscious opening sought through traditional therapy to inspire a patient to move in new conscious directions. Limitlessness comes to replace restrictive binding, and this opening inspires new nonsexual desires in Thea's patients.

Just as the men admit that Thea provides an unarticulated *more* than her conscious being when she sings, so too does Thea understand that the men in her life receive an energy from her of which she is not in conscious possession. Before she fully understands her therapeutic power, she muses on the reaction she inspires in her male admirers:

She remembered the way Ray had looked at her that morning. Why had he cared so much? And Wunsch, and Dr. Archie, and Spanish Johnny, why had they? It was something that had to do with her that made them care, but it was not she. It was something they believed in, but it was not she. Perhaps each of them concealed another person in himself, just as she did. Why was it that they seemed to feel and to hunt for a second person in her and not in each other? Thea frowned up at the dull lamp in the roof of the car. What if one's second self could somehow speak to all those second selves? What if one could bring them out, as whiskey did to Spanish Johnny's? (SL 184)

Here, Thea accurately describes the therapeutic effect that she has on the men surrounding her. Her vocal art puts her in close contact

with her own second self, and its display prompts the emergence of the second selves of others. Thea is the neutral analyst who encourages others to open to their own desires as she opens to hers. As Freud notes, the overlay of two unconscious minds propels conscious movement in new directions, and Thea certainly awakens the desire of men who had previously been separated from their longings. Just as Thea's desire is not primarily sexual, neither is the desire of these men, but its power lacks nothing in potency. This form of desire focuses on internal understanding, not its outward movement. Dolar explains this internal, nonsexual movement when he writes, "As soon as the object, both as the gaze and as the voice, appears as the pivotal point of narcissistic self-apprehension, it introduces a rupture at the core of self-presence" (15).

All the men who experience therapeutic catharsis as a result of Thea's art similarly experience the "self-rupture" theorized by Dolar and open to new conscious desire due to her presence in their lives. And like she wonders above, her second self does communicate with the second selves of listeners who are open to it. When she displays her own unconscious desire so fervently, their own desires emerge and spur new patterns of associations. Where that desire leads is different for each individual due to its singular unconscious content. Her earliest teacher, Wunsch, was fearful of her ability to awaken him to his distant past. Cather describes his inner thoughts when she writes, "He was thinking of youth; of his own, so long gone by, and of his pupil's just beginning. He would even have cherished hopes for her, except that he had become superstitious" (*SL* 29). Ultimately, his recollection of the past prompts free association of his life's terrain: "His thoughts wandered over a wide territory; over many countries and many years. There was no order or logical sequence in his ideas. Pictures came and went without reason" (*SL* 85). Following the path of his new desire to where it directed, Wunsch rediscovers his inherent nomadic identity and leaves Moonstone for a "new town" (*SL* 85). Naturally homeless but a living composite of the places he has been, Wunsch moves on as a wanderer full of desire. He describes the impact an adolescent Thea has on his desire to move on by writing in his farewell note, "There was something unconscious and unawakened about her, that tempted curiosity" (*SL* 86). For him, that curiosity prompted more western travel.

While Wunsch's response to Thea is to abandon his current life, Harsanyi feels a kinship with Thea's unique knowledge that leads him

to a deeper commitment to his own calling. As Lacan develops Freud's theory of the transference even further, he explains that strong transference relationships are built on the sharing of unspoken knowledge. The cathartic reaction is strengthened when a patient believes that an analyst knows him/her at an unconscious level, and this intimacy often fuels the emotional working-through of the transference. Harsanyi's reaction to Thea shows that he believes they share a secret knowledge that ultimately pushes him to learn more about himself.

Though Thea frustrates Harsanyi immensely at first, he detects her raw, uncultivated gift and becomes the man to peel back Thea's layers to allow the artist to emerge. Considering himself an artist as well, Harsanyi feels that both he and Thea have a mutual, unspoken understanding of their innate dispositions. This unique shared knowledge inspires Harsanyi's desire to explore his own professional yearnings when he urges Thea to sing impromptu at the end of their structured piano lessons. A pianist by training, "He found that these unscientific singing lessons stimulated him in his own study" (*SL* 161). As he pursues his own lack of knowledge, Harsanyi admits that he has experienced gains as a result of his interaction with Thea, though he cannot really explain why. Drawing a comparison between her effect on two different men, Cather summarizes, "In short, Harsanyi looked forward to his hour with Thea for the same reason that poor Wunsch had sometimes dreaded his; because she stirred him more than anything she did could adequately explain" (*SL* 162). A catalyst for both men, Thea prompts them to acknowledge their buried desires and pursue their courses. She arouses them asexually to develop a closer relationship with their second selves.

While Thea's therapeutic effect on Wunsch and Harsanyi — along with other men in her midst — is of a relatively short duration, she has an extended, abiding therapeutic relationship with Dr. Archie from the time she is his eleven-year-old patient and he is her thirty-year-old doctor. Their relationship is predicated more on a father/daughter interaction than on forbidden romantic attachment, yet many years later, Dr. Archie defines their relationship in terms of the non-sexual desire I have been expanding here. Using collective pronouns to include all the other men in Thea's life, Dr. Archie explains how she "met our initial want; the desire which formed in us in early youth, undirected, and of its own accord" (*SL* 334). This explanation underscores how Thea, in her being and in her art, is able to project

her own unconscious for others. She inspires the unconscious minds of others to emerge, but she does not react to them consciously; rather, she reflects it back to her “patient” to pursue as his own desire. Even as a young child, Thea had this kind of effect on Dr. Archie, whose loveless marriage and routine existence had all but stamped out his conscious desires for pleasure, sexual or otherwise. Ignorant of her effect on him through the early years of their relationship, Dr. Archie admits, “She had counted for a great deal more to him than he knew at the time” (*SL* 333).

Back then, he was so bored with his daily life that “it had become a habit with him to lose himself” (*SL* 42). Instead of losing himself in books or sport, Dr. Archie desperately needed to be reconnected to that part of himself that he lost to repression. He found that he was able to do so by identifying with Thea and her awakening. Cather sets up this relationship of identification just as Dr. Archie is about to embark with Thea on her first journey to Chicago. Looking forward to the trip, he thinks, “I feel almost as gay as if I were going to get away for a winter myself” (*SL* 132). This identification establishes a pattern of idealization that stays with Dr. Archie as he follows Thea throughout her awakening. It is what causes Archie to say, “You’ve always been my romance” (*SL* 379). This comment is not meant to be taken sexually, but rather refers to how Thea is able to ignite his desire for more out of life. He both idealizes her and her accomplishments and identifies with her through her journey. She is the idealized analyst, admired by her patient. While Dr. Archie’s conscious life prevents him from real experience, his active internal desire keeps him attached to his second self. His vicarious living through Thea brings a new dimension to his waking life.

As a placid mirror to the males in her life, Thea inspires the real-world therapy possible through cathartic art. In fact it can be argued that Thea’s performance as *Sieglinde* becomes a group therapy session of sorts, for in the audience sit four of her male patients: Dr. Archie, Fred Ottenburg, Harsanyi, and even Spanish Johnny. Cather writes, “Thea Kronborg’s friends, old and new, seated about the house on different floors and levels, enjoyed her triumph according to their natures” (*SL* 395). Though they comprise a group, her effect on each is individual according to his unconscious second self, what Cather calls nature. We do not know the direction of each desire aroused, but we can assume these men — as well as countless others in the audience — experience new conscious desires after hearing Thea’s

voice. James Woodress maintains that this momentous performance is bittersweet for all involved because “[o]ne knows that Thea one day will lose her Eurydice and some other singer will replace her as Thea replaces an ailing Sieglinde at the end of the story” (271). This description of a fading Thea does not match my interpretation of Thea as therapist. Therapists, like artists, don’t extinguish desire in themselves or others once it has been attained; rather, they inspire the desire for more desire. Thea gives us every indication that she will continue to pursue her desire’s course wherever it leads, and so she will continue to fulfill that function for others.

5. Cather as Therapist

The Song of the Lark is a revised *Künstlerroman*, not only because of the internal psychoanalytic awakening it describes, but because Cather also endures her own artistic rebirth through its production. In conclusion, I suggest that Cather’s art may occasion the same type of catharsis as Thea’s. We, her readers, may be moved — if we are open to it — to the same emotional outpouring and arousal of conscious desire as Thea’s male listeners. Just as Thea struggles to increase her awareness of her own unconscious to present it to her listeners, Cather does the same when she reflects her unconscious through her fiction. Overwhelmed when she had a story to tell, Cather’s words exude the same self-possession as Thea’s voice. Reflecting her unconscious as Thea does, “She can only write a story if she is possessed by it, she says in 1922, and if she analy[z]es it, she kills it” (Lee 186). By refraining from her own interpretation and reflecting its lack, Cather draws out the unconscious minds of her own readers and performs a therapeutic function for us.

This experience is felt just as intensely as it is when the men hear Thea’s voice. Susan J. Rosowski in “Willa Cather and the Intimacy of Art, Or: In Defense of Privacy” notes a similar experience of intensity for many who read Cather’s fiction. Questioning the intimacy created between the text and the reader, she asks, “How might we understand the exceptionally close, personal relationship that Cather’s readers forge with her books?” (1992-1993, 48). For Rosowski, *The Song of the Lark* has a unique ability to create this intense intimacy with the reader because it is so direct and personal. “Cather creates disillusionment scenes that are unsettling and shocking by their voyeuristic quality with her narrator taking the reader into regions that

belong to the characters alone,” she writes (52). I agree with Rosowski, and I want to push that internal intimacy one step deeper and suggest that Cather is able to arouse our own second selves and propel our desires in new directions.

My theory aligns with the one put forth by Parveen Adams in *The Emptiness of the Image* (1996), where she argues that the power of art, therapy, and representation stems from what is *not* there and how that absence relates to desire and its object. She explains that when music, writing, film, photography, and painting point to that absence — as therapy does — “that has to do with producing the place of the object as empty” (Adams 83). The object may be rendered empty for a variety of reasons: the unseen lark in the Breton painting observed by both Cather and Thea, the spectators’ description of Thea and her voice as both excess and absence, Cather’s readers’ perception of “the inexplicable Presence of the thing not named” in her writing, etc.

By rendering itself as absence rather than presence, each emptied object removes the previously impenetrable border between inside and outside and turns the focus back onto the subject and his/her desire as the viewer of a piece artwork, listener to an opera, or reader of a novel. Adams says this abrupt shift of focus from object to subject is akin to “a moment of blindness — the artist’s analogue to the moment of the analyst’s silence in the talking cure” (89). But, she continues, “these moments allow desire to emerge in the subject. The empty place of the object will come to be occupied by new things among which may be the work of art itself” (Adams 89). This circular pattern helps explain *The Song of the Lark*’s trajectory: Cather’s empty objects led to catharsis that led to the representation of Thea and her catharsis (and those of her audience members), which led to Cather’s readers experiencing catharsis and perhaps producing art themselves, and so on. Like psychoanalysis, *The Song of the Lark* implicitly communicates an absence that generates catharsis, self-recognition, and desire.

Lacan also emphasizes the ability of the written word to achieve a therapeutic purpose most clearly through his analysis of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. By not giving up her desire and following it resolutely, Antigone goes beyond human limits, and her unspeakable pursuit arouses the desire of both the chorus and the audience members. The effect of both Thea and Cather on their audiences is similar to Antigone in this way. Note both Lacan’s focus on “us” in the

following quote and my inclusion of “Thea” alongside Antigone: “It is [Antigone/Thea] herself who fascinates us, [Antigone/Thea] in her unbearable splendor. She has a quality that both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us . . . ” (Lacan, 1960, 247). This nameless quality shifts attention away from “desire that visibly emanates from the eyelids of this admirable girl” and places the focus on the desire of the “us”: those subjects watching, hearing, or reading about her (1960, 281). Our attraction to desire’s pursuit impels our own.

Because the regions that she represents for her readers are her very own, like Antigone and Thea, Cather gives us more than the words on the page, more than the internal lives of her characters. She gives us the representation of her own unconscious, and in so doing, entices ours. In parallel fashion to Thea’s therapeutic effect on her listeners, Cather opens up her readers to similar feelings by permitting unconscious doubleness that “is felt upon the page without being specifically named there” (“ND” 50). This *Künstlerroman* is not about a rebirth that denies internal doubleness to focus on external identity, but one in which the unconscious and its desire are necessary for the production of art. Furthermore, Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* is a *Künstlerroman* that extends this rebirth to an artist’s audience through emotional catharsis.

Notes

¹ All quotations from Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* are taken from the same Penguin Classics edition and will be referenced as *SL*. Cather’s other works will be noted as follows: “ND” for “The Novel D meubl ,” “KM” for “Katherine Mansfield,” and “Preface” for “Willa Cather’s 1932 Preface to the 1915 Edition.”

² These intersecting readings are those offered by Sharon O’Brien, Judith Fryer, and Susan Rosowski through the 1980s.

³ Cather’s decision to use the male pronoun in reference to an artist is certainly curious in this instance. She clearly thought females could be artists, since she placed Katherine Mansfield, Thea Kronborg, and even herself in that category. Without overanalyzing, we may assume that she chose the pronouns for their inclusivity; upon closer examination, we may find that Cather believed artists to be asexual, and therefore any gendered pronoun would be considered superfluous.

⁴ In these readings, on the one hand, it is believed that Cather's thwarted lesbianism becomes her source of creativity and because it cannot be expressed openly, she sublimates her sexuality into her writing. On the other hand, it is believed that her frustrated sexuality comes out in the content of her fiction, where her characters act out her own symptomatic frustration through unfulfilled relationships and asexuality.

⁵ See the already-referenced work of Sharon O'Brien, Judith Fryer, and Susan Rosowski through the 1980s.

⁶ During the Mirror Stage, from fragmentation and discord, the child ostensibly moves seamlessly to coherence and mastery. Like Lacan's inverted bouquet of *Seminar I*, which is nothing more than a mirage of reflections, the reflected image, or *imago*, falsely convinces the child to believe in his/her own autonomy, a literal smoke and mirrors routine concealing the fact that the child is actually being produced through a complex set of forces acting on him/her. Seduced by imaginary forms, the child no longer sees his/her substantial lack of coordination or codependency on external powers. In the instant s/he recognizes the image, the double has been created, but is not recognized as such. Put simply, the image, misrecognized as self, *is* the double. Hence, the main effect of the Mirror Stage is the creation of a rarely, if ever, acknowledged double through "the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire development" (Lacan, 1949, 4).

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Immeasurable Yearnings: The Artistic Legacy of the Landscape in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*

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This was music she could understand, music from the New World indeed! [. . .] It brought back to her that high tableland above Laramie [. . .] Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts; [. . .] the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. There was home in it too; first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old [. . .] (*SL* 169-170)¹

Sixty-three years after the publication of Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, literary criticism began to develop new terminology which would prove to be an invaluable tool in exploring the novel's complexity. The term ecocriticism was first used in the late 1970s. William Rueckert's essay, "Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), advocated the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature."² Initially, however, ecocriticism had little impact on literary criticism; in fact, its influence really emerges in the late 1990s when its scope is broadened and feminists in particular begin to recognize its utility.³

Ecocriticism, "sometimes popularly referred to as green criticism", explain Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, "is a type of literary criticism" that "focuses on the relationship between nature and literature" (125). It "examines how people interact with nature and how these interactions inform and are forged by symbolic representations of nature" (125). Ecocritical readings may focus on texts that are explicitly nature writing, but the approach is expansive enough to include works that incorporate nature. Or, as Cheryl Glotfelty phrases it: the "effort to promulgate environmentally enlightened works examines mainstream genres, identifying fiction and poetry writers whose work manifest ecological awareness" (xxiii). Glotfelty identifies Cather as fitting into this category; asserting that her novels reveal an "ecological awareness" long before the term was coined.

Lawrence Buell's groundbreaking work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, outlines the criteria that can help to determine if a literary text merits the label of ecocritical writing. Nature, Buell argues, must be more than a mere "framing device"; it must be a "presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (7). In addition, human interests are not privileged, or considered the only "legitimate interest"; as Buell insists, "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation" (7-8). Finally, "some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text," proposes Buell (8). To varying degrees, *The Song of the Lark* fulfills each of the requirements Buell identifies. Thea Kronborg's encounters with nature are crucial to her development as an opera singer. Nature is an agent of change in the novel, not a static setting for the events. Cather does not sustain the nature/culture dichotomy in the novel; instead, anticipating ecocritical concerns, *The Song of the Lark* highlights the invigorating interplay of these two elements.

Music triggers an imaginative journey for Thea Kronborg in the quotation that opens this essay. An unanticipated artistic stirring shakes the feeling of stagnation derived from her experiences in Chicago; adrift in an impersonal city, Thea discovers an emotional anchor by personalizing Dvořák's Symphony—"From the New World" (*SL* 169). She envisions familiar places, but reconceptualizes them: the high tablelands, "the grass-grown wagon trails, the far-away peaks of the snowy range, the wind and the eagles" surface in the sound waves (*SL* 169). The young girl recognizes tangible places from her personal past, but now associates them with intangibles: "a soul obsessed by what it did not know, under the cloud of a past it could not recall" (*SL* 170). The intuitive response encapsulates the path Thea must take. To move forward Thea must look to the past—a past consecrated in the landscapes of her childhood. At times the past does cast a shadow or a "cloud" over Thea's artistic development, but it also offers crucial illumination during her struggle. Thea's growth is contingent on the various natural and human made settings she occupies. "Place—as Cather writes of it—is a matter of consciousness, a point of view rooted in nature that is individual and particular", asserts Susan J. Rosowski ("Ecology of Place" 145-146). Thea Kronborg is one in a series of Cather's characters whose identity is entwined with the physical places she occupies. However, her

situation is unique in that Thea is in the process of becoming an artist; nature and culture are both catalysts in this venture.

Defining culture and nature as opposites and distinct categories⁴ is part of a long philosophical and literary tradition which has garnered a great deal of critical attention. Feminists in particular, Gillian Rose proposes, “have discussed the distinctions between Nature and Culture at some length, because they see it as one of those oppositions which are heavily gendered and power-ridden” (68). The concern is that culture, associated with the masculine, is privileged over nature with its association with the feminine. Hidden and not-so-hidden power imbalances are embedded in the culture/nature paradigm. From the 1980s onwards, a growing body of ecofeminist criticism has sought to expose the potential for exploitation lurking behind the seemingly benign pairing. Murfin and Ray interpret ecofeminists as “locat[ing] the source of environmental problems in the tendency to privilege human interests, many argue more specifically that androcentrism, the tendency to conceive of nonhuman nature in terms of human male interests, has led patriarchal cultures, particularly in the West, to associate and exploit women and nature” (127). Women and nature, many theorists argue, are vulnerable to manipulation because they are conceptualized as powerless and available.

The insight into the connection between the mistreatment of human beings and the destruction of the natural environment is an invaluable one. Noël Sturgeon’s point that “the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment” is well taken (23). One response to the gendered, nature/culture binary, and the woman-as-land motif, has been to downplay the influence of nature on human behavior; culture remains privileged, but is expanded to include the feminine. However, ecocritics argue that nature is not completely apart from culture, nor is culture completely apart from nature. “All human culture”, Murfin and Ray explain, “exists in the natural world and [. . .] any human act affecting nature ultimately affects culture” (128). This theoretical approach argues that any attempt to separate the natural and cultural is futile; the interwoven natural and cultural elements may be denied, but they cannot be erased. *The Song of the Lark* reinforces this ecocritical position through the depiction of Thea Kronborg. Cather bridges the two categories: Thea must draw upon both culture and nature in her development as an artist—she needs knowledge gained from the

experience of Panther Canyon and her formal lessons. The dual influence is also evident in the path she takes: Thea will move between natural and socially constructed spaces in the pursuit of her dream.

In order to become the great artist she aspires to be—an aspiration hinted at by the child Thea's response to her first music teacher Wunsch's assertion that "there was only one to sing that good [. . .] 'Only one?' she asked breathlessly; her hands [. . .] were opening and shutting rapidly"—Thea must discover her inner power while developing an awareness of the wider natural and cultural worlds (*SL* 65). Cather suggests that an artist requires both intimate and expansive perspectives: she must know herself and be able to see beyond the individual personality. Enclosed, sheltering sites and vast vistas prove to be invaluable resources for the young girl. They will also resurface at key moments in Thea's adulthood.

Houses, or more accurately rooms, are the central symbols in several of Cather's novels. Architectural imagery, however, is not restricted to artificial constructs, but is extended to natural shelters. Cather employs shelters as both actual and metaphorical spaces; they are simultaneously physical barriers or shields against the elements and/or intruders, and nurturing sources of safety and protection. Settings cannot be ignored. As Sharon O'Brien observes, "in Cather's fiction, structure, space, and landscape are always significant. To understand how her characters shape and are shaped by the worlds they inhabit, her readers must always consider the house [. . .] the garden, the prairie, the rock, the mesa" (63). Certainly, there is a heightened awareness of structures, spaces, and landscapes in *The Song of the Lark*. Bedrooms, bathrooms, and gardens figure prominently in Thea's life. She moves through a series of naturalized domestic spaces and domesticated natural spaces. To varying degrees they temporarily nourish and protect Thea; the life of an artist is essentially nomadic. Thea does, however, recreate the emotional and psychological experiences associated with particular places when she feels vulnerable. Memories become coping mechanisms.

1. Moonstone as stepping stone: the importance of birthplace

As the first place she occupies, it is only logical that the Kronborg family home plays a crucial role in Thea's development. She is an

anomaly in the group—not entirely an outsider (at this point) but not in line with the values and social conventions of Moonstone—and yet, Thea’s musical talent is fostered in this childhood setting. The fragile roots of her identity as the opera singer Kronborg are planted in the harsh desert soil of Colorado. It seems to be an inauspicious beginning for an artist, but the daily struggles to carve out a space for her music steal Thea for subsequent battles. Determination is forged in the face of adversity; the hunger for greatness is fed by a response to mainstream mediocrity. The provincialism of Moonstone is a source of motivation for Thea. Its influence seems to lie in helping the young girl discover the kind of life she desires through contrast with a life she cannot abide.

A significant turning point in Thea’s turbulent childhood is the acquisition of her own room. More than simply privacy (although this is much needed), Thea discovers a space for intellectual exploration: “she had lived in constant turmoil; [. . .] The clamor about her drowned the voice within herself. In the end of the wing [. . .] She thought things out more clearly. Pleasant plans and ideas occurred to her [. . .] certain thoughts which were like companions, ideas which were like older and wiser friends” (*SL* 52-53). During the day, Thea is subject to the demands of social obligations; night time affords more freedom to pursue her own ideas and dreams. The room no one else in the family desires because of its inadequacies, is precisely what Thea requires. It is a physical, emotional, and intellectual retreat. The bedroom also permits her to lead a “double life”: “During the day, when the hours were full of tasks, she was one of the Kronborg children, but at night she was a different person” (*SL* 53). The creative impulse, stifled by the daily domestic routine, can only be indulged in private.

Retreating from the chaos of her large family to a relatively isolated space enables Thea to listen to her inner voice; it is a positive phase of her development. However, the retreat must be temporary. Permanent withdrawal from an outer life is not a possibility for Thea. In order to embrace her musical gift, Thea must first relinquish what has been a nurturing space, but is now on the verge of becoming a trap. The choice is really a non-choice. Even if the inevitable confrontation with her family did not occur—a confrontation that has been fuelled by a mutual inability to understand the other person’s anxieties and aspirations—Thea could not have reduced her world to a mere bedroom. Sanctuaries are, by their very nature, temporary

sources of protection. Thea's return to Moonstone, during a break in her Chicago studies, marks the end of her idealized bedroom. Reeling from a volatile argument with her sister, Thea again seeks out the solace of her bedroom: "This place had always been her refuge, but there was a hostility in the house now which this door could not shut out [. . .] Its services were over; its time was done [. . .] She was not ready to leave her little shell. She was being pulled out too soon" (*SL* 202). The recognition of her loss is a painful one for Thea. She instinctively knows that "She would never be able to think anywhere else as well as here" (*SL* 202). Virtually estranged from her family already, Thea laments the violent separation from the creative space rather than the natal place.

Escaping from the family home is necessary for Thea's artistic advancement: as a young child the act of escaping functions as a survival strategy. Home, for Thea, proves to be oppressive in its adherence to Moonstone's narrow code of propriety. She is more at ease in the outdoors and less "reputable" areas of Moonstone. Thea collects friends in the Mexican Town and the parts of Moonstone where the inhabitants "had no social pretensions to keep up" (*SL* 32). The less rigid lifestyles appeal to Thea. She liked to "explore these quiet, shady streets, where the people never tried to have lawns or to grow elms and pine trees, but let the native timber have its way and spread in luxuriance" (*SL* 32). The neighborhood's landscape signals a kind of acceptance—an appreciation of the natural beauty—rather than a determination to impose a strangely artificial foliage on the desert town. The dynamic mirrors the residents' responses to Thea: the people on Sylvester Street—site of the "best dwellings"—react to Thea with suspicion and hostility while the people on the outskirts of town—the part that "Sylvester Street scarcely knew [. . .] existed"—accept her without judgement (*SL* 31, 32). Thea's awareness that she is different isolates her; venturing outside the narrow social circle of her siblings and the restrictive landscapes of respectable Moonstone, Thea reduces that isolation.

Music also introduces Thea to a wider range of people and places. In order to reach her teacher, Thea walks "a very pleasant mile out of town toward the glittering sand hills" (*SL* 23). The journey to the Kohlers' house is almost as invigorating as the lessons with Wunsch. It anticipates the therapeutic journey to Panther Canyon an older, care-worn Thea will make. Venturing into the natural landscape reinvigorates Thea. The movement out into open space is both

physical and intellectual: Thea escapes the restrictive family home and prepares for a future she cannot yet articulate. Wunsch's assertion that "if some day you are going to sing, it is necessary to know well the German language" catches Thea off guard. "How did Wunsch know that, when the very roses on her wall-paper had never heard it?" wonders Thea (*SL* 68). The teacher raises the possibility that the student has not dared to express, even in her moments of solitude. The lessons are demanding, frustrating, and yet life-sustaining for Thea. They represent both a moment of escape—the release of her artistic spirit—and a vehicle for escape—the triumph of the artist Kronborg. These early lessons function as a kind of refuge for the would-be artist.

The Kohlers' house affords Thea another, more pleasant retreat: the garden. Mrs. Kohler's method of coping with the harsh landscape is to pretend it does not exist: "she had tried to reproduce a bit of her own village in the Rhine Valley. She hid herself behind the growth she had fostered [. . .] Outside, the sage-brush grew up to the very edge of the garden, and the sand was always drifting up to the tamarisks" (*SL* 24). She imposes the familiar landscape of her past on the unfamiliar terrain of Colorado. There is something unnatural about Mrs. Kohler's actions; she is engaged in an unending battle with the environment. It is precisely the kind of combative interaction with nature that concerns ecocritics. Mrs. Kohler's garden reflects the privileging of human interest over the ecosystem. However, Cather makes it clear that Mrs. Kohler's efforts are continually challenged by the prairie. Cather can be viewed as anticipating Buell's ecocritical criteria through her depiction of the Kohlers' garden. Its tenuous existence suggests that the "human interest", as Buell asserts is necessary in ecocritical literature, "is not understood to be the only legitimate interest" (8).

Mrs. Kohler expends a great deal of energy to maintain her garden. The strong implication is that nature will ultimately win this confrontation. The struggle is seemingly a futile one. And yet, it is not a meaningless struggle: Thea is clearly at ease in the space, Wunsch desires "to be buried in the garden, under [Mrs. Kohler's] linden trees", and Mrs. Kohler herself displays a competence in the garden she cannot sustain in "the blaze of the open plain [where] she was stupid and blind like an owl" (*SL* 24). There is an ambiguity about the Kohler garden: it is isolated from the Moonstone majority, but inviting to the privileged few. It is a space of denial, in that Mrs. Kohler

transforms her “world” because she is not comfortable in her environment, and acceptance with Thea and Wunsch—misfits in the eyes of Moonstone’s inhabitants—finding a sorely needed welcome. The Kohlers’ garden will ultimately sustain the adult Thea in a way the child cannot anticipate.

2. Chicago Bound: the confinement and liberation of the artist

The Kohler garden, like her bedroom, is a place Thea can only access temporarily. These spaces are too small to foster Thea’s artistic spirit; she must turn to more expansive terrains. Relocation to Chicago affords more possibilities, but the city itself is of little importance to Thea. A young country girl alone in the city has the potential for disaster, but Cather avoids this plot line. In Thea’s eyes, “Chicago was simply a wilderness through which one had to find one’s way”; her father’s fear that “big cities were places where people went to lose their identity and to be wicked” does not materialize (*SL* 165, 134). Thea’s initial response to her new surroundings is disinterest, not titillation. She does, however, make several crucial, cultural discoveries during this phase of her life.

I opened this article with part of Cather’s description of Thea’s experience of her first real concert. It marks a moment of awakening as Thea moves beyond an intellectual response to music (the material of her lessons), to an emotional and more psychological appreciation. Dvořák’s Symphony, “From the New World”, challenges Thea to dive beneath the surface: sound waves carry her into familiar and unfamiliar terrains and transport her in and out of time. At first, it appears to be an intellectual exercise—“her mind became clear; instant composure fell upon her, and with it came the power of concentration”—but Thea does something different than reason out the mechanics of the musical score (*SL* 169). She invests the story line the music inspires with personal references. The symphony is evocative, summoning visual images from both a personal and collective background. Thea emerges from the concert hall with a renewed sense of purpose. She vows that “that ecstasy was going to be hers” and determines to “live for it, work for it, die for it [. . .]” (*SL* 171). The assertion that the artistic struggle is personalized during Thea’s Chicago period may seem odd. After all, Thea begins her music lessons and first thinks of becoming an artist without a peer

while in Moonstone, but she does not (indeed cannot) claim that role for herself until the symphony stirs the smouldering embers of her artistic passion. In conjunction with her newfound resolution, Thea finally opens her eyes to the city and people around her. She identifies them all as her adversaries: “the world became one’s enemy [. . .] All these things and people were no longer remote and negligible; they had to be met [. . .] they were there to take something from her” (*SL* 171). The isolation Thea originally felt in Moonstone is intensified. Uncomprehending individuals are re-cast as threats to the artist; no longer merely ignorant, bystanders become a collective force obstructing the artistic process. Now, more than ever, Thea requires a buffer between herself and the world.

Lacking a home of her own, Thea is unable to recreate the refuge that was her bedroom in Moonstone; consequently, she must seek out new sanctuaries. Slow to explore her surroundings, when Thea does venture out, she stumbles upon an unlikely location: the Art Institute. Thea enters the building almost under duress but later “remonstrated with herself severely. She told herself that she was missing a great deal [. . .]” (*SL* 167). Reluctant to visit the Institute, Thea nonetheless discovers is an invaluable resource, one she will return to once a week. The public location opens a space of forgetfulness—“she could forget Mrs. Andersen’s tiresome overtures of friendship, the stout contralto in the choir whom she so unreasonably hated, and even, for a little while, the torment of her work”—and relaxation—“That building was a place in which she could relax and play, and she could hardly ever play now” (*SL* 167). It serves as a respite from daily pressures, an escape from obligations and an imaginative return to the emotional retreats of her past: “The Institute proved, indeed a place of retreat, as the sand hills or the Kohlers’ garden used to be” (*SL* 167). During her visits to the art gallery, Thea briefly recaptures the playful spirit of her childhood. Her narrow routine and concentrated efforts to master her work are in danger of debilitating Thea; she is in desperate need of other emotional outlets. Thea will have to journey to new physical territory in order to continue her artistic development. Chicago, and before it, Moonstone, inspire Thea, but the inspiration is limited; each location becomes a crippling force as Thea moves beyond its nurturing potential.

3. Panther Canyon: probing the past as a path to the future

Chicago introduces Thea to a nomadic life. She will move from boarding house to boarding house without locating a comfortable personal space. Clearly, the parade of rooms fails to provide Thea with one comparable to the “sunny cave” she crafted in her parents’ home (*SL* 189). Only in leaving Chicago and venturing to Arizona does Thea begin to regain her equilibrium. Exposure to the restorative effects of Panther Canyon triggers a remarkable change in Thea’s character;⁵ specifically, the “dead” city of the Cliff -Dwellers forces her to turn inwards in a way not possible since the loss of her childhood bedroom. However, Thea’s initial reaction to Arizona is a feeling of erasure. Driving through the “first great forest she had ever seen” enroute to the Ottenburg ranch, “the personality of which she was so tired seemed to let go of her”; for the physically exhausted and emotionally drained Thea, it is a welcome release (*SL* 247). The perception that “The old, fretted lines which marked one off, which defined her—made her Thea Kronborg, Bower’s accompanist, a soprano with a faulty middle voice—were all erased” is not alarming (*SL* 248). Battered and on the verge of defeat, Thea’s acceptance of this process borders on the fatalistic—it is a measure of the toll her Chicago studies have taken.

Daily trips to the canyon, however, fortify Thea. Body, mind, and soul respond to the unique setting. The first step in the healing process is to take no action. Hours lying in the sun, listening “to the strident whirl of the big locusts, and to the light, ironical laughter of the quaking aspens” lead to the recognition that “All her life she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been hurrying to catch up” (*SL* 251). Panther Canyon represents a release from “meaningless activity and undirected effort” (*SL* 251). In that environment, peace and tranquility, so scarce in her early life, engulf Thea. She selects a rock-room of her own and re-accesses the bedroom of her adolescence: “This was her old idea: a nest in a high cliff, full of sun” (*SL* 250). Whereas her old room provided only temporary respites from the turmoil of life, Thea’s new cave room empowers her to completely withdraw from the demands of civilization. Isolation becomes insulation. Panther Canyon is a sheltering, nurturing space for Thea; it serves to revitalize her much weakened spirit.

A significant difference between Thea's bedroom and her rock room is that the former is associated with an active mind while the latter operates on a intuitive rather than an intellectual level. In the Kronborg home, the solitude of Thea's bedroom allows her to think "things out more clearly" (SL 52). Initially, Panther Canyon encourages her to refrain from thinking. The healing process entails a new perspective: Thea

could lie for half a day undistracted, holding pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind—almost in her hands. They were scarcely clear enough to be called ideas. They had something to do with fragrance and color and sound, but almost nothing to do with words (SL 251).

Referring to a character in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995), Bethany Fitzpatrick identifies her as embodying "a way of knowledge that is felt and known in the body rather than arrived at through linear logic" (4). The statement is an apt description of Thea's experience. Thea opens herself to the natural world, and Cather implies that it, in turn, opens to her. Comprehension involves an intuitive reaction rather than a rational response. It is the willingness and opportunity to listen that makes the difference. Thea's disengagement from a life of activity enables her to engage with nature. "Landscape", Janice Monk theorizes, "is not a passive context—it communicates to us and provides stimuli that influence our behaviour" (23). Approaching the natural setting as a space to be enjoyed, rather than a commodity to be exploited, Thea is granted a rare experience.

In embracing the physical environment, the erasure of personality begun on the journey to the ranch reaches its climax; Thea seems to merge with her new setting: "her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, like the bright lizards that darted about [. . .] or she could become a continuous repetition of sounds, like the cicadas" (SL 251). Like the rocks absorbing the sun's heat, Thea soaks in the sounds and sights of Panther Canyon; it is an instinctive response. While not of the mind per se, it is by no means a mindless activity; it seems to be a process of sharpening Thea's perception.

Panther Canyon is depicted as a "process rather than as a constant"—one of Buell's ecocritical criteria—it is not a static entity, but a living presence (8). Thea's ability to immerse herself in her

surroundings enhances her sense of identity. “Relinquishment”, Buell asserts in his discussion of Henry Thoreau, Mary Austin, and Aldo Leopold, does not “mean eradication of the ego” (151). “The aesthetics of relinquishment”, he continues, “implied [. . .] suspension of the ego to the point of feeling the environment to be at least as worthy of attention as oneself and of experiencing oneself as situated among many interacting processes” (178). The process is not erasure, but expansion: Thea gains greater self-awareness because of her willingness to internalize the multiple influences operating in Arizona. Matthew Wynn Sivils argues that Thea is actually emptying herself during her Arizona interlude: “her experience at Panther Canyon is not one of filling the self but emptying it, of cleansing her identity and leaving room” (14). She does relinquish much of her identity during this phase, but for Thea, it is a temporary “emptying”. The return to her studies and career involves a reconfiguring of identity; Thea re-examines past experiences in light of her discoveries in the natural setting. Sivils’ definition of Thea as an “ecomorphic hybrid” has a promising premise—“an ecomorphic hybrid is a character whose identity figuratively combines with that of the natural world”—but his contention that the result is a “suprahuman character who displays abnormal human abilities or characteristics” tests credulity (15). Thea is an exceptional artist, but Cather maintains her humanity; for example, Thea confesses to nerves when performing, cares for her Aunt Tillie and brother Thor, and marries Fred.

Thea’s physical response to the natural world is intensified in Arizona, but the ability is first experienced in Moonstone. She is not particularly observant, but

the things which were for her, she saw; she experienced them physically and remembered them as if they had once been a part of herself [. . .] when she thought of the moon-flowers that grew over Mrs. Tellamantez’s door, it was as if she had been that vine and had opened up in white flowers every night [. . .] These recollections were a part of her mind and personality (*SL* 252).

Thea’s sympathy with nature verges on empathy. She has the sensation of dissolving into the natural beauty that she witnesses—“as if she had been that vine”—but closer reading suggests the opposite process: the natural beauty dissolves into her—“these recollections were a part of her mind and personality”. It is a subtle, but telling difference. Early memories, created in childhood, are internalized; Thea’s education ranges beyond the school room, family home, and

her piano lessons. Nature's lessons resonate with Thea, and she carries them with her on her artistic journey. This ability to sympathize with natural forces will play a crucial role in Thea's development as a musician, but the merging she will experience in Panther Canyon will enable her to become a true artist.

While Thea deliberately breaks from her musical lessons, her time in the Cliff City is not entirely music free. Thea puts the artistic drive on hold, but she does not abandon her dream. In fact, Thea is able to approach music from a new angle: "a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up [. . .] It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering. Music had never come to her in that sensuous form before. It had always been a thing to be struggled with, had always brought anxiety [. . .] never content and indolence" (*SL* 251). Paradoxically, Thea gains a greater understanding of her work by stepping back from the problem and opting not to approach music as something to be mastered. It is the antipathy of her previous efforts to dominate "difficult things [which] are enemies" (*SL* 64). The adversarial spirit does not enter the equation at this point. The image of a spring welling up suggests a natural element moving at its own pace.⁶ It is also apt in that it is an association that others have made between Thea and her talent. Listening to Thea sing, Wunsch identifies a "nature voice [. . .] breathed from the creature and apart from language, like the sound of the wind in the trees, or the murmur of water" (*SL* 69-70). Thea's talent is innate; it rises from within and seems to have an existence or life force of its own. Nor is Wunsch—a trained musician—the only one to make the connection; the Kohlers wake to a "soprano voice, like a fountain jet" playing "in and about and around [. . .] like a goldfish darting among creek minnows [. . .]" (*SL* 199). Thea's impromptu concert evokes natural imagery in her auditors. The experiences of Panther Canyon permit Thea to recognize the true nature of her musical abilities. She listens to the language of the setting and finally comprehend the "river of sound", as Bowers terms it, that she carries within her (*SL* 227).

The imaginative connection with the landscape that evolves during Thea's quasi-sensual, quasi-mystical experiences in Panther Canyon is, of course, not a literal erasure of personality, but in subduing the combative, yearning personality Thea is able to intuitively identify with the previous inhabitants of the Cliff City. In the past, the natural environment of Moonstone allowed Thea to

escape the demands of family life and the network of social obligations connected with town life. Panther Canyon provides Thea with an uninterrupted evasion of, but it is not a case of permanent escape from, social obligations. Indeed, she discovers new “connections” during her visits to the ruins; Thea opens herself to “a voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally” (*SL* 253). In climbing the water trail she “began to have intuitions about the women who had worn down the path” (*SL* 253). Thea recreates their movements “with a feeling in her feet and knees and loins which she had never known before—which must have come up to her out of the accustomed dust of that rocky trail” (*SL* 253). It is as if the very land speaks to her through her own body—the intuitions take on a physical form. Echoes of the past reverberate in the rocky ruins.

Thea’s heightened awareness in Panther Canyon leads to an epiphanic moment. Her bath takes on a “ceremonial gravity” and, in the “ritualistic” atmosphere of the canyon, Thea has a flash of inspiration.⁷ She comes to the realization that the “stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself [. . .]” (*SL* 254). The physical reality of the location, with its fusion of natural elements (the water) and artistic evidence (the pottery) grants Thea an insight into art in general—“The Indian women held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion”—and her own art—“in singing, one made a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals” (*SL* 255). Thea links her own struggles and triumphs with that of all artists. The common goal of capturing, albeit briefly, that “elusive element”—life—creates a sense of continuity, of community. In short, Panther Canyon empowers Thea to liberate herself from the narrow-minded assumptions of Moonstone which could not comprehend the meaning of talent and artistry. More than mere refuge, the elevated architecture of the Cliff City functions as a source of renewal and inspiration for the artist Thea is on the verge of becoming.

4. Engaging her world: the triumphs and tribulations of Kronborg

Spiritually fortified by her experiences in Arizona, Thea returns to human civilization; her withdrawal from society has been a temporary retreat as opposed to a permanent rejection.⁸ While it has been a largely solitary sojourn, Thea is never entirely alone: each night she returns to the ranch and the Biltmers, and Fred Ottenburg eventually joins in the “holiday”. More significantly, Thea feels the presence of the kindred spirits of the original inhabitants of the ruins and memories surface from her personal past. Thoughts of Mrs. Tellamantez, Mrs. Kohler, and Ray Kennedy come to Thea; the two women are significant in terms of the associations with their gardens (*SL* 252), while Ray introduces the notion of obligation—obligation to those who “dreamed there long ago” (*SL* 252). Although Thea thinks of it as an individual struggle, the text makes it clear that an artist does not exist in a vacuum. Kronborg’s triumphs on the stage are rooted in her earlier experiences and relationships.

Moonstone appears to be a place Thea must escape if she is ever to become an artist, and yet, it is in this small Colorado town that the foundations for greatness are laid. On a practical level, it is here that Thea encounters a music teacher with vision. Wunsch challenges her to think beyond her limited resources: “It is always possible to learn when one likes” (*SL* 68). He raises the prospect of Thea pursuing her dreams beyond the confines of her home town. Others will join Thea in her struggle to realize her goal; they are, as Ray Kennedy asserts, the “halfway people in this world who help the winners win, and the failers fail” (*SL* 108). Fred Ottenburg will claim, “It takes a great many people to make one—*Brünnhilde*” (*SL* 386). While much of Moonstone’s populace is either indifferent or openly hostile to Thea’s ambitions, she does encounter a number of individuals eager to “back” a winner. Out of these relationships Thea will discover the enduring emotional anchors she carries with her on her journey.

As she resumes the struggles of an artistic life, Thea draws solace not only from her experiences in the cave city of Arizona, but also from Moonstone. Retreats take both tangible and intangible forms in *The Song of the Lark*. Earlier I mentioned Thea’s discovery of the Art Institute as “a place of retreat, as the sand hills or the Kohlers’ garden used to be” (*SL* 167). It provides a much needed physical escape from the confines of her Chicago boarding-house. Equally

important, the space permits an imaginative escape from her soul-grinding drudgery.

Increasingly, Thea will seek out retreats as coping mechanisms; they are grounded in specific places but take her out of her immediate situation into an imaginative space. Thea internalizes, and periodically recreates, the sheltering spaces of her youth in times of turmoil in her adult life. For example, Thea regards the bathroom in her New York apartment “as a refuge”: when she turned the key behind her, she left care and vexation on the other side of the door” (*SL* 355). It is evocative of her “bath at the bottom of the canyon, in the sunny pool behind the screen of cottonwoods” with its “ceremonial gravity” (*SL* 254). The space takes on a heightened significance in Thea’s life. Water relaxes the singer, but, as a life force and symbol of continuity, it also connects Thea with the original inhabitants of Panther Canyon. More than simply lengthening her past, the Cliff -Dwellers provide Thea with an ancestry of artisans;⁹ Panther Canyon operates on an imaginative anchor for Thea.

The tactic of returning to positive places from her past is a conscious one on Thea’s part. She attempts to articulate the psychological value to Dr. Archie: “sometimes I’ve come home as I did the other night [. . .] so full of bitterness that it was as if my mind were full of daggers. And I’ve gone to sleep and wakened up in the Kohlers’ garden [. . .] so happy! And that saves me [. . .] They save me: the old things, things like the Kohlers’ garden” (*SL* 380-381). Thus, selective memory serves a therapeutic purpose for Thea. She turns to the past to endure the present and fortify herself for the future.

In this moment, Thea identifies Moonstone as a source of comfort that helps to sustain her talent. Nonetheless, conversely, during a subsequent conversation with Fred Ottenburg, Arizona is given credit for the emergence of that talent. Fred observes that she is “as much at home on the stage as you were down in Panther Canyon—as if you’d just been let out of a cage” (*SL* 383). In response to his query—“didn’t you get some of your ideas down there?”—Thea agrees: “oh yes! For heroic parts, at least. Out of the rocks, out of the dead people” (*SL* 383). The enduring spirit of those dead people speaks to Thea while in Panther Canyon, and their message continues to resonate for her years later. Fred claims that it was Thea’s “creative hour” and anywhere would have sufficed.¹⁰ Thea’s interpretation is quite different: “They taught me the inevitable hardness of human life”, she notes, and “no artist gets far who doesn’t know that” (*SL* 384). She insists “you can’t

know it with your mind. You have to realize it in your body [. . .]" (SL 384). The setting she immersed herself in was ideal: solitude, natural beauty, and the signs of an enduring artistic impulse combine to heal and teach the struggling young singer.

Personal associations invest the various landscapes of Thea's life with a value beyond the merely physical. Those same personal associations also have the potential to devalue specific settings. At one point Thea "tried to think about her little rock house and the Arizona sun and the blue sky. But that led to memories which were still too disturbing" (SL 391). The positive powers of her "rock room" are subverted by her relationship with Fred. In its stead, an old device is employed: Thea returns to her attic room of her childhood. She imagines her old bedtime routine as she moves through the house. At last, "everybody was warm and well downstairs. The sprawling old house had gathered them all in, like a hen, and had settled down over its brood. They were all warm in her father's house [. . .] She slept ten hours without turning over. From sleep like that, one awakes in shining armor" (SL 391).¹¹ The cocoon-like space of her bedroom, even in the form of a memory, allows Thea to retreat from the pressures of performing. She emerges prepared for another battle.

While Moonstone and Panther Canyon seem to be in conflict in Thea's mind, the novel reveals that the relationship is much more complex. Still reeling from the "hostility of comfortable, self-satisfied people toward any serious effort" evidenced in her last summer home in Moonstone, Thea resolves to stop clinging to "whatever was left of Moonstone in her mind" (SL 258). It is not a resolution that she can sustain. Once she must face Fred's betrayal, Thea's Moonstone roots help to ground her. In response to Fred's taunt that her language and point of view are "pure Moonstone", Thea insists, "I've never said I wasn't Moonstone, have I?" She adds, "I can't see anything funny about Moonstone [. . .]" (SL 299). Thea's value system is challenged by her feelings for Fred, but she does not waiver in her conviction of what is right or wrong.

The Moonstone influence is not limited to a moral code for Thea. Her assertion to Dr. Archie that the "old things" save her represents an insight on Thea's part: the seemingly conflicting spaces of Moonstone and Panther Canyon are in fact complementary. Thea claims the past is "in everything I do" (SL 381). Like any individual, she is the product of her various experiences, but for an artist those experiences are somehow intensified. Thea attempts to articulate it for Dr. Archie;

from the past she recalls “the light, the color, the feeling. Most of all the feeling. It comes in when I’m working on a part, like the smell of a garden coming in at the window. I try all the new things, and then go back to the old” (*SL* 381). It is a process similar to the one she experiences in Arizona. The absorption of sensations and impressions in childhood serve the artist well in adulthood.

Drawing on Wagner’s theory that “art is only a way of remembering youth”, Thea surmises that a “child’s attitude toward everything is an artist’s attitude. I am more or less of an artist now, but then I was nothing else” (*SL* 381). The intensity of a child’s reaction to life is the very intensity an artist requires. The “essentials, the foundation of all” Thea does were established during her childhood in Moonstone (*SL* 381). As tempting as it may be to discount the role of the small town, with its enthusiasm for mediocrity¹² (as Thea interprets the success of Lily Fisher), Moonstone does play a significant part in Thea’s growth and cannot be dismissed.

Key secondary characters in Moonstone have recurring roles in Thea’s life. Dr. Archie is a constant support (emotionally and financially), but spaces associated with the Kohlers, her parents, and Ray Kennedy are also constants for Thea. The Kohlers’ garden and the sunny bedroom in her parents’ house stand out as emotional anchors, resurfacing at key moments. The legacy of Ray Kennedy takes several forms. On a practical level, the money he leaves Thea funds her relocation to Chicago, opening more opportunities to pursue her dream. Ray also paves the way for Thea’s emotional response to Panther Canyon. Technically, Fred sends Thea to Arizona, but Ray has already introduced her to the southwestern desert. Since Thea listens intently to Ray’s stories of his adventures, one wonders if they make Thea more receptive to Panther Canyon’s emotional lessons? It is difficult to determine, but Ray does surface during her visit. Thea recalls Ray’s “moralizing about the cliff cities. He used to say that he never felt the hardness of the human struggle or the sadness of history as he felt it among those ruins” (*SL* 253). Thea echoes that sentiment when she explains the lessons she learns in Panther Canyon to Fred (*SL* 384). Ray proves to be a kind of guide for Thea; his tales are linked to the American landscape and to the people who once inhabited it.

While Ray is rather dismissive of the Cliff-Dwellers because of their “failure” to master metals, he does appreciate their artistic accomplishments. Thea will share that appreciation. Ray will also

introduce a shared notion of obligation. He confides, “There’s something mighty elevating about those old habitations. You feel like it’s up to you to do your best, on account of those fellows having it so hard. You feel like you owed them something” (SL 104). The common struggle to survive, to thrive, connects the living and the dead. Thea internalizes a similar message. “Ray Kennedy was right”, she acknowledges. What she “owes” the dreamers of the past is “to do one’s best, and help fulfill some desire of the dust that slept there” (SL 256). While her representation of the potsherds being “like fetters that bound one to a long chain of human endeavour” suggests imprisonment or a punishment, Thea ultimately views her epiphany as a gift (SL 257). Neither Ray nor Thea can quite articulate it, but they have a sense of connection bordering on the sacred.

Thea and Ray’s appreciation of the humanized landscapes is a positive attribute, but their interactions with the landscape raise some troubling questions. Ray’s observations to Thea follow a confession that he was “with some fellows who were cracking burial mounds” (SL 103). He has enough grace to feel “a little ashamed of it,” but his remorse is rather limited (SL 103). Ray distances himself from the act, but he proposes a trip to the southwest: “I’ll go into the burial mounds and get you more keepsakes than any girl ever had before” (SL 104). He is even willing to pillage for the right person! Thea’s “eyes kindled when he talked about it,” but she will approach the ruins with a different sentiment (SL 104). Henry Biltmer teaches “Thea how to find things among the ruins,” and he has “a whole chestful of Cliff-Dweller relics which he meant to take back to Germany” (SL 254). In stark contrast, Thea is reluctant to move the potsherds, preferring to “leave them in the dwellings where she found them” (SL 256). Guilt accompanies the action of relocating the pieces of pottery. Indeed, it is unclear whether or not Thea actually removes any artifacts.¹³ The only reference to her taking “a few bits back to her own lodge and [hiding] them under the blankets” (SL 256). It is a curious, but ambiguous act. Thea appears to honour the hospitality of the canyon and behaves as a responsible “guest”. In this way, *The Song of the Lark* fulfills Buell’s requirement that “human accountability to the environment” is part of an ecocritical novel’s “ethical orientation” (8).

The moral culpability of Ray, and to a lesser extent, Thea, is touched upon, but not resolved in the novel. Earlier in the story, Thea’s return journey to Moonstone from Chicago grants her an insight into Ray’s mindset. She has the “sense of going back to a

friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her [. . .]” (*SL* 187). Thea thinks of Ray: “He, too had that feeling of empire, as if all the southwest really belonged to him because he had knocked about over it so much, and knew it [. . .]” (*SL* 187).

Empire, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, incorporates “supreme and extensive (political) domination” and “absolute control”. However, Thea’s use of the term does not acknowledge any such power dynamic. Indeed, she interprets Colorado as “a naïve, generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, childlike power to love [. . .]” (*SL* 187). Rather than domination, the interaction is based upon an act of generosity, a sympathetic response on the part of the viewer and the viewed. Anticipating ecocritical concerns, Cather seems to acknowledge that the line between appreciation and appropriation is blurred. “Ecocritics”, Glynis Carr notes, “pose questions centering on language and the representation of ideas about human relationships to nature; their main purposes are to raise consciousness about ecological attitudes and practices that are destructive and to illuminate creative alternatives” (18).

Thea is attuned to nature but is it a matter of identification or exploitation?¹⁴ Panther Canyon unfolds its secrets to Thea because she approaches it with respect and a willingness to listen. *The Song of the Lark* tips the scale in favor of identification with the land—achieving a sense of harmony rather than mastery.¹⁵ Ownership of the land is downplayed while personal responsibility is highlighted. Fred Ottenburg’s family owns the canyon (it is part of a “big worthless ranch”) but Thea is the one who truly possesses it—because she allows it to possess her (*SL* 242).

The gift Thea carries with her from Panther Canyon is less tangible than a relic. One of the questions that emerges in Thea’s struggle is whether isolation or insulation protects an artist. Thea instinctively seeks out solitary spaces to re-energize herself—bedrooms, bathrooms, and the garden serve as buffers between the individual and the world. Each is a temporary retreat; withdrawal is a strategic move, not a signal of defeat for Thea. Security, contentment, and a sense of collective humanity are the predominant features of Thea’s imaginative spaces. The sheltering places of her youth enable her to develop as an individual and as an artist. This development does not occur in isolation; Thea walks a fine line between being a part of, and apart from, humanity.¹⁶ The Cliff-Dwellers not only lengthen her past, they remind Thea of “older and higher obligations”: the

immeasurable yearnings consecrated in the landscapes of her life (*SL* 258).

Notes

¹ All quotations are from Sherrill Harbinson's edition of *The Song of the Lark*.

² Quoted in Glotfelty's "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis" (xix).

³ For an informative history of ecocriticism see *The Ecocriticism Reader*.

⁴ Linda Martin Alcoff traces "the major factor in [the] masculinist formulation" of the nature/culture divide back to the "mind-body dualism" proposed by such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Bacon, Descartes, Rousseau, Hume and Kant (14-15).

⁵ It is for this reason, and the striking contrast with Colorado, that the "Ancient People" section garners so much critical attention (despite its "slight" size: 39 pages out of 397, not including the "Epilogue").

⁶ Linda Hogan creates a similar situation for the character Bush in *Solar Storms* (1995). She achieves a new level of self-awareness by immersing herself in nature: "the sound of water lashing down filled me with such a longing, an ache in my chest I could not yet fathom, but now know as the animal heart yearning its way into being, pulled out of a song" (78). Hogan's ecocritical novel has several parallels with Cather's novel, but the most striking is this emphasis on the healing powers of nature.

⁷ Anne Kaufman reads another level of significance in the bathing scene—one focused on the body. She suggests "that the positioning of the subject in the water, occupied in a literal act of self-cleansing, to be sure, but an act of sensual pleasure as well, makes this a moment resonant with more than grand statements about Art" (28). Given Thea's own emphasis on her bodily response to the setting, Kaufman's position is a reasonable one.

⁸ Thea's interaction with the landscape is that of a privileged tourist. In fact, Caroline M. Woidat interprets Cather as "experiencing and writing about the Southwest in ways typical of tourists of her day" (2). "Indian-detours", Woidat explains, "took tourists on a side trip away from civilization as they knew it: they offered a chance to gaze upon the Indian 'other' and temporarily enter into cowboy and Indian life through an elaborate masquerade" (2). Thea encounters artifacts and dwellings rather than a living people, but hers is a temporary retreat from mainstream civilization. Masquerade, however, strikes me as an inaccurate term; Thea internalizes lessons from both the land and its previous inhabitants. She does not simply don a mask; she alters her personality.

⁹ "Ancestry" is a provocative choice of term; it raises the issue of cultural appropriation. The imaginative link between the deceased artists and Thea—albeit tenuous and fragile—I believe justifies a qualified claim to kinship.

¹⁰ Patrick J. Sullivan offers a similar view arguing that "the place furnishes Thea's imagination with a new burst of freedom, energy, and conviction; but the situation

primarily concerns her own growth into the artist she is to become rather than her full response to the realities of the land itself" (29). While the description of the landscape is focused on Thea's perspective—that of an artist—the humanized landscape, with its link to a particular period of human development, can only be accessed through the "realities of the land itself".

¹¹ Thea's categorization of it as her father's house is rather disconcerting. It is very apparent that her mother is the domestic force in the family. The "hen" settling down may be an oblique reference to the mother who died while Thea pursued a singing engagement.

¹² Deborah Williams encapsulates the negative view of Moonstone when she asserts "art and the lessons [Thea] learns about art in Panther Canyon enable her to flee the stifling world of Moonstone and its unreflective respectability" (161). *The Song of the Lark* does seem to be part of what Carl Van Dornen deemed the "revolt from the village". Anthony Channell Hilfer describes it as a movement away from an idealized vision of the small town and a "more realistic interpretation of the town emphasizing its moral repressiveness and stultifying conformity" (3). Cather does insist on recognition of the negative aspects of Moonstone but she also draws attention to its positive influence on Thea.

¹³ Cather's own pilfering is well documented—Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant reports that Cather guiltily confessed to taking some potsherds from Walnut Canyon (133).

¹⁴ Audrey Goodman contends that Thea's experience "shows dramatically how an outsider's experience of place and its native representation can come together, even as it insists that Anglo and native visions are not the same" (59). Jonathan Goldberg offers a more guarded interpretation, suggesting that "if the mesa and the lost civilization resonate so deeply [. . .] they do in part because of a classical echo (Anasazi pots are said to be identical to Greek ones)" (138).

¹⁵ Linking Willa Cather and Cormac McCarthy in the same sentence may seem odd, but *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *Blood Meridian* (1985) share this tactic of conceptualizing the connection between the human and natural worlds as symbiotic. McCarthy's description of all "phenomena [as being] bequeathed with a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence" and "a man and a rock becom[ing] endowed with unguessed kinships" has striking similarities to Cather's text (247).

¹⁶ The view of Thea as the solitary artist struggling alone against the world is an inaccurate and misleading one. For example, Christopher Nealon adopts this stance, asserting: "on her way to the top, Thea must forsake family, teachers, friends, and even, at last, her lover" (11). While she is selective in her family connections (missing her mother's final days, but helping Thor and her aunt Tillie), Thea's teachers recognize the need for Thea to move on, and she retains the friendship of Dr. Archie throughout the novel. As for the abandoned lover (Nealon makes a least three references to the impossibility of Thea marrying), Fred becomes her husband in the "Epilogue".

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Place, Inspiration, and the Railroad in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*

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In Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, Moonstone's local physician Dr. Archie, feeling discontent, has a late-night conversation with Thea Kronborg in which he centralizes the importance of the railroad to the very existence of the isolated town. The town is there, he notes somewhat bitterly, merely because it is the "end of a run" and a place for the train to refuel. He remarks to Thea,

In my own town in Michigan, now, there were people who liked me on my father's account, who had even known my grandfather. That meant something. But here it's all like the sand: blows north one day and south the next. We're all a lot of gamblers without much nerve, playing for small stakes. The railroad is the one real fact in this country. That has to be; the world has to be got back and forth. But the rest of us are here just because it's the end of a run and the engine has to have a drink. Some day I'll get up and find my hair turning grey, and I'll have nothing to show for it. (SL 74)

Moonstone, as he describes it, ironically fuels technological "progress" for society at large at the same time it oppresses an individual's growth. The foundationless, changeable conception of Moonstone that Archie has stands in sharp contrast with his memory of Michigan, the place where he feels he has a history. This contrast suggests that he feels a true connectedness to the place he was born and feels dissatisfied in a place he perceives as transitory. Despite the importance he gives to place-based ties, however, his speech reveals that he accepts the railroad as a given fact—the railroad which, as Leo Marx describes it, challenges the stability of place by dissolving regional barriers and enabling mobility (212-216). This freedom of

movement, as Barbara Young Welke more recently points out, was instrumental in allowing the development of individual liberty (x).

While Dr. Archie's perspective does not necessarily represent the novel in its entirety, Cather's *The Song of the Lark* is at times ambiguous on the conceptual position of the railroad relative to the places it connects and the space it traverses. While Thea's childlike response to Dr. Archie's above speech is merely to say that she won't let him get grey, her connections with place—and Moonstone, her birthplace—grow more complex as she grows older, particularly as the railroad claims a more central role in her life. Her travels away from Moonstone, first to Chicago and then to Panther Canyon and New York, alter her perspective on the western landscape, her family, and herself as artist. While Thea's ties to Moonstone during her formative years ultimately do shape both her artistic genius and the options available to her as a growing artist, the presence of the railroad in the novel shifts how we think about place-based ties; the mobility it provides destabilizes our conception of "place" as a static, fixed location. In this essay, I intend to explore the ways in which the train becomes a mobile "place" in and of itself in the novel at the same time it makes it possible for characters to visit, experience, and alter the places the railroad connects. Ultimately for Thea, the hyper-compact and mobile train space which plays such a central role in her development leads her to a more generic view of the landscape by the novel's end.

The railroad's role in *The Song of the Lark* thus forces us to rethink spirit of place, or *genius loci*, as it relates to Thea's growth as a musician. Perhaps more importantly, though, it also suggests the need for a shift in Cather criticism in general as many critics continue to affiliate Cather with a specific place or mode of regionalism. In his article "Willa Cather: 'The West Authentic,' the West Divided," for instance, William Handley focuses primarily on the specificity of the places Cather chooses to include in her novels and contrasts her descriptions of the west with those of such writers as Roosevelt and Wister. Similarly, Christopher Schedler investigates the specific places and cultures Cather represents in three of her novels by drawing upon ethnography and anthropology. Considering the train as a mobile place in *The Song of the Lark*, however, complicates these geographically-centered interpretations. In her recent book *Translating Southern Landscapes: The Making of an Anglo Literary Region*, Audrey Goodman argues the need for a similar shift in Cather

criticism, contending that, while debate about Cather's work is often centered on its association with specific places, historical periods, or sexual content, Cather herself was eager to disassociate her work from its regional specificity (Goodman 138). Ultimately, Goodman concludes that "[w]hile Cather's fiction explores the sources of local knowledge, it also seeks to transcend the particularities of place" (164). Goodman, however, bases her argument primarily on the ways in which the multiplicity of consciousness challenges our ability—and the characters' abilities—to formulate and conceptualize a stable notion of place. The presence of the railroad as mobile "place" in *The Song of the Lark* suggests yet another way in which Cather's fiction challenges the constriction of regionalism. This is not to say, however, that Cather turns completely away from the importance of geographic location; after all, in order to understand Cather's portrayal of the railroad we must first turn to the her description of Moonstone.

I. The Town of Moonstone: The Importance of Specific Geographic Location

While Dr. Archie claims that the town of Moonstone lacks the kind of history that would give it a reason for existence beyond being merely a railroad stop, the descriptions of Moonstone in the novel tend to heighten rather than minimize the importance of the town—at least relative to the lives of the characters. In some cases, the very structure of individual chapters positions Moonstone and the surrounding landscape as the context within which to interpret the characters' lives and the chapters' events. In the section "Friends of Childhood," for instance, Chapter 5 begins with a description of the town's geography and layout that points out streets and the various areas of town before returning to the events at hand—namely, Thea's visit to Mrs. Archie. Chapter 6 of the same section begins similarly, describing Moonstone as it would appear from the sky, a "Noah's Ark town set out in the sand and lightly shaded by grey-green tamarisks and cottonwoods" (36), before proceeding to describe an encounter between Dr. Archie and Thea. As in these two passages, Cather's broader geographic descriptions often link details of the settlement—the houses, the streets, the gardens—with descriptions of the local soil, trees, and land, thus pointing out the ways in which the people of Moonstone live within the wider southwest environment.

Further, the very social fabric of the town is influenced by the physical geography of the land. The narrator points out that the social classifications of Moonstone “conformed to certain topographical boundaries, and every child understood them perfectly” (31). Just as the southwestern setting is the larger context within which Moonstone exists, Moonstone and its environment frame the lives of the characters. Mary Lawlor contends that “Cather’s imaginative geographies are virtually characters themselves—hostile, challenging, seductive, even openly affectionate beings who recognize in some fashion the presence of their witnesses” (166). Arguably, Moonstone in *The Song of the Lark* has at least some agency over the lives of the characters who live there, particularly given the way in which Cather often subordinates the action of the plot to a wider almost omniscient look at the environment where the events take place. The frustration Dr. Archie expresses with the way in which the town limits his growth also grants the environment active agency.¹

While life in Moonstone is shaped by regional geography, however, it is also shaped by the presence of the railroad as Archie suggests. Once Thea is in Chicago, she explains to her music teacher Professor Harsanyi “how the people in little desert towns live by the railway and order their lives by the coming and going of the trains” (157). Thea grows up with friends among the railroad workers, including Ray Kennedy, who figures centrally in the early parts of the novel. Additionally, the children of many of the local families in Moonstone work for the railroad, among them the Kohlers’ children and the six sons of the woman in church. This mother’s prayers “made one think of the deep black canyons, the slender trestles, the pounding trains,” a descriptive effect intensified by the fact that she calls the trains “engines that race with death” (113). The old woman, whose eyes Thea notes “seemed full of wisdom,” leaves an impression on Thea, and the image of the “spectral, fated trains that ‘raced with death’” haunt Thea’s dreams as an adult (318). Through the old woman’s “wisdom” and Thea’s dreams, Cather associates the train with fate, which seems to suggest that while the town of Moonstone may have an influence on the people who live there, the railroad plays an essential part in this determinism as well. Thea in particular has a kind of intimacy with the railroad through her childhood in a railroad town, and her dreams of the “shrieking of trains, whistling in and out of Moonstone” as an adult suggest that the railroad defines the town and shapes the lives of even those who move away.

Moonstone and those who live there, then, are shaped by the town's geographic location—both relative to the southwestern landscape and the town's proximity to the railroad itself. However, while the novel points out the specific features Moonstone has due to its location, the way in which the railroad is described in the novel suggests that “place” can be defined without a reliance on fixed physical location. The train in *The Song of the Lark* becomes a symbolic sort of “place” through its association with Ray Kennedy at the same time it takes on the influential, stable qualities of a home or interior space itself. Further, the presence of the railroad shapes not only Moonstone but Thea's shifting perceptions and connections with the town and the landscape in general as she travels via train. After Thea leaves Moonstone, she begins to share Dr. Archie's view that Moonstone limits those who live there as she comes to realize the limits of the musical training she was able to receive as a child (149-151). While the novel thus highlights the importance of place to intellectual development, it also points out that the place of inspiration can be mobile, such as Ray Kennedy's train car. Just as Kennedy acquires a kind of “displacement” through his travels, Thea too begins to mirror the very railroad system via which she travels, becoming a displaced link between geographic locations.

II. Redefining “Place” Through the Train's Mobility

In the novel, Ray Kennedy is closely aligned with the railroad. Not only is he literally associated with the railroad as a conductor on a freight train, but his quiet presence in the novel is the driving force behind Thea's ability to leave Moonstone to advance her artistic training, just as the railroad itself is. When the novel first introduces Ray, the narrator describes Thea's perception of him:

Thea liked him [Ray] for reasons that had to do with the adventurous life he had led in Mexico and the Southwest, rather than for anything very personal. She liked him, too, because he was the only one of her friends who ever took her to the sand hills. The sand hills were a constant tantalization; she loved them better than anything near Moonstone, and yet she could so seldom get to them... The real hills—the Turquoise Hills, the Mexicans called them—were ten good miles away, and

one reached them by a heavy, sandy road. Dr. Archie sometimes took Thea on his long drives, but as nobody lived in the sand hills, he never had calls to make in that direction. Ray Kennedy was her only hope of getting there. (SL 43)

While this passage reveals Thea's continuing connection with and love of the natural world, it also points out the way in which Ray not only represents adventure but also acts as a kind of link for Thea between her home and inaccessible parts of the area she wants to explore in her childhood. He offers the occasion for day trips while she is a child and later on provides the financial freedom to travel. After his death, the money he leaves to Thea becomes the practical link for her between home and Chicago, and the railroad he made his living working for becomes the physical means that transports her from town to city. Ray—and by extension, the railroad—lies at the very heart of Thea's ability to gain artistic training in the city, and thus is foundational to the person she becomes by the novel's end. Perhaps most importantly, however, her trip to Chicago alters her perspective on life in Moonstone dramatically, and it is Ray and the railroad that make this trip possible.

As Leo Marx notes in *The Machine in the Garden*, the railroad has the promise to unify the nation while creating social equality (210). *The Song of the Lark*, however, illustrates the way in which the railroad's presence is more complex than merely being the vehicle to unification. While the presence of the train and Moonstone's easy access to it allows Thea to make trips to and from Chicago thus allowing her to transcend the regional barriers created by geographic distance, the experience of the trip itself ironically causes her to view Moonstone in a more negative light. Thus, while the trip *appears* to allow her to break regional barriers, in a way it also causes the formation of more barriers as she gains the knowledge and objective distance that leads her to pass judgment on her own hometown.² Her position shifts from within the regional boundaries of Moonstone to outside them, eventually resulting in a perspective that might be described as looking in with an outsider's eyes.

The shift in Thea's perspective is most easily observed by examining her thoughts on the train ride home in contrast with her thoughts shortly after her arrival back in Moonstone. On the train ride

home, Thea feels as if she is returning to “her” land. The narrator tells us,

This earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range. Wire fences might mark the end of a man’s pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains or forests can...Thea was glad that this was her country, even if one did not learn to speak elegantly there. She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her; a naïve, generous country that gave one its joyous force. (*SL* 186)

Initially, then, it seems that upon her return from Chicago Thea appreciates the unique qualities of the land she identifies as “hers;” further, she connects the limits of the mind with geographic limits and suggests that where geographic limits don’t exist, neither do restrictions upon one’s thoughts. Notably, she makes this observation from the train car; she observes the land as she passes through it, gaining a “feeling of empire” that she identifies with her memory of Ray (187). Thus, it seems that it is not only the time that passes while Thea is in Chicago that gives her objective distance, but the very train trip home itself which provides time and occasion for her thoughts as well as a holistic view of the countryside as she passes through it. While on the train she is simultaneously “inside” and “outside”; she exists within the confines of a sort of mobile “place”—the train car—but outside the confines of a definable, fixed geographic location.

Thea’s arrival home, however, is less ideal than she has imagined it while aboard the train. As soon as she steps off the train and sees Anna, she “suddenly realiz[es] that Anna had always disliked her” (189). The additional family tension that comes as a result of Thea’s attendance at the Mexican dance leads her back to her attic; the narrator tells us, “This place had always been her refuge, but there was a hostility in the house now which this door could not shut out” (202). The feelings of difference don’t exist solely on Thea’s part, however; both Mrs. Kronborg and Dr. Archie observe changes in Thea, and

those who hear her sing note the remarkable quality of her voice (197-199). The changes in Thea's relationships with her family and community are, of course, at least partially due to the passage of time during her absence; however, they can also be traced to the sheer distance she traveled away from home—a distancing made possible by the presence of the railroad. In this way, her train trip intensifies the effects of the passage of time through adding the additional complication of physical removal. The role of physical distance becomes even more obvious when she at last boards the train again to return to Chicago. She looks back at her family:

They were calm and cheerful; they did not know, they did not understand. Something pulled in her—and broke. She cried all the way to Denver, and that night, in her berth, she kept sobbing and waking herself. But when the sun rose in the morning, she was far away. It was all behind her, and she knew that she would never cry like that again. (*SL* 208)

The train allows her to wake up “far away” from her problems, to leave them literally “behind her,” a distancing which moves her toward psychological healing. As Thea's connection with Moonstone weakens, she is able to build a stronger connection with other places she visits and lives in the United States, namely Chicago and Panther Canyon. Thea's experience of returning to Moonstone calls into question whether or not the railroad actually breaks down regional boundaries as Marx suggests, since, while her trip allows her to physically traverse boundaries, it simultaneously highlights these divisions by shifting and intensifying the ways in which she identifies (and fails to identify) with Moonstone. Further, as she uses the railway system she begins to take on its very characteristics; just as we associate the railway system with no specific place, Thea's disassociation from her home makes her in a way just as “placeless” or variously placed as the railroad. While Thea initially feels this as a positive sort of potential, identifying herself with Ray's feeling that “all of the Southwest really belonged to him because he had knocked about over it so much, and knew it” (187), her experience of returning home reveals the level of loneliness such “knocking about” can create. Additionally, as Thea travels, she begins to feel “real element of

companionship between her and Ray” (187), a sense of closeness she feels through the railroad itself.

While Ray is positioned somewhat ambiguously between places and identifies himself with all of the southwest, he claims a space for himself aboard his train; thus, while he may be essentially “placeless” just as Thea seems to be, he *makes* himself a place. According to one of his brakemen, Ray was “as fussy about his car as an old maid about her bird-cage” (98). When Ray is expecting Mrs. Kronborg and Thea for a picnic near Denver, he goes into his car alone, where he “got into his overalls and jumper” and “set to work with a scrubbing-brush and plenty of soap and ‘cleaner’” (98). As the party returns home from the picnic, Cather makes the stability of Ray’s caboose even more explicit, writing, “Everything was so kindly and comfortable; Giddy and Ray, and their hospitable little house, and the easy-going country, and the stars” (109). Ray’s caboose, the comforts it provides, its homelike nature, and the way he carefully maintains it create a kind of stability in motion; while the train may be moving, it becomes a sort of enclosed domestic sphere, linked with the “easy-going country” and the stars, but independent of its relationship to any more specific locality. The train, a moving place and Ray’s home, fosters a kind of genius within him as he works toward self improvement; at the end of his workday, for instance, Ray is depicted as getting into his bunk in the caboose and reading Robert Ingersoll’s speeches and *The Age of Reason* (47). Thus, Ray’s caboose, while not *really* a “place” in the geographic sense, possesses a kind of *genius loci* just as Chicago and New York do for Thea. While Thea gains inspiration from the concerts and operas she attends and performs in herself, (a localized experience specific to the urban environment in the novel), Ray’s caboose in the middle of a generic star-filled landscape inspires him to new intellectual heights. *The Song of the Lark* doesn’t completely undo the idea of localized genius specific to a place, particularly since it suggests that some opportunities for growth and inspiration are available only in certain locations. Rather, it suggests that inspiration takes different forms for different people, and that, because of this truism, the kind of “place” in which one finds inspiration may vary—even to include a sort of mobile place under the stars, regardless of where it is located geographically.

The railroad in *The Song of the Lark*, then, challenges our conceptions of place and the geographic specificity we often give it. As a result, it also complicates the critical tendency to associate

Cather with the specific regions she describes. While Cather of course writes about specific regions and landscapes in *The Song of the Lark*, the presence of the railroad in the novel suggests that “place” for Cather must not always be as fixed and geographically specific. Further, the novel also points out the possibility that a place which lacks geographic specificity such as a railway car can retain the same sort of stable properties that we typically might attribute to a fixed town, city, or location.

III. Destabilizing Geographic Location: The Railroad’s Effect on the Specifics of Place

The railroad system may not entirely break down regional boundaries for Thea, who travels to and from Chicago. However, it does create a kind of cultural unity as it makes the geographic locations that it connects more mobile through their very accessibility. The train itself, as a kind of mobile “place” that links other places, provides a venue for moving and changing the environments that it links. When Thea visits Panther Canyon, for instance, she takes shards of pottery with her, however guiltily; Cather writes,

Thea had a superstitious feeling about the potsherds, and liked better to leave them in the dwellings where she found them. If she took a few bits back to her own lodge and hid them under the blankets, she did it guiltily, as if she were being watched. She was a guest in these houses and ought to behave as such. (*SL* 256)

Thea, as a tourist in the area, alters the environment she finds there; she sometimes gathers relics and takes them with her. Additionally, Cather describes her mind as “a ragbag into which she had been frantically thrusting whatever she could grab” (257); even if she doesn’t physically take and transport relics from the canyon, she herself becomes the link between Panther Canyon and New York through the experiences she carries with her. Patricia Yaeger also sees Thea’s mind as a sort of place as she concludes that “Thea’s voice and psyche become a locale” or a place to locate the female sublime (139).

The specificity Cather grants to Panther Canyon—the location, the cultural history—is no doubt important, and critics such as

Christopher Schedler and Ellen Moers point out the significance of this specific region.³ However, it is interesting to note that Cather also abstracts the canyon into a larger, less specific experience. For instance, the narrator describes the canyon as

like a thousand others—one of those abrupt fissures with which the earth in the Southwest is riddled; so abrupt that you might walk over the edge of any one of them on a dark night and never know what had happened to you. (SL 249)

Audrey Goodman notes the way in which Thea must understand the canyon not only through observation, but with all of her senses, pointing out that comprehending the entirety of the place is overwhelming if not impossible (151). Thea's inability to fully capture the experience in her mind confirms this interpretation, as the narrator informs us that her ideas "were scarcely clear enough to be called ideas" and that they "had something to do with fragrance and color and sound" (251). Perhaps this overwhelming sensory experience is part of what causes Thea to generalize her experience of the canyon, to relate it to things that she knows as a method of understanding:

She was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember. She had loved the sun, and the brilliant solitudes of sand and sun, long before these other things had come along to fasten themselves upon her and torment her. That night, when she clambered into her big German feather bed, she felt completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world. Darkness had once again the sweet wonder that it had in childhood. (SL 248)

Like Ray under his star-filled sky, the specificity of Thea's geographic location doesn't matter much in this moment. While Cather creates a regionally and culturally specific site for Thea to visit and reflect on life, Thea traces general features of the landscape that she could have experienced nearly anywhere outside of the city—the sun, the sand, darkness—back to her childhood experiences in Moonstone. It is only through the mobility that the railroad provides that she is able to visit the canyon; moreover, the way in which she

interprets her experience there depends entirely upon her associations with where she comes from and where she has been. Judith Fryer poetically describes the way in which Thea generalizes her experience of the canyon into a kind of unity with the earth itself:

What Thea understands as she stands in the stream with a piece of pottery in her hands, as she lies on the rock shelf in the sun, as her own body tenses in affirmation as the eagle soars overhead, is the connection between matter and spirit, between form and desire. Her emergence as an artist comes quite literally from the earth. (34).

Fryer's analysis highlights the way in which Thea takes the regionally specific—in this case, a shard of pottery—and uses it as a means to understand a more general truth about unity with the earth. While on one hand this seems to indicate some sort of localized spirit of place at the canyon that helps Thea to see her life in a new light and refreshes her artistic spirit, Thea cannot experience and understand the specifics of the location without first generalizing them to a larger framework of interpretation and experience—a framework she possesses as a cultural outsider to the area.

As Thea and Fred depart Flagstaff via the train, however, the experiences Thea has had at the canyon become still more generalized. They sit together on the observation deck “watching the yellow miles unfold and disappear” (*SL* 276):

With complete content they saw the brilliant, empty country flash by. They were tired of the desert and the dead races, of a world without change or ideas. Fred said he was glad to sit back and let the Santa Fe do the work for awhile. (*SL* 276)

From the train the country “flash[es] by” and appears “empty,” likely a side effect of moving at a high rate of speed. In this case, being mobile prevents the couple from noticing any specifics of place around them; however, they aren't particularly motivated to do so at this moment either. The train itself then inspires a new kind of impulse; Fred suggests that this would be a good time to “make a run for it,” that they could just take a southern branch of the railroad down

to Mexico; he states that they are “exceptionally free” (276). The accessibility the railroad provides, the freedom from bondage to any particular place, is appealing, yet at the same time destabilizing; as Thea looks back along the train tracks, they “quivered in the light behind them” (276), visually breaking the connection she may have had with Flagstaff, where they’d just been.

Shortly thereafter, Fred bitterly tells Thea that her language is “pure Moonstone . . . like [her] point of view” (299). At this point in the novel, however, after she has traveled so much and been exposed to various cities and people, Thea is anything but “pure Moonstone.” However, she is not completely placeless and removed; the fact that she carries a bit of her Moonstone heritage with her wherever she goes is what Fred and Dr. Archie say keeps her grounded. Fred comments that “[h]er scale of values will always be the Moonstone scale. And, with an artist, that *is* an advantage” (307). The determining force of Moonstone has a permanent effect on the artist Thea becomes; however, the presence of the railroad is that which allows her to transcend her origins and gather the sum of experiences that refine her talent and lead to her fame. Moonstone itself is finally left with only “evidence” of Thea; Tillie, the last Kronborg to remain there, has only photographs, records, and newspaper accounts of Thea and her successes (402-403). While Thea may not be there, her absence and growth adds to Moonstone materially, as she sends home phonograph records; thus even a geographically specific place such as Moonstone ultimately changes due to the mobility of its citizens.

Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*, then, points out the important role of specific geographic locations while at the same time challenging our ability to accept such a simplistic conception of “place.” The railway system, presented in the novel as a kind of mobile “place” itself, has an active influence in shaping Thea’s perspectives on Moonstone as it is the means by which she travels away from home and returns again. The novel also illustrates that a mobile place that lacks geographic specificity, such as a railway car, shares the same kinds of properties we might associate with a physical location: it can create a sense of domestic security, and it can inspire personal and intellectual growth. Further, the railway system, which links place to place, allows Thea herself to become the very embodiment of several places at once through her travel. While it remains important to recognize Cather’s careful construction and description of the western and southwestern landscapes, the central presence of the railroad in

The Song of the Lark suggests an alternative to thinking about “place” in Cather’s work—one which transcends the specifics of geographic location.

Notes

¹ Amy Ahearn, in her article “Full-Blooded Writing and Journalistic Fictions: Naturalism, the Female Artist, and Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*,” offers a more historical look at Cather’s relationship to such naturalist writers as Frank Norris and Jack London before highlighting instances of environmental determinism in *The Song of the Lark*. Both Lawlor and Ahearn point out the important—and active—role of place in Cather’s work.

² Thus, the novel also highlights the political stakes of the kind of unification the railroad can bring about as it creates barriers which sacrifice the less fortunate in the name of Manifest Destiny. Barbara Young Welke discusses the railroad and social equality in greater detail in *Recasting American Liberty: Gender, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution, 1865-1920*, particularly as the railroad relates to the necessary balance between individual liberty and state protection.

³ Schedler’s look at Cather’s Panther Canyon is primarily anthropological; however, Patricia Yaeger quotes feminist critics such as Ellen Moers, who often examine the Panther Canyon scenes as well, interpreting the canyon as an idealized female landscape (Moers qtd. in Yaeger 139).

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A Place Apart: Transcending Social Topographies in *The Song of the Lark*

Tony R. Magagna

Willa Cather's work has often emphasized the importance of place to individuals and communities living within the immense spaces of the American West. In *My Ántonia*, for instance, Jim Burden famously feels "erased, blotted out" by the unmarked expanse of the Nebraska plains, and he yearns for the order and familiarity of home (8). A central theme in that novel—as in *O Pioneers!* and others—has long been recognized as the necessity to nurture a sense of place and belonging amid the vast landscapes of the West. Cather's characters physically settle the territory and populate it with story and custom, defining their place in the land.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather deploys similar themes to characterize Thea and her fellow Moonstone residents as they work to cultivate a sense of order and familiarity in the midst of the surrounding landscape. At the same time, however, by means of Thea's youthful explorations throughout—and, later, beyond—the town's rigid social and moral geographies, Cather reveals the underside of attempts to affix definitions of place and identity to the Western landscape. She illustrates that, for all of the triumphs inherent to cultivating a rooted sense of belonging in the land, definitions of place can also manifest as narrow and exclusionary. As Thea confronts the ethnic and social distinctions that abide in Moonstone and as she later struggles with the sense that her West is beyond the bounds of the official artistic culture to which she aspires, she encounters strict boundaries which persistently threaten to fix her in her "proper place," despite her inclinations toward wider fields. Thea's happiness and success in *The Song of the Lark*—both as a child in Moonstone and as an emerging international talent—rely upon her ability to negotiate the cultural hierarchies and transcend the social topographies that mark her course throughout the novel.

The Western landscapes that Cather depicts in her novels often demand human definition. In the terms used by human geographers, Cather's West is dominated by open space, and her characters struggle to establish shelter, comfort, and definition as a means of developing a sense of place. As Yi-Fu Tuan has written in *Space and Place*, one of the founding texts of human geography, "Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed

pattern of established human meaning; it is a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed. Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values" (54). In the unfinished countries of Cather's West, establishing the values and order of human place is essential to feeling secure and at peace within an often overwhelming territory.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea's Moonstone represents just such an attempt to carve a place from open space. Amid the surrounding desert, Moonstone seems a "Noah's ark town set out in the sand" and, though brightly painted, it is "frail" against the dry, sparsely shaded landscape (*SL* 36). Cather shows us the local landscape through Thea's adoring eyes as the young girl delights in her rare visits to the sand dunes, relishing the sense of discovery and adventure away from town. As in so many other things, however, Thea seems the exception in this regard, as the town itself is designed to counter the disorder and uncertainty of the surrounding environment. Moonstone is staked out in regular, rectilinear lots surrounded by an ordered network of streets and sidewalks. Patches of sunflowers, sheltered gardens such as the Kohlers' and cultivated groves of cottonwoods—as well as a few instances of people "trying to make soft maples grow in their turned lawns"—provide a verdant respite from the sun-dried expanses of the landscape (*SL* 36). The "new brick Catholic Church," as well as the prominence of the railway station and other official establishments, also lend a sense of human order and legitimacy to a Western town whose place in the land is less than a generation removed from wilderness (*SL* 36).

The harsh weather that besets the town evokes a sense that Moonstone is still a fragile settlement amid the immense open territory of the West, and the violent accidents that punctuate Thea's stories of recent town history speak also to Moonstone's tenuous hold on a "civilized" social order. Yet the regular social and physical structures that the townspeople have erected amid the desert do represent a concerted—and largely successful—effort to settle a piece of the Western territory and to mark it out for human endeavor. Though Cather does not emphasize the struggle or the triumph of Moonstone's efforts to tame the land in *The Song of the Lark* as she does with similar ventures in other works, the plotting and planting that has taken place here among the Colorado sand hills is reminiscent of the efforts of her unvanquished settlers of the Nebraska plains who *are* celebrated for their successes in marking and defining the open space of the West.

On the level of the individual, though, Cather does emphasize efforts to cultivate a sense of place in *The Song of the Lark*. As Thea grows into her own ways and personality in Moonstone—and later, as she struggles to assimilate into the cultured, demanding sphere of world-class opera—she finds refuge, first, in the physical reality of her father’s house and, later, by recalling memories of it. In particular, as Thea is allowed “to fit up a little room for herself upstairs in the half-story,” she quickly discovers the pleasures of a place of her own, secure and defined according to her needs (SL 51). “The acquisition of this room,” Cather writes, “was the beginning of a new era in Thea’s life. It was one of the most important things that ever happened to her” (SL 52). Here, away from the clangor of her siblings and the town, Thea creates a nest for herself—a “little shell” (SL 202)—in which she can allow her inner self to breathe free. Decorated by her own hands and entirely her own, Thea’s attic bedroom is her shelter from the storms of life, an ordered retreat from the chaos of adolescence and social demands. It is her place.¹

Yi-Fu Tuan has described the intimate experiences of home as universal: “Hearth, shelter, home or home base are intimate places to human beings everywhere. Their poignancy and significance are the themes of poetry and of much expository prose” (147). Certainly, this poignancy of home is central to much of Cather’s prose, and several critics, not least among them Judith Fryer in her studies of “felicitous space” in Cather’s fiction, have traced the contrast between this type of placed intimacy and the almost oblitative vastness of the Western landscape.² In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather’s “felicitous space” encompasses Mrs. Kohler’s garden, an insulated island of moisture and greenness—and a piece of her own homeland—amid the heat and glare of this American desert, as well as Thea’s attic sanctuary. In each of these cultivated places, these women are able to maintain a sense of shelter and “at homeness” that is stripped from them in the outside world. Just as Mrs. Kohler is made “stupid and blind like an owl” in the open plain outside of the shade of her garden, so Thea, too, is never able to think as well as she can in her attic room, her sheltered place (SL 24, 202).

Judith Fryer borrows the term “felicitous space” from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose book *The Poetics of Space* marks him as one of the most effusive proponents of the house as the ideal human refuge. Prefiguring Tuan’s comments on the universal value of a sense of hearth and home, Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* that “the chief benefit of the house” is that “the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house

allows one to dream in peace... Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life" (6-7).

This idea of the house—and by extension, the room—as a shelter to the imaginative journeys of the individual is certainly at play in Cather's depiction of the bedroom in which Thea leads her "double life," allowing her curiosities and creativity to blossom through reading and reverie (*SL* 53). Further, the concept that the house is a person's once-and-always sanctuary is embodied in Thea's dearly held memories of her father's house. "That's the house I rest in when I'm tired," Thea explains to Dr. Archie, though years have passed since she last visited her first home (*SL* 380). And, when she becomes anxious on the evening before the book's ultimate performance, Thea allows her memory of home to lull her to sleep: "The sprawling old house had gathered them all in, like a hen, and had settled down over its brood. They were all warm in her father's house" (*SL* 391).

Thea's reliance on her little room for shelter and for imaginative growth and escape—both as a child in that room, and as an adult through her memory of it—highlights the central role that a carefully maintained and cherished sense of place plays in a person's life and sense of self, a common theme in much of Cather's writing. Yet, Cather also uses the image of this room and of Thea's father's house to reveal the underside of fixed definitions of place. Though Thea comes to remember fondly the sense of shelter and warmth that her childhood home evokes, she also struggles with the rules and roles of domesticity and conventionality that are contained within the walls of the house.

In direct contrast to the concepts of the house as a universal site of comfort and shelter put forth by Bachelard and others, feminist geographer Gillian Rose has argued that the home can, on the contrary, often represent a site of toil, constraint, and mistreatment for women. In *Feminism and Geography*, Rose writes that the enthusiasm for the image of home and the domestic as "the exemplar of place... as universal, even biological, experiences" suggests that human geographers work largely with a masculinist notion of place, for there is little regard in their work for the impressions that the idea of home might hold for women (53). In contrast to the "conflict-free, caring, nurturing and almost mystically venerated" concept of home promoted by place-philosophers, Rose contends that the house can be a place of exploitation and oppression for women (56).

Though Thea's relationship to her father's house is not one of absolute patriarchal oppression, her experiences there are torn between

the secret, imaginative excursions she takes alone in her room and the demands of meeting social and familial expectations. Before she was allowed her own room as a child, for instance, Thea “had lived in constant turmoil,” surrounded by the aggravations of her six siblings and the demands of helping her mother care for her youngest brother, Thor (*SL* 52). Combined first with her duties to school and her father’s church and later with her commitment to her own piano students, Thea’s domestic responsibilities make for a life “full of tasks,” and nights in her room serve as her only respite, where “there was no one to nag her” (*SL* 53).³

Even this room, though, becomes tainted by the rigid expectations that rule in her hometown. During Thea’s only homecoming after leaving the West to study music in Chicago, she quickly rediscovers the comforts of her own bed in her own little room; however, when the gulf that has grown between her and her family members becomes apparent, her room can no longer serve as a refuge, for “there was a hostility in the house now which this door [to her room] could not shut out” (*SL* 202). Thea feels as if these “chilling hostilities” abide in the very framework of the house, “awaiting her in the trunk loft, on the stairway, almost anywhere” (*SL* 204). From that point on, Cather writes, Thea “felt differently toward the house and everything in it, as if the battered old furniture that seemed so kindly, and the old carpets on which she had played, had been nourishing a secret grudge against her and were not to be trusted anymore” (*SL* 204).

That these hostilities seem to reside within the same walls that had once served as sanctuary to Thea speaks to the larger concept that a sense of place and a sense of rigid social expectations are often bound up together. Beyond Thea’s complex feelings for her family home, Cather represents this entwined, dual nature of place within the town itself. Although Moonstone’s established civic and social institutions—as well as its regular patterns and structures of settlement—mark it off from the rough-edged open spaces and mining frontiers that populate the edges of Cather’s narrative, these stamps of civilization also manifest a rigid set of social values which define certain individuals and actions as welcome and *in place*, while others are deemed marginal, unwelcome, and *out of place*.

As Cather describes Thea’s perambulations through Moonstone, she notes that this is a town beset by social divisions so prominently entrenched that even schoolchildren could recognize their purpose:

The children in the primary grades were sometimes required to make relief maps of Moonstone in sand. Had they used colored sands, as the Navajo medicine men do in their sand mosaics, they could easily have indicated the social classifications of Moonstone, since these conformed to certain topographical boundaries, and every child understood them perfectly. (*SL* 31)⁴

The town's physical layout communicates a vivid sense of social values linked to class, religion, and ethnicity—a social topography that is clearly delineated. To the west of Main Street, as Cather describes it, “lived all the people who were, as Tillie Kronborg said, ‘in society,’” whereas to the east, and radiating outward to the edges of town, “lived all the humbler citizens, the people who voted but did not run for office” (*SL* 31). In this more modest part of town, there were none of the architectural or social pretensions apparent on Sylvester Street (where “the best dwellings” could be found), but rather yards in which the native timber was given reign and in which “the men sat in the front doorway and smoked their pipes,” while old women did the wash (*SL* 31-32). “The people on Sylvester Street,” Cather coyly notes, “scarcely knew that this part of town existed,” a fact which indicates a distinct disdain for the individuals—Moonstone residents though they are—who seem so out of place here in *our town* (*SL* 32).

This misplaced nativism is even more manifest in relation to the ethnic topography of the town, by which the local Mexican population is relegated to the edges of the settlement, alongside the Kohlers' ethnically-marked “bit of...the Rhine Valley,” planted more than a mile out of town, “beyond the gulch” (*SL* 23-4). Fritz Kohler had been one of the first settlers in Moonstone, building his house and planting his garden “when Moonstone was first marked down on the map” (*SL* 23). Spanish Johnny, the chief representative to Thea of “Mexican Town,” had been “the first Mexican who came to Moonstone” when there had been a boom on and “a good many new buildings were going up” (*SL* 39). Followed soon by a number of friends and relatives, Spanish Johnny and his fellow Mexicans aided in the expansion of Moonstone, working in the brickyard and the roundhouse.

Yet, despite such established roots in Moonstone, both the Kohlers and the Mexicans are physically and socially separated from the rest of the town. Much as with the working-class citizens living east of Main Street, Thea realizes that the Kohlers' home lies beyond the “proper” realm of Sylvester Street values and that, had it not been

for her piano lessons with Professor Wunsch, “she might have lived on for years in Moonstone without ever knowing the Kohlers, without ever seeing their garden or the inside of their house” (SL 25). From the prevailing perspective of the denizens of Sylvester Street—by way of the Ladies’ Aid Society—the Kohlers’ home is simply the place “where there was so much drinking,” an unfit location for their preacher’s daughter, or for anyone else (SL 25). And Mexican Town, certainly, is a den of iniquity, home to foreign “rowdies” whose ways are simply out of place amid “the nice people” of Moonstone proper (SL 201). From the conventional, nativist view of those in the position of privilege and power—those “in society,” those who vote *and* run for office—there is a clear sense of what counts as Moonstone values and of which Moonstone people matter. Those residing on the margins of town do not fit neatly into these conceptions.

Just as a physical sense of order is imposed upon an open landscape through architecture and civic planning, so too is a sense of propriety and convention. As Tuan has noted, “the built environment clarifies social roles and relations. People know better who they are and how they ought to behave when the arena is humanly designed rather than nature’s raw stage” (102). Amid the open spaces of the West, for instance—as frontier gives way to formal settlement and society—a sense of stability and comfort can derive from the establishment of familiar norms and customs. Whether in a plotted and planted town or in a room of one’s own, such definitions and structures contribute to a sense of identity and belonging. Yet, as Cather shows us in the case of Moonstone’s social and moral topographies, such configurations of place and propriety determine who and what *does not* belong, as much as they determine who does.

In detailing such “politics of place,” critical geographer Tim Cresswell has noted that “struggles for place identity...appeal to the parochial and exclusive forces of bigotry and nationalism,” and that “the identification of place usually involves an us/them distinction in which the other is devalued” (27). Though Cresswell recognizes, as Cather does, the human necessity for a sense of place and belonging, he also acknowledges—again, as Cather does—that definitions of place can often translate into “an opportunity to mark particular boundaries and constitute particular forms of...social power” (57).

Within Moonstone, these boundaries and forms of social power delineate the “good” and “bad” sides of town and define—and enforce—modes of acceptable conduct and proper relations. The voices that arise from Thea’s chorus of “natural enemies”—including Mrs. Livery Johnson, Lily Fisher, and Thea’s sister Anna—speak

from positions of privilege and power as established and accepted members of Moonstone's moral majority. Their gossip and actions highlight the social mores and close-minded, nativist distinctions within the town and enforce these rigid rules through what Cather describes as "the fear of the tongue, that terror of little towns" (*SL* 110). Mrs. Johnson, for instance, is a prominent Baptist, a "fierce W.C.T.U. worker" and president of the Sunday-School committee in charge of the town's yearly Christmas pageant (*SL* 54). She is, in short, well established in the small-town society of Moonstone, and her vocal opinions reflect (and enact) the social topographies of the town: "Mrs. Johnson disapproved of the way in which Thea was being brought up, of a child whose chosen associates were Mexicans and sinners, and who was, as she pointedly put it, 'bold with men'" (*SL* 54). For Mrs. Johnson and those of her ilk, it is vital for a girl like Thea—particularly as the minister's daughter—to stick to *her place* within the town, both physically and socially.

Though they have little effect on Thea, such distinct norms and accepted codes of conduct do shape how her sister Anna views the social world of Moonstone. Moreover, Anna's reactions also determine Thea's conduct within that world as well. "Anna's nature," as Cather writes, "was conventional...indeed, scarcely anything was decent until it was clothed by the opinion of some authority" (*SL* 115-16). Anna's strict adherence to such conventional authorities translates into a particular sensitivity to appearances and reputation, as well as into "really shocking habits of classification" directed toward Mexicans and anyone else she determines to reside outside the social norms and in the realm of the wicked (*SL* 116). When Thea's final rupture with her home and family occur (during her summer home from Chicago), her change is precipitated by Anna's rebukes—echoed by her brothers Charley and Gus—that Thea had breached the social order and endangered her family's reputation by associating with the citizens of the Mexican quarter:

Everybody at Sunday-School was talking about you going over there and singing with the Mexicans all night...Somebody heard you, and told it all over town. Of course, we all get the blame for it...I must say you choose your company! You always had that streak in you, Thea. We all hoped that going away would improve you...it reflects on father when you are scarcely polite to the nice people here and make up to the rowdies. (*SL* 201)

For Anna, as for Mrs. Johnson and others, Thea belongs in the company of "the nice people" on her side of town, not off singing

across the gulch with “the rowdies.” Her conventional, nativist opinions, too, take the form of the social and moral geography which define Moonstone and its people, and which Thea so forcefully rejects.

Cather herself described *The Song of the Lark* as more about escape from a place than about establishing one, as have many subsequent critics. Thea’s journey is one away from what Cather described in her 1932 Preface to the novel as “a smug, domestic, self-satisfied provincial world of utter ignorance” (*SL* 434). The social hierarchies and the small-minded conventionalities of Moonstone circumscribe Thea’s ambitions and abilities and, to a certain degree, she is forced to flee the town for the sake of her imaginative and artistic life.⁵

Yet, Cather also demonstrates that these very social topographies have little actual effect on Thea’s choices and associations during her childhood, and that her happiness—and the foundation for her future success—grow from her unique ability to transcend these boundaries. Just as Thea relishes trips into the sand hills and away from the defined settlements of town, so she travels across the bounds within the town as well. Often with her brother Thor in tow, she pulls her wagon along all of the sidewalks of town—and along many unboarded paths as well—exploring those parts of town that “the people on Sylvester Street scarcely knew...existed” (*SL* 32). To the east of Main Street and on out to the marginal settlements of Mexican Town, Thea “had many friends” (*SL* 32), and her affections for the Kohlers, Professor Wunsch, and Spanish Johnny and his wife are profound, as is their fondness for her. Thea is deeply aware of the social divisions within Moonstone and of the “fear of the tongue” that plagues the social world of the town, but she seems ultimately unfazed by them. Though many of the townspeople see her cosmopolitan tastes as unsuitable—they are “a queer freak” to Dr. Archie (*SL* 309), and worse to citizens like Anna and Mrs. Johnson—Thea’s travels and her associations within Moonstone transcend the rigid distinctions of race, ethnicity, and class.

In particular, Thea’s relationship with Spanish Johnny and the other town Mexicans illustrates her unique indifference toward distinctions within the racial and social hierarchies of Moonstone. In defense of Cather’s treatment of race and ethnicity in her works, critic Ann Moseley focuses on Thea’s Mexican friendships in *The Song of the Lark* as evidence of Cather’s cultural pluralism. “Cather shows,” Moseley writes, “that even as a child, Thea—and perhaps by implication Cather herself—identified with the free and intense life of

the Mexican quarter of Moonstone” (8). Furthermore, Moseley continues, the descriptions of Thea’s interactions with Spanish Johnny and the others—as well as her defense of these associations to her family—“shows not only Thea’s acceptance of but also her preference for the Mexican population of Moonstone” (9).⁶

By choosing to sing with the Mexicans, rather than for her father’s church, Thea demonstrates her allegiance not only to these “talented people” but to an interchange of values that defies the strict moral geographies of Moonstone (*SL* 201). Just as she fosters an affection for Professor Wunsch, despite his ragged reputation, she also accepts Ray Kennedy’s devotion, though, as Anna would have it, “he was not a passenger conductor with brass buttons on his coat” (*SL* 116), Thea heartily joins with the Mexicans in their musical celebrations, despite their racial exclusion from Moonstone’s official society. By doing so, she becomes *simpático* with Spanish Johnny and his compatriots, “one blonde head moving among so many dark ones” (*SL* 196), and she gains access to a cultural and artistic realm of which, like the Mexican dance-hall itself, “nobody in Moonstone knew...its existence” (*SL* 193).

Through all of her relationships across societal divides, Thea gains access to worlds and wonders that inspire her and of which she would never have had knowledge had she remained in her “proper place.” In addition, those with whom she has contact across the bounds of Moonstone convention—Johnny, Wunsch, Ray—each benefit in often ineffable ways from the experience of her friendship and talents. By negotiating the exclusionary conventions that would have relegated them all to separate geographies, Thea transcends the imposed hierarchies and roles of Moonstone; in the process, she is able to borrow and to grow from each encounter, and to translate part of her own wondrous desires across seemingly impermeable social topographies.

The unique joy of Thea’s childhood derives from her ability to confront and to transcend these social conventions and hierarchies, and, as she grows into an adult and a burgeoning artist, her later successes come to rely upon a similar transcendence. As Thea travels further from Moonstone in pursuit of her artistic education, she encounters cultural perceptions that define her home place as a virtual hinterland, devoid of any culture or influence that *matters*. Just as the townspeople of Moonstone interpret segments of their population as outside of the accepted mainstream, so Thea discovers an artistic and cultural world that inscribes the realms of East and West, Old World

and New, within clearly defined topographies of value—topographies with which she must, again, contend.

Growing up, Thea is aware that Moonstone is a Western town isolated from the larger currents of the outside world, that “the people who go through [town] in the dining cars aren’t like us” (SL 39). Despite her affection for the town, she is beset by the double impulse to embrace it and to flee it: “She loved the familiar trees, and the people in those little houses, and she loved the unknown world beyond Denver. She felt as if she were being pulled in two, between the desire to go away forever and the desire to stay forever” (SL 122). The examples of artistic and intellectual culture that enrich her childhood—the books, music, and art—are from elsewhere, stamped with the authority of the East and Europe. Furthermore, she is deeply influenced by men who interpret Moonstone as a dead end; Wunsch, for instance—though once a *real* musician in a *real* place—is forced into a kind of exile in the West because of his dissolution, a broken man of whom “there was not much left” (SL 149). Ray Kennedy, as well, though a Westerner himself and strongly associated with the West in Thea’s imagination, realizes as much as anyone that Thea must head east to Chicago if she is to learn—and to contribute—anything of substance.

Most profoundly, Dr. Archie insists on Thea’s escape from the provincial world of Moonstone, for he has come to see himself as stuck there, a refugee from a broader world of substance and meaning. “[W]hy are we in Moonstone?” he wonders allowed to Thea during one of their unique exchanges,

It isn’t as if we’d been born here. You were, but Wunsch wasn’t, and I wasn’t...I don’t learn anything here, and as for the people— In my own town in Michigan, now, there were people who liked me on my father’s account, who had even known my grandfather. That meant something. But here it’s all like the sand: blows north one day and south the next...The railroad is the one real fact of this country. That has to be; the world has to be got back and forth. But the rest of us are here just because it’s the end of a run and the engine has to have a drink. (SL 74)

From Archie’s perspective, Moonstone is both literally and figuratively the end of the line, a nowhere town of little significance or character. Despite its developed social structures (for better and worse), it remains a perpetual frontier with no real culture, nor any immediate promise of one, as Archie implies when he goes on to bemoan Wunsch’s presence in the West: “What do such fellows come

out here for?...We won't need them for another hundred years. An engine wiper can get a job, but a piano player! Such people can't make good" (*SL* 75).

For Dr. Archie, Denver represents a cultured escape from the wilderness of Moonstone, a place of refinement and home to his beloved Brown Palace Hotel and Denver Athletic Club. Similarly, for Thea—as for many in Moonstone—Denver *is* the larger world *out there*, the place of “candy and magazines and pineapples” (*SL* 97). Denver is the initial place Thea thinks of when she imagines pursuing her artistic ambitions, for, as she beseeches Professor Wunsch—indicating as well her sense of Moonstone's cultural vacuity—“Only how can I learn anything here? It's so far from Denver” (*SL* 68).

Yet, through difficult lessons that are prefigured by Wunsch's bemused lip curl in response to her comments in this scene, Thea discovers the naiveté of her childish faith in the culture of Denver. As she ventures ever eastward in pursuit of her art, Thea finds that, within the cultural topographies that define the world of opera (and all other conceptions of *true* civilization), even the Queen City remains a frontier backwater.⁷ Only in that “unknown world *beyond* Denver” is Thea able to discover the resources—and, more vitally, the cultural credibility—that she requires to achieve her ambitions (*SL* 122, emphasis added). The West as a whole, within such topographies, is no place for either art or artists.

As Thea begins her training in the “world beyond,” she becomes intensely and immediately aware of her separation from the world of legitimate culture. Cather describes Thea's early days in Chicago as a miserable and disorienting experience as she attempts to adapt to the rigors of urban life. The self-assured, vigorous young girl who had raced through the streets of Moonstone is promptly cast as an out-of-place bumpkin whose clothes and manners are awkward at best (*SL* 139-41). In addition, as she begins her formal training with Andor Harsanyi, Thea quickly discovers that, despite Wunsch's lessons and encouragement in Moonstone, as well as her own homegrown talent, “the literature of the piano was an undiscovered world to her” (*SL* 149). The customs and culture of her Western childhood are deemed all but worthless within this more established, legitimate realm. Consequently, Thea feels unfit and isolated from this world of true cultural value: “she was not able to forget,” Harsanyi observes, “her own poverty in the richness of the world he opened for her” (*SL* 152).

Whereas Thea's great strength in Moonstone had been her ability to travel easily between worlds and to translate her ambitions and desires across social boundaries. She is initially incapable of

reconciling her Western roots with her new environment when she is introduced to the world beyond Moonstone. Her double impulse—to hold on to Moonstone and to flee it—becomes a deep divide that she is unable to transcend, mirrored in the divisive cultural geographies of East and West, and she becomes embittered by the conflict. “There were times,” Cather writes, “when she came home from her lesson and lay upon her bed hating Wunsch and her family, hating a world that had let her grow up so ignorant; when she wished that she could die then and there, and be born over again to begin anew” (SL 150). Caught up in the distinctions of cultural hierarchies as she had never been as a child, Thea falls victim to the persistent belief that only what happens outside of the West matters, that the only legacy from the region of her youth is ignorance.

There are hints of Thea reemerging from this resentment and sense of division in her euphoric response to Dvořák’s “From the New World”—a symbol of the transcendent blending of Old World and New World cultures—as well as in her brief joy at returning West after her first season in Chicago, “to her own land...glad that this was her country, even if one did not learn to speak elegantly there” (SL 169-70, 186). Yet these moments seem quickly lost amid the internal struggle that Thea continues to face. Her homecoming erupts into family strife and an abrupt resolve to depart forever, feeling that “nothing that she would ever do in the world would seem important to [her family], and nothing they would ever do would seem important to her” (SL 203). And, when she returns to Chicago, she falls under the influence of Madison Bowers, a relationship that sets the tone for Thea’s emerging spite for the “stupid faces” that she sees around her, representing her further entrenchment into rigid social definitions and exclusionary cultural values.

Bowers—characterized by Cather as a self-serving pedant—appreciates Thea most for “whatever was least admirable in her” (SL 213). Under his influence, Thea resorts to a judgmental and almost vindictive conception of the musical world and who and what truly belongs within it. Even as her own talents develop and as her outward appearance begins to conform to the expectations of Chicago society, she also develops “an indifference, something hard and skeptical” (SL 216), and she admits to Mrs. Harsanyi that what she has learned during her time in Chicago “is just to *dislike*” (SL 217). As her tumultuous living arrangements during this period exemplify, Thea is unable to cultivate a place or an identity that conforms to her whole nature, and as she attempts to force herself into imposed rules and

roles—defying the transcendent personality that saw her through her Moonstone childhood—she becomes static, stale, and dissatisfied.

A large share of the critical commentary dedicated to *The Song of the Lark* focuses on Thea's trip to Panther Canyon in the novel, and rightfully suggests—through a multitude of lenses—that her journey into this landscape represents her rebirth and revitalization. Here, in the Southwest, Thea feels as if “the old, fretted lines which marked one off, which defined her—made her Thea Kronborg, Bowers's accompanist, a soprano with a faulty middle voice,—were all erased” (SL 248). From her “nest in a high cliff, full of sun” (SL 250)—reminiscent of her childhood bedroom—Thea reemerges from her dissatisfied and censorious sense of the world, full of boundaries and judgments, and rediscovers “the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember...long before these other things had come along to fasten themselves upon her and torment her” (SL 248). In her return west, to a landscape noticeably devoid of societal structures, Thea allows her own recent social judgments to fall away. She begins to see beyond the imposed cultural topographies that divide Eastern (and European) aesthetic worth from the West's cultural vacuum, for she discovers in the cliff-dwellings of the Ancient People a Western, New World heritage as valuable, as venerable, and as deeply rooted as any from the so-called *Old World*. Here, Thea discovers that the legacy of her Western childhood is not one defined by lack and cultural isolation, but rather a unique and valuable inheritance upon which she can draw in her artistic life.⁸

Just as important as Thea's time in Panther Canyon, though, is her decision and ability to leave it. This episode in the novel represents not only Thea's rediscovery of a sense of the West and its meaning, but also a recovery of her capacity to transcend imposed topographies, to translate experiences across social and cultural boundaries. While contemplating the innumerable swallows who live within the walls of the canyon, Thea “often felt how easy it would be to dream one's life out in some cleft in the world” (SL 252). Yet, she also recognizes that the birds “seldom ventured above the rim of the canyon...[that] the only sad thing about them was their timidity; the way in which they lived their lives between the echoing cliffs and never dared to rise out of the shadow of the canyon walls” (SL 252). Were Thea to allow herself simply to be reabsorbed into the Western landscape, content with her newly extended past, she would be guilty of this same timidity, opposed to but analogous with her initial absorption into the exclusionary cultural hierarchies of the East. Instead, she resolves to return to her studies, this time heading even

further from the West and into the established realms of European culture; in the process, though, she holds tightly to what she has gained within these canyon walls, granting value to the West and its legacy, despite the strict boundaries that mark it off as insignificant.

Just as *The Song of the Lark* opens with Thea's childhood adventures traversing the social bounds of Moonstone, both gaining and granting through her interactions across imposed topographies, so the novel closes with a testament to Thea's transcendence of the even broader hierarchies of East and West, Old World and New. As she heads to Germany and negotiates the European capitals of culture, Thea carries with her the lessons of Moonstone and the deeper West of Panther Canyon, and her formal, "legitimate" studies are symbolically funded by the frontier gamble of Dr. Archie's Western investments. When we meet her again, ten years later, she has become an emerging name—*Kronborg*—upon the hallowed, international stages of opera, and she is on the cusp of true stardom. Yet, despite the decade spent away from her native soil and in the realm of recognized culture, she retains the Moonstone scale of values that Fred once noted in her (*SL* 307); she acknowledges that she owes her education to Ray Kennedy's money and his dying wish, explaining to Dr. Archie, "I always measure things by that six hundred dollars, just as I measure high buildings by the Moonstone standpipe. There are standards we can't get away from" (*SL* 379). These standards are Thea's anchor, and both her Moonstone memories and her Panther Canyon discoveries—the ideas she obtained "out of the rocks, out of the dead people" (*SL* 383)—remain with her, providing her strength, comfort, and motivation: "They save me: the old things," Thea proclaims to Archie, "They are in everything I do" (*SL* 381).

Thea straddles the imposed divides between the recognized culture of the East and Europe and the low (or "no") culture of the West, and she derives the power and energy that makes her such a force in the former realm from her commitment to the latter.⁹ Cather explicitly casts Thea's success at the close of the novel—and particularly her final triumphant performance as she comes into "full possession" of her art (*SL* 395)—in terms of this ability to transcend cultural boundaries and to appeal across social topographies. Despite Dr. Archie's skeptical belief, for instance, that "so few of her old friends can appreciate her" and that her artistic abilities "will be rather wasted on [him]" (*SL* 330), Fred insists that Thea's unique virtue is her capacity to communicate across such apparent gulfs: "She gets it across to people who aren't judges. That's just what she does" (*SL* 329).

Nowhere is this transcendence more apparent than in Thea's breakthrough performance as *Sieglinde* at the novel's close. In this moment, Thea comes into her "inheritance," as Cather writes, "into the fullness of the faith she had kept before she knew its name or its meaning" (*SL* 395). Her talent and voice are remarkable, but what is even more noteworthy are the broad array of people to whom this power is conveyed, to whom she "gets it across." Thea's friends, "old and new, seated about the house on different floors and levels," Cather tells us, "enjoyed her triumph according to their natures" (*SL* 395). Fred and Dr. Archie witness her triumph from the orchestra circle, the Harsanyi from a box near the stage; Landry, the vaudeville performer and Thea's accompanist, roams the back of the house. Most importantly, "there was one there," Cather writes, "whom nobody knew, who perhaps got greater pleasure out of that afternoon than Harsanyi himself" (*SL* 396). Spanish Johnny, now gray-haired and visiting New York as a musician with Barnum and Bailey's circus, is overwhelmed by Thea's performance, "praying and cursing under his breath, beating on the brass railing and shouting 'Bravó! Bravó!'" until he was repressed by his neighbors" (*SL* 396). No one, perhaps, could be more *out of place* at the Metropolitan Opera House; yet, it is to Spanish Johnny that Cather draws our attention, to his ecstatic response to Thea's performance and to his singular smile as he leaves the performance, an expression "which embraced all the stream of life that passed him and the lighted towers that rose into the limpid blue of the evening sky" (*SL* 396). The golden-haired young woman from *Moonstone* has arrived at the pinnacle of artistic endeavor in this final scene, but it is not the accolades of New York opera critics—nor even the approval of Harsanyi, Thea's former teacher—that marks Thea's success. In the end, it is the simple smile of a man from Mexican Town.

Thea's childhood experiences in the West and her adult life on the opera stages of the world's culture capitals are reconciled in this closing scene. Through her transcendence of so many distinctions and definitions—her blending of cultures and inheritances, her impact on individuals from different levels and of different natures—Thea comes full circle. She borrows from her travels across cultural and literal topographies in order to speak to individuals across social divides. As a child, she was never one to stick to a defined place, and, as an international opera talent, she follows suit, creating an art—as Cather notes again in her Epilogue—that can at once appeal to, and represent, the experience of "the King at Buckingham Palace" and "her queer old aunt in *Moonstone*" (*SL* 405, 403). If there is any aspect that tempers

this triumph, it is that Thea herself seems separated from those around her by her artistic endeavors, by her effort to translate her talents across all places. But perhaps this is the cost paid by the true artist: in choosing to “break through into the realities” and to capture the sense of the world for the rest of us, she must reside in a place apart, welcome in all topographies, but beyond the bounds of each (*SL* 298).

Notes

¹ In her article “Insulated Isolation: Willa Cather’s Room with a View,” Cynthia Briggs traces the similarities between “Thea Kronborg’s fictional attic room” and “Willa Cather’s historical one,” writing that Cather’s own discovered sense of sanctuary in her Red Cloud bedroom translated across the various sheltered places that she created in her fiction, not least Thea’s own attic bedroom in *The Song of the Lark*.

² Judith Fryer’s article “Cather’s Felicitous Space” was developed as a larger study of the phenomenon of place (or “felicitous space,” in Bachelard’s terms) in both Cather’s and Edith Wharton’s work, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*.

³ In *My Antonia*, Cather would go on to highlight the thornier nature of home and domestic responsibilities through the figure of Lena Lingard, who refuses to marry and to settle down because she recalls home as a place of constraint and toil. “She remembered home,” Cather writes, “as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man and work piling up around a sick woman” (186).

⁴ Whereas Thea’s experience of Moonstone testifies to the rigid and seemingly immutable nature of the town’s social hierarchies, Cather’s use of the image of a Navajo sand mosaic to characterize them speaks also to the possibility that these boundaries are unfixd—that they might be reconfigured. As Dr. Archie later remarks, in the West, after all, “it’s all like the sand: blows north one day and south the next” (*SL* 74).

⁵ Of course, Thea discovers that the rest of the world is as beset by social conventions and rigid rules of propriety as is Moonstone. While training in Chicago, she finds that that city “was not so very different from Moonstone, after all, and Jessie Darcey was only Lily Fisher under another name” (*SL* 220). Further, two of the major male figures in her life—from two very different social topographies—are themselves hemmed in by convention and expectation. Neither Dr. Archie nor Fred are able to escape their unhappy marriages due as much to a “fear of the tongue” as to any other force.

⁶ Thea’s relationship with Ray Kennedy—which itself crosses perceived class boundaries—is based, in part, on his own preference for Mexicans and Mexican culture: “Thea often thought that the nicest thing about Ray was his love for Mexico and the Mexicans. . . . He spoke Spanish fluently, and the sunny warmth of that tongue kept him from being quite as hard as his chin, or as narrow as his popular science” (*SL* 47).

⁷ The tenuous culture of Denver in comparison to that of “the world beyond” the Queen City is highlighted most profoundly in the novel through Dr. Archie’s anxiety over his clothing and behavior when he sets off to visit Thea in New York for the first time (*SL* 293). This anxiety—and the contrast of the best of the West with the *true*

culture of the East and Europe—is further emphasized by means of Archie’s disparity when compared to Fred: “[Fred’s] black afternoon coat, his gray tie and gaiters were of a correctness that Dr. Archie could never attain for all the efforts of his faithful slave, Van Deusen, the Denver haberdasher” (*SL* 358).

⁸ In her recent article on Cather’s treatment of art and place, María Carla Sánchez suggests that Thea’s discovery of a deeply rooted Western aesthetic in the Southwest—and its effect on her own art—mirrors a similar discovery and transformation on Cather’s part. In such early stories as “A Death in the Desert,” Sánchez suggests, Cather “juxtapose[s] eastern artistic appreciation and aesthetic cultures to uncomprehending, deadening, anesthetic cultures that are western” (120), and she “figures the landscape of the West as barren of all possibility for meaningful cultural production because the only aesthetic culture it possesses is displaced from the East” (123). However, Sánchez goes on to argue, as “Cather came to recognize and appreciate native western aesthetic cultures, the all-encompassing emptiness of a story like ‘Death in the Desert’ failed to express her later beliefs” (128). Like Thea, Cather had discovered an aesthetic heritage in the native cultures and landscapes of the Southwest, and these convinced her of the artistic value of her Western roots.

⁹ In her article “Fine and Folk Art in *The Song of the Lark*,” Jean Schwind suggests that the novel is “Cather’s earliest and most detailed investigation into the origins of her own art” (90), and she argues that Thea’s—and by extension, Cather’s—power derives from her melding of both high art and her Western folk traditions.

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**The Kingdom of Culture:
Culture, Ethnology and the “Feeling of Empire” in *The
Song of the Lark***

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Throughout Willa Cather’s writings, the art and artifacts of the Cliff-Dweller civilizations of the American Southwest form a crucial site through which Cather works out her own aesthetic theories. While they figure prominently in Cather’s early fiction—most notably in her short story “The Enchanted Bluff” (1909) —Cliff-Dweller artifacts first become central to Cather’s emerging aesthetic in *The Song of the Lark* (1915): in this semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, the budding artist Thea Kronborg retreats from the cold indifference of Chicago to “Panther Canyon,” Arizona, where she finds inspiration among “the Cliff-Dweller ruins” (SL 242) and discovers, in pondering the remains of their architecture and pottery, a way to conceive of her own artistic endeavors.

Cather returns to the Cliff-Dwellers and their art in later novels like *The Professor’s House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and critics have often read Cather’s use of Cliff-Dweller artifacts in *The Song of the Lark* as part of a consistent aesthetic argument emerging across these novels. David Harrell, for example, argues that “at some early point Cather. . .[began] to associate [the Cliff-Dwellers] with her concept of the Kingdom of Art;” in *The Song of the Lark*, he asserts, “Cather introduces this theme and explicates it, but not until ‘Tom Outland’s Story’ does she develop it fully” (140). This “theme,” moreover, has often been read through the lens of what would by the 1920s become the “anthropological” idea of cultures as relative, plural ways of life characterized as meaningful wholes. For Sharon O’Brien, for example, Cather values “Indian culture” for the way in which “everyday life was imbued with order and meaning” and “the dichotomy between ‘art’ and ‘life’ [was] erased” (415).

While O’Brien sees Cather learning the lessons of holistic “Indian culture,” in this paper I want to argue that Cather’s deployment of Cliff-Dweller artifacts in *The Song of the Lark* is about culture as such, in a period in which the concept was the subject of intense debate. For, as historians of American anthropology have demonstrated, the decade in which Cather composes *The Song of the Lark* is precisely the period in which anthropology achieves its modern disciplinary form, organized around the reconceptualization of

“culture” from nineteenth century ideas of “refinement” or evolutionary progress, to a “way of life” that is relative, plural, and “whole” (or “Culture” vs. “cultures”).¹ Moreover, as critics like Marc Manganaro and Susan Hegeman have shown, these new conceptions of culture emerge from a distinctly interdisciplinary debate, involving artists, literary and social critics, and social scientist in a common conversation over aesthetics, value and meaning.² Grounding Cather’s argument in *The Song of the Lark* in the specific history of that debate, and thereby separating that argument from the anthropological versions of culture that emerge even ten years later, reveals both the complexity of these debates, and Cather’s active engagement with the emergence of the modernist culture concept.

Grounding *The Song of the Lark* within these debates, I will argue that Cather deploys the Cliff-Dweller artifacts in a way that allows several related senses of the term “culture” to intersect personal “cultivation,” objects of high Culture, artifacts of “primitive culture,” and the creation of “national culture.” At each level, Cather complexly combines a teleology of progress with romantic anti-modernism. On the one hand, Cather constructs a model of culture that is universal, evolutionary and progressive: rather than locating the meaning of Indian artifacts within a unique, whole way of life, Cather abstracts these artifacts from their context, placing them in a universal, progressive “long chain of human endeavor” (*SL* 257) of which Indian artifacts form the earliest links, and Thea’s Wagnerian opera, the latest. On the other hand, Cather valorizes primitive “desire,” in contrast to the complacency of “civilization.” In this way, Cliff-Dweller artifacts represent the *necessary*, but not sufficient, conditions for the highest artistic achievements: the potsherds Thea contemplates provide a wellspring of inspiration, but that inspiration must be then “refined” and “perfected” through Thea’s artistic training (395). Intertwining evolutionary progress and romantic anti-modernism, Cather’s theory draws on both the “ethnological” sense of culture articulated by E.B. Tylor and Lewis Morgan, on the one hand, and the “humanist” conception of culture articulated most famously by literary and social critic Matthew Arnold on the other. Through this theory of “cultivation” (174), Cather in turn articulates the ways in which ideas of self-culture, or the development of one’s identity as an artist, parallels ideas of national culture, or the development of the nation itself: in both cases, culture is defined by a process of *possession*, through which exceptional individual takes possession of and “cultivates” its object of desire—for the pioneer, the land; for the artist, the self. In this way, Cather’s *Bildungsroman* is also a novel of

empire-building, as the imperial possession of the Kingdom of Culture is akin to imperial possession of the American landscape itself.

Cather's Southwest: Imperialism, Modernism, Anthropology

From the outset, Cather's encounters with the Native cultures of the Southwest took place in the context of imperial expansion and debates over the meaning of culture. As is well known, Willa Cather made her first trip to the American Southwest in the spring of 1912, taking a train across America to visit her brother Douglass in Winslow, Arizona. The trip, as many of her biographers have noted, "was a watershed in her career" (Woodress 11). Cather had up to this time been managing editor of the political and literary magazine *McClure's*, and, although she had already written one novel while working for the magazine (*Alexander's Bridge* was published while Cather was in the Southwest), the trip marked her leap into her career as a full-time novelist. Arriving in Arizona after several months in upstate New York, Cather described in letters to friends how her initial resistance to the ugliness of Winslow soon changed to fascination with the surrounding landscape. The desert, she wrote, was "big and bright and consuming," and seemed to be the setting for "a new tragedy or a new religion" (Lee 88). Cather went on excursions to nearby Hopi pueblos and Spanish missions, explored the dramatic cliffs of several local canyons, and took a longer trip to the Grand Canyon, as well. Most importantly for my purpose here, she also visited the cliff dwellings of Walnut Canyon, a national monument several miles outside of Flagstaff, where a collection of some three hundred cliff-dwellings about one thousand years old, abandoned in the twelfth century, were preserved in the dry desert air. As critics have noted, Walnut Canyon and its ruins provide the inspiration for Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark*.³

Cather herself saw this trip as life-changing. In letters to McClure after returning East, she proclaimed that she had soaked up so much of the Southwest and returned with so many stories, that it haunted her dreams at night (Woodress 11). Even at the time, Cather associated the trip with a kind of renewal, or a recovery of essentials; she wrote to McClure that the trip "took all the kinks and crinkles out," and she felt as if her mind "had been freshly washed and ironed and made ready for a new life" (Woodress 11). When Cather returned to this landscape three years later, during the weeks between the completion of *The Song of the Lark* in the summer of 1915 and its publication in October, she paid a visit Mesa Verde itself, the site of the most

extensive Indian cliff-dwellings in America—a trip that critics have argued provided the experiences that were later incorporated into “Tom Outland’s Story.”⁴

In her appraisal of the Southwest as a space for reconstructing definitions of spirituality, art and culture, Cather traveled a route—both figuratively and literally—that was both old and relatively new, and one that formed a crossroads for imperialism, anthropology, and modernist art. Already in the late nineteenth century, the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest occupied a powerful place in American popular culture; as Edith Lewis describes, Cather “and her brothers had thought and speculated about [the Cliff-Dwellers] since they were children. The cliff-dwellers were one of the native myths of the American West; children knew about them before they were conscious of knowing about them” (81). In fact, ethnologists like Frank Hamilton Cushing had promoted public awareness of Indian life and art of the Southwest, and the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 even featured a replica of the Cliff Palace (Harrell 27).⁵

This fascination with Southwest Indian art and life in turn followed the development of new routes of transportation and commerce that opened these areas to both tourism and scientific exploration. It was only as recently as 1880 that the railroad came to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and, in the years that followed, the railroad penetrated further into the Southwest, easing the way to areas hitherto accessible only with difficulty by horse and wagon. In the first decades of the twentieth century, then, the region was still in the process of being integrated into the commercial and industrial grid extending from the East—a process that liberal historians like V.L. Parrington, writing just two years after Cather’s publication of *The Professor’s House*, would label the consolidation of the United States’ “inland empire” (259). This economic and industrial expansion was coupled with a rise in tourism, as more Americans sought to experience this “exotic” area and see its native inhabitants. As Edwin Wade puts it, “for White America, it was time of personal movement and exploration, and the railway allowed Victorian sophisticates and metropolitan adventurers the experience of meeting in person ‘pacified’ Pueblo and Navajo Indians in their native habitats” (169). By the late 1890’s, passenger departments of the railroads actively began to “mine the landscape for culture,” producing tourist handbooks—often written by archeologists and ethnologists—describing Indian art, ceremonies and life-ways (and outlining the paid side-trips that could take visitors there) (McLuhan 18).⁶ By the 1920s, the Santa Fe Railway was transporting an estimated 50,000

tourists a year to the Grand Canyon and had specific “Indian Detours” to bring travelers to witness “exotic” ceremonies and performances (McLuhan 43).

Prominent among these travelers were both anthropologists and artists. As historians of anthropology have frequently pointed out, the development of anthropological discourse has followed the routes of imperial expansion, as ethnologists follow the colonial administrator or missionary into newly colonized regions.⁷ From the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century, then, the Pueblo Southwest constituted, as one historian has put it, a “laboratory for anthropology” (Fowler) where the most influential American ethnologists and anthropologists (from Cushing and John Wesley Powell in the late nineteenth century, to anthropologists like Franz Boas, Elsie Clews Parson, A.L. Kroeber, Leslie Spier, and Ruth Benedict) developed their theories of culture. Cather visits Walnut Canyon, then, in the midst of the period in which—in part through work done in this region—American anthropology, led by the Boasian school, undergoes crucial shifts both in its professional practices and its theoretical paradigms, ushering in what Stocking has called the “classical period” of American anthropology, with the emergence of new versions of “culture” as its central concern (“Ethnographic” 212).

At the same time, more artists saw the Pueblo Southwest as a worthy subject *for* art and as a site where a unique kind of art was being produced *by* the indigenous inhabitants. Epitomized by the success of Mary Austin’s series of articles and stories about Pueblo Indian art and life published from the early 1900s—many of which were first published in *McClure’s* while Cather was an editor—interest in Southwest Native American art intensified through the ‘teens and into the 20s, as figures like Mabel Dodge Luhan, D.H. Lawrence and Laura Gilpin making pilgrimages to the region, looking for a “primitive” authenticity lacking in American life.⁸

Moreover, this artistic and anthropological interest cannot be seen separately: anthropologists and artists worked side-by-side in the critique of Victorian values characterizing the intellectual climate in the ‘teens and 20s, participating in the same intellectual forum, and publishing in the same journals. For example, anthropologists like Elsie Clews Parson, Robert Lowie and Franz Boas were frequent contributors to the *Dial*, *The Nation*, *American Mercury*, *The Freeman* and *The New Republic*—journals to which Cather herself contributed or read. As historians of anthropology like Stocking have noted, these intellectuals identified (or created) two sites of “genuine culture”—Greenwich Village and the Pueblo Southwest. As Stocking writes, “the mapping of the ‘geography of culture’ of cultural

criticism overlapped that of cultural anthropology to an extent that we may not appreciate today, when the boundaries between academic anthropology and the outside world are more sharply imagined” (“Ethnographic” 220). Anthropology’s revision of basic categories of “civilization” and “the primitive” through new definitions of culture must be seen as part of the modernist revolt against Victorian ideas.

Thus, Cather’s trips to the Southwest and her subsequent attempts to represent the Pueblo Indian life-ways and artifacts that she encountered there took place within a context of imperial consolidation, anthropology, and modernist art. Cather’s visit to Arizona in May of 1912 came only two months after the territory was granted statehood; moreover, Cather’s brother worked the Santa Fe railroad in Winslow and took Cather on one of the much-advertised excursions to see the Hopi Snake Dance (O’Brien 404). Cather was also well situated—both geographically, from her Greenwich Village apartment, and professionally, from her years at *McClure’s Magazine*—to be exposed to the revolt against genteel America that was centered in New York and of which new versions of American anthropology were a part. Cather’s ideas about “possessing culture” in *The Song of the Lark*, then, must be seen as part of this larger debate over culture and its imperial context.

The Long Chain of Human Endeavor: Progress, Antimodernism and the Construction of Culture

Cather’s own first encounter with the Cliff-Dweller ruins in Walnut Canyon reappears in *The Song of the Lark*, as Thea Kronborg contemplates the ruins of a Cliff-Dweller settlement in “Panther Canyon,” and is moved in particular by the shards of pottery strewn about the ruins. In Thea’s contemplation of these artifacts, and in her imagined connection to the artists who created them, I want to argue that Cather braids together multiple traditions of thinking about culture, working the tension between ethnology and aesthetics, enlightenment ideals of progress, and romantic nostalgia. On the one hand, Cather places Indian art within a progressive history of the development of art; on the other hand, Cather positions the progressive “kingdom of art” (*Kingdom* 43) within a romantic, anti-modern narrative of culture as antidote to the shallowness of modern civilization.

On one level, Cather constructs, as Christopher Schedler has argued, a model of culture that fits into the dominant mode of ethnology in the late nineteenth century: cultural evolutionism. Cather’s construction of the “kingdom of art” in this pivotal scene is

both universal and evolutionary. It is universal in that “art” is a category that is the same for all time, and all ways of life: examining the potshards, Thea realizes that “any art” is “an effort to make a sheath, a mold in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself” (*SL* 254-255, emphasis mine). In Cather’s theory, the shards of Indian pottery represent the same kind of work as Thea’s own artistic endeavors. Just as the Indian women caught the “elusive element” of “life itself” within their jars, “in singing, [Thea] made a vessel of [her] throat and nostrils and held it on [her] breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals” (*SL* 255).

At the same time, this categorical similarity also makes individual artifacts available for comparison and arrangement within a hierarchy which, it turns out, is evolutionary and progressive, with earlier, “primitive” creations setting the stage for later, more developed ones. In a passage charged with a sense of “beginnings” and “promise” that finds “fulfillment” in her present artistic endeavors, Thea imagines how

“here...so far back in the night of the past! Down here at the beginning, that painful thing was already stirring; the seed of sorrow, and of so much delight...All these things made one feel that one ought to do one’s best, and help to fulfill some desire of the dust that slept here. A dream had been dreamed there long ago, in the night of ages, and the wind had whispered some promise to the sadness of the savage. In their own way, those people had felt the beginnings of what was to come. These potsherds were like fetters that bound one to a long chain of human endeavor” (*SL* 256-257).

These “beginnings” find their promised fulfillment, presumably, in art like Thea’s Wagnarian opera. Thus the “long chain of human endeavor” both links Thea *to* the Indians, and marks her progress *beyond* them.

While Indian pottery in Cather’s description forms one stage in the evolution of art, it is also crucial that these artifacts are *not* seen as parts of a “whole way of life.” Key terms that will, for example, become central both to American anthropology’s concept of culture in the 1920s, and to Cather’s argument about culture in *The Professor’s House*—“whole,” “meaning” and “design”—are largely absent from these passages.⁹

Here, the shards of Indian pottery are significant insofar as they represent a universal category—“art”—abstracted from the other elements of Native American life-ways that surround it and placed within a transhistorical “chain of human endeavor.”

In articulating this relation transhistorical, universal

connection between individual elements of a group's life, Cather draws on a central feature of the dominant, evolutionary paradigm of "culture" in the late nineteenth century. The most influential proponents of cultural evolution in late nineteenth century ethnology were E.B. Tylor and, in the context of American ethnology and its institutionalization in organizations such as the Smithsonian, Lewis Henry Morgan. In his landmark *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor defines "culture or civilization" as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). Tylor, like Cather, includes practices and artifacts of "primitive" societies in the category of "Culture." This is in contrast to, for example, Matthew Arnold (whose extremely influential definition of culture I will return to below), who famously defined culture as the "best which has been thought and said in the world," thus reserving the term for only the highest achievements of civilization (5). While Tylor's "Culture" is a "complex whole," it is not, however, relative and plural. There are not many "cultures" but instead singular, universal process of Culture, "various grades [of which] may be regarded as stages of development or evolution," and whose highest stage to date is represented by European civilization (6). Similarly, in his *Ancient Society* (1871), Morgan established universal "stages" of evolutionary progress, from "savagery," to "barbarism," to "civilization," along which the artifacts and practices of any group could be plotted; at each stage, subsistence arts and technology could be correlated to associated stages of development in government, family and property (Morgan vi-vii; Hinsley 133-137). Morgan, of course, worked out his theory of progress through extensive study of Native Americans, who "possess a high and special value" since they "represent, more or less nearly, the history and experiences of our own remote ancestors when in corresponding conditions" (vii).

Crucially, for Tylor and Morgan, the job of the ethnologist was not the study of cultures as self-contained, relative wholes, but rather to "classify" and "arrange" the individual "phenomena of Culture" "stage by stage, in a probable order of evolution." "A first step in the study of civilization," Tylor argues, "is to dissect it into details, and to classify these in their proper groups"—that is, according to the type of object or technology, such as weapons, farming implements, or weaving tools—and then arrange these objects to demonstrate their progressive development *across* civilizations, with "little respect. . . in such comparisons for date in history or for place on the map" (6-7). Using this comparative method, the ethnologist could reconstruct the universal, evolutionary stages that

characterized the development of any category of artifacts.¹⁰ In detaching Indian pottery from the context of a “whole way of life,” and inserting it into a universal, evolutionary “chain of human endeavor,” Cather thus replicates the evolutionary narratives that dominated American ethnology through the late nineteenth century and the practices of ethnographic display they entailed—ways that were in fact increasingly under attack by the time Cather writes *The Song of the Lark*.

While critics like Schedler correctly associates Cather’s model of culture with evolutionary progressivism, this account overlooks the complexity of Cather’s contemplation of culture. Rather than merely reflecting a Tylorian evolutionism, Cather braids together *multiple* traditions of thinking about culture, combining both enlightenment ideals of progress and romantic nostalgia. Thus, in Cather’s broader argument, modern civilization was *not* characterized by “progress.” Cather often expressed contempt for the shallowness of modern life and instead stressed the importance of the “precious, the incommunicable past” in her work (*Antonia* 272). Early on her career, Cather lamented the supposed weakness and exhaustion of modern life, and valorized “primitive” strength, vitality, and violence: “the world is tired” she wrote, “jaded, exhausted, satiated we have come back to nature acknowledging that she is best” (*Kingdom* 342).¹¹ Consequentially, through much of Cather’s fiction, art and imagination form antidotes to the cheap commercialism of the modern world, as Cather locates the sources of art in the intertwined concepts of memory, childhood, nature and the primitive.

Memories of childhood and the vitality of nature and the primitive are central to Cather’s theory of artistic composition in *The Song of the Lark* and mark the way in which Cather’s theory of culture combines romantic nostalgia within a narrative of artistic progress. Throughout the novel, Cather suggests that art is grounded in memories of childhood. As a mature artist, Thea realizes that “the old things,” or childhood impressions, “are in everything I do. . . A child’s attitude toward everything is an artist’s attitude. I am more or less of an artist now, but then I was nothing else” (381). Indeed, Cather suggests that the source for art is located even prior to childhood experience, in one’s “nature”: Wunsch, Thea’s first music teacher, argues that “some things cannot be taught. . . For a singer there must be something in the inside from the beginning . . . in the baby, when it makes its first cry, like der Rhythmus, or it is not to be” (70).

Cather’s emphasis on “beginnings,” then, moves backward through childhood into nature. Thea has, according to Wunsch, “a nature-voice. . . breathed from the creature and apart from language,

like the sound of the wind in the trees, or the murmur of water”(69-70). This pre-linguistic impulse is in turn associated with the landscapes of the Great Plains or the Southwest. In terms that combine images of childhood, nature and art, Thea describes her home in Colorado as “young and fresh and kindly. . .there was a new song in that blue air which had never been sung in the world before. It was hard to tell about it, for it had nothing to do with words; it was. . .a naive, generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, childlike power to love, just as it gave one its coarse, brilliant flowers” (*SL* 186-187). Childlike and naive, the landscape itself is an artist producing “coarse, brilliant” artifacts, inspiring the child-artists who inhabit it in a way that “had nothing to do with words.”

These pre-linguistic impulses of childhood, nature and the landscape are also found in the Indian. Like the Colorado landscape, the cliff-dweller artifacts and their setting combine to generate “pleasant and incomplete conceptions” in Thea’s mind that “had something to do with fragrance and color and sound, but almost nothing to do with words” (*SL* 251). The floors of the adobe houses and the trails seem to “transmit” to Thea “feelings” that are “not expressible in words,” but imprinted on her body. These feelings make everything “simple and definite,” “as things had been in childhood” (*SL* 257). Thus, the cliff-dwellers’ artifacts occupy the same category in Cather’s theory of art as landscape and childhood.

Thus each of these categories—nature, landscape, childhood, and Indian artifacts—are valorized as the sources of artistic inspiration. But, while on the one hand, Cather counters the progressive optimism of the early twentieth century by valorizing the past and the primitive, on the other hand, *within* the category of art, Cather constructs her own version of artistic progress through “cultivation.” In this teleology, childhood memories, nature, and “primitive” art are the raw materials, the *necessary* but not sufficient conditions, for the highest artistic achievements. But crucially, these sources must be accessed from temporal and spatial distance, *re-*possessed and transformed by the artist through progressive “cultivation.”

They are repeatedly framed as “beginnings” and “foundations” precisely because they are to be built upon and shaped into more perfect forms of art. True art requires distance from these sources. Quoting Wagner, Thea argues that “art is only a way of *remembering* youth. And the older we grow the more precious it seems to us, and the more richly we can present that memory” (*SL* 381, emphasis mine). The child’s experience (like nature or primitive art) is just that, a child’s experience; to make it “art,” memory (of

childhood, of nature, of the primitive) must be *re*-possessed, *re*-remembered, by a later self. The more distance separates the experience from the remembering self, the more “richly” it can be represented.

The process by which Thea is able to “more richly present that memory” is “refinement.” In the climax of the novel, describing Thea’s most fully realized artistic performance, the narrator suggests that “artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a *refining* of the sense of truthfulness. . . She merely *came into full possession* of things she had been *refining* and *perfecting* for so long” (*SL* 395, emphasis mine). This “refinement” is elsewhere called “cultivation.” Thea comes to Harsanyi, her first professional music instructor, as a “fine young savage,” talented but with “no cultivation whatever” (*SL* 174). Culture, then, transforms Thea from a “savage” to a “refined” artist. Crucially, culture here is *self*-culture, the shaping and improvement of the self, rather than either the exposure to great works, or a specific way of life.

This process of “cultivation” reveals the progressive teleology of Cather’s “long chain of human endeavor.” Linked rhetorically with childhood and nature, the Indian artifacts of Panther Canyon stand in the same relation to Thea’s art as does Thea’s “natural” talent and her childhood experiences: just as Thea’s “nature” requires “cultivation” to create art, so too does the Indian pottery represent the “beginning” of “what was to come”—namely the “refinement” of Thea’s experiences of the Indian artifacts into her art. Thea’s art represents a more advanced stage of development—it is the original artistic desire of the Indian that she absorbs and develops.

Cather, then, on the one hand constructs a narrative of evolutionary progressivism within the realm of art, while on the other, opposes the application of such narratives to modern civilization as a whole. In combining evolutionary progressivism and romantic resistance to modernity, Cather constructs a model of culture that combines in complex ways two distinct, if related, traditions of thinking about culture in the early twentieth century. On the one hand, as I have argued, Cather’s placement of Indian art within an progressive history of “human endeavor” draws on the evolutionary paradigm of ethnologists like Tylor—an evolutionary paradigm that, while relegating “primitive” art to a lower stage on the evolutionary scale, nonetheless counted it *as* “Culture.” On the other hand, Cather’s distinction between the progress of the kingdom of art and the general state of modern civilization, diverges from Tylor and Morgan. For Tylor and other evolutionary ethnologists, “cultivation” and “civilization” were essentially synonymous, both terms measuring a society’s technical and scientific and artistic advancement. Thea’s

artistic “cultivation,” however, takes place in opposition to the mediocrity of modern American life—particularly evident in the section describing Thea’s life in Chicago before her trip to the Southwest is entitled “Stupid Faces.”

In seeing the “cultivation” of the individual artist as distinct from, and in tension with, the progress of “civilization,” Cather draws on a romantic tradition that includes Carlyle (who Cather particularly admired), Coleridge, and ultimately, Matthew Arnold.¹² Like Tylor and Morgan, Arnold’s version of culture is normative and universal, producing a scale of values ascending toward “perfection.” As Arnold famously put it, “culture” is the “pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know. . . the best which has been thought and said in the world”—a definition that for Arnold, unlike for Tylor or Morgan (or Cather), would not have included “primitive” art at all (5). But while Tylor and Morgan identify this progress toward perfection with the technological improvements of civilization, for Arnold “culture” is an “inward condition of the mind and spirit. . . *at variance* with the mechanical and material civilization in esteem with us” (emphasis added) (33).¹³

In *The Song of the Lark*, culture is likewise an inward process: as Cather writes of Thea’s climactic performance, “[W]ithin herself, she entered into the inheritance that she herself had laid up.” This “internal” operation of cultivation in turn emphasizes the individual as opposed to the social whole—the tradition of the romantic artist who is the bearer of culture, in opposition to the mass of Philistines who have no culture. This distinction between the artist’s inward cultivation and the outward “civilization” that surrounds (and even threatens) the artist is in turn evident in Cather’s description of the Cliff-Dwellers. Far from the Cliff-Dwellers’ pottery embodying a collective “whole way of life,” they are, like Thea’s opera, produced only by a select few; as Henry explains to Thea, “the stupid women carried water for most of their lives; the cleverer ones made the vessels to hold it” (*SL* 254). The Cliff-Dwellers, it seems, had their “stupid faces” and their Philistines as well.

Possessing Culture: the Kingdom of Culture and the Course of Empire

Cather, then, constructs a model of culture that is both romantic and progressive, moving to re-possess the past to create more “refined” art in the present. This movement, I argue, is in turn an *imperial* movement. For Cather, this inward operation of *self-*

possession has a corresponding outward movement, as the processes of “cultivation” are also connected to empire. If, as I have argued, the Cliff-Dweller artifacts represent for Cather an essential but insufficiently cultivated “desire,” one index of its insufficiency is the Cliff-Dwellers’ failure to move beyond the canyon that confined them. In several key moments, Cather uses the image of an eagle in flight to symbolize desire. Basking in the sun in Panther Canyon, Thea is galvanized by the sudden sight of an eagle soaring high above: “O eagle of eagles! Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! From a cleft in the heart of the world she saluted it” (*SL* 269). In contrast, Thea concludes that, despite their artistic achievements, the Indians are ultimately “a timid, nest building folk, like the swallows,” who “lived their lives between the echoing cliffs and never dared to rise out of the shadow of the canyon walls” (*SL* 253, 252).¹⁴ Again, Indian “desire” is valued as the desire necessary for any artistic achievement, but not sufficient to constitute higher “links in the chain of human endeavor.”

Another group in the novel, however, *is* linked to the eagle, and by extension, the artist—namely, the pioneer. Early in the novel, Thea is moved to tears by finding the signs of the wagon trains that transported “the Forty-niners and the Mormons” westward across the plains. Recalling the first telegraph message sent across the Missouri River—“Westward the course of Empire takes its way”—Thea in turn links empire with the flight of the eagles: “Thea remembered that message when she sighted down the wagon tracks toward the blue mountains. . . The spirit of human courage seemed to live up there with the eagles” (*SL* 49-50). The eagle as a symbol for courage, achievement, or desire, then, links the pioneer to the “glorious striving for human art.”

Both the pioneer and the artist, it turns out, engage in taking “possession”—the pioneer of the land, the artist of herself. For the pioneer, “the course of Empire” entailed an intimate knowledge of the land that equaled possession: Ray Kennedy—a railroad brakeman, and thus an agent of westward expansion and consolidation—“had that feeling of empire; as if all the Southwest really belonged to him because he. . .knew it, as he said, ‘like the blisters of his own hands’” (*SL* 187). Thea, in turn, becomes an artist in the moment that she “came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long” (*SL* 395). Thus, the pioneer takes possession of the landscape—in novels such as *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, explicitly in order to “cultivate” it—just as the artist takes

“possession” of *herself*, through “cultivation” or self-culture.¹⁵

Thus, Cather constructs artistic cultivation as a kind of (self) possession analogous to the pioneer’s possession of the continent—and conversely, envisions imperial possession of the land as an aesthetic achievement. Cather’s linking Indian pottery, the process of empire and the progress of culture were, of course, lessons embedded in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American anthropology. Morgan’s student, John Wesley Powell, was himself an agent of empire, an Army major who headed west after the Civil War to map the terrain and study the Native Americans, before becoming the head of the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology. Under his guidance, that institution then organized its museum presentation of pottery shards like those Thea discovers around precisely the progressive narrative Cather deploys in *The Song of the Lark*.¹⁶

By 1925 and *The Professor’s House*, the architecture of Cather’s Kingdom of Art has changed. In that novel, Cather’s construction of Indian artifacts as forming a “meaningful” “whole” both reflects and participates in the debates over new versions of culture as plural, relative wholes that would come to define American anthropology in the 20s and 30s. In *The Song of the Lark*, however, Cather’s construction of culture marks an earlier phase of that modernist debate. By intertwining the evolutionary, progressive theories of culture emerging from ethnologists like Tylor and Morgan, with Matthew Arnold’s romantic, anti-progressive version of high Culture, Cather uses this complexity to depict Indian artifacts as early stages in a “long chain of human endeavor,” stages that, while crucial in their embodiment of artistic desire, nevertheless must be progressively refined to achieve the level of art represented by Thea’s opera.

This progressive narrative of the evolution of art, moreover, parallels the *Bildungsroman* of Thea’s progressive refinement of her artistic talent; this *Bildungsroman*, moreover, finds its analogy in the progress of Empire. At each level—personal “cultivation,” objects of high Culture, artifacts of “primitive culture,” and the creation of “national culture”—culture is characterized by the act of taking “possession” through imperial movement. The artist takes possession of and shapes her artistic media—that is, herself—even as the pioneer takes possession of and shapes the landscape; the Indian potters shapes beautiful, if primitive, aesthetic objects which are then possessed by modern ethnologists, who compose them into narratives of progressive refinement. *The Song of the Lark*, then, marks a key moment in the debates over culture that would in many ways define

modernism between 1910-1930, and Cather's complex interweaving of various meanings of culture in the novel—and indeed, the ways those meanings differ from those constructed ten years later in *The Professor's House*—reveal her active and ongoing contribution to those debates over the course of her career.

Notes

¹ The classic works are Stocking, “The Ethnographer’s Magic,” and especially “Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective.” In what has become a convention in studies of the history of the culture concept, I use Culture, with a capital C, to designate an elite, universal and hierarchal sense of culture, in contrast to the lowercase, plural form of the word designating an integrated “way of life” that becomes common in the twentieth century. For an example of this usage, see Manganaro 3.

² For the intersection of literature and anthropology in the 1920’s, see especially Manganaro and Hegeman.

³ See, for example, Sergeant 144; Woodress 10; Harrell 29.

⁴ See Woodress 391; Harrell; Rosowski and Slot.

⁵ For Cushing’s role in promoting late-nineteenth Century fascination with Pueblo culture of the Southwest, see Hinsley, “Zunis and Brahmins,” and Evans.

⁶ For example, in 1898 the Santa Fe route published a handbook entitled *The Moki Snake Dance*, “a popular account of that unparalleled dramatic pagan ceremony of the Pueblo Indians of Tusayan,” by Smithsonian ethnologist Walter Hough, colleague of Otis Mason and John Wesley Powell.

⁷ For the imbrication of, first, nineteenth century ethnologists and, later, early twentieth Century anthropologists with the colonial projects of administrators and missionaries, see, for example, Stocking, “The Ethnographer’s Magic;” Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, and “On Ethnographic Allegory.”

⁸ Austin’s “A Land With Little Rain” appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1903, and was followed by a series of stories and articles, including *The Basket Woman* (1904), *Lost Borders* (1909), and *The Arrow Maker* (1911). Cather knew Austin, having met her in New York’s literary circuit around 1910, and the two shared an admiring, if competitive, relationship until a falling out in the late 20s. For the complexities of their relationship, see Stout, especially Chapter 3.

⁹ In her account of the Cliff City in *The Professor’s House*, Cather stresses the way in which each individual element and artifact in the City “hangs together” in order to “mean something”: as Tom Outland puts it, the City “was as still as a sculpture—and something like that. It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition,” with the central tower “the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something” (PH 179-180). In contrast to the pottery fragments Thea contemplates in *Song*, Tom deals exclusively with “water jars and bowls [that] stood about unbroken” (PH 186); while the potsherds form a link in the diachronic “chain of human endeavor” in *The Song of the Lark*, the whole pots in *The Professor’s House* are linked synchronically only to each other, to the architectural elements of the Cliff City, and to the way of life of which they were a part. In constructing culture as an integrated way of life that is above all “whole” and “meaningful,” in which any artifact becomes significant only

in relation to the entire way of life of which it is a part, Cather echoes the relative, plural conception of cultures being developed by Boasian anthropologists like Edward Sapir in the 1920s. For Cather's construction of a spatial conception of culture in *The Professor's House* and its relation to Boasian anthropology, see Aronoff.

¹⁰ This principle found its visual expression in the dominant mode of ethnological display practiced in American museums through the late nineteenth century—practices institutionalized by men like Otis Mason, the curator of the Division of Ethnology of the Smithsonian's National Museum, and by the head of the Bureau of American Ethnology, John Wesley Powell, who saw himself as a student of Morgan. By translating the evolutionary narrative in spatial terms, objects were classified by type according to apparent function and arranged in display cases alongside other objects of the same category in supposed order of evolutionary development, as opposed to being grouped by region or by group of origin. As Hinsley and others have shown, the paradigm shift in the culture concept in the first decades of the twentieth century—a shift in which I am arguing Cather participates—finds one of its earliest expressions in terms of arguments over the proper mode of ethnographic display. Of particular note are the Mason-Boas debates over displays in the Smithsonian museum. Otis T. Mason, one of the curators of the Smithsonian, used evolutionary theory as a guide to arranging artifacts and thus arranged Indian materials in groups according to function (baskets, fish hooks, cooking implements) and in order of apparent sophistication or level of technical ability, to display the evolutionary progress of technology over time, leading to the modern industrial age as the highest stage of that progression. Franz Boas argued in a series of articles that artifacts should instead be regarded in the context (geographical, historical, material) of the group-life in which it is found. "We have to study," he argued,

each technological specimen individually in its history and in its medium By regarding a single implement outside of its surroundings, outside of other inventions of the people to whom it belongs, and outside of other phenomena affecting that people and its productions, we cannot understand its meaning.

Boas proposed the "tribal arrangement of specimens" thus creating an artifactual representation of the idea of cultures as relative wholes (62, 46). For extensive discussion of the Mason-Boas debates, see also Hegeman, Jacknis, and Manganaro.

Interestingly, according to Elisabeth Sergeant, Cather attended an exhibit of Mesa Verde pottery at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in the spring of 1914, while completing *The Song of the Lark*. Unfortunately, no catalogue remains from the exhibit to shed light on what method of display might have been used.

¹¹ For a study of anti-modernism and primitivism in late-nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture, see Lears.

¹² The classic work tracing the romantic conception of “culture” as a term deployed in opposition to “civilization,” in the work of figures like Coleridge, Carlyle and Arnold, is Williams.

¹³ For an analysis of Arnold, Tylor and Morgan’s theories of culture, see Stocking, “Arnold, Tylor and the Uses of Invention.”

¹⁴ This same ambivalence toward Indian achievements is also everywhere in Cather’s account of her visit to Mesa Verde, published in the *Denver Times* in January 1916, just three months after the publication of *The Song of the Lark*. In the article, Cather praises the “harmony” of Indian architecture in contrast to American “ugliness”; at the same time, Cather suggests that this harmony may come at too high a price. Mesa Verde architecture, she argues, is a “successful evasion of ugliness,” but “perhaps an indolent evasion”; later she remarks that “the mesa people may have been somewhat enslaved by their strongholds, and their temper may have been softened by their comparative comfort and their attention to order and detail” (Rosowski and Slotte 84, 85). “They seem not to have struggled to overcome their environment” and “went on gravely and reverently repeating the past, rather than battling for anything new” (85). In the end, she suggests that “the most plausible theory as to their extinction is that the dwellers on the Mesa Verde were routed and driven out by their vulgar, pushing neighbors of the plains, who were less comfortable, less satisfied, and consequently more energetic” (85). In *The Professor’s House*, there is no such hint at “indolence”; on the contrary, the Cliff-Dwellers’ patience and unrelenting effort is emphasized. Cather’s description of the Cliff-Dweller ruins in this article has often been linked to her construction of Cliff City in *The Professor’s House*. Given how soon it is written after *The Song of the Lark*, and more crucially, the characterization of Indian “indolence” in *Song* and the article, it seems more fruitful to see the *Denver Times* article more closely linked to Cather’s theory of Indian culture as in *Song*, than the very different construction of culture in *The Professor’s House*.

¹⁵ The identification of the pioneer with the artist is made even more explicitly in novels like *O Pioneers!*. In this novel, Cather argues that a “pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” (28).

¹⁶ For an examination of Powell’s work as a soldier, explorer, and head of the BAE, see Worster and Hinsley.

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Locating Mexicans in *The Song of the Lark*

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In her 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark*, Cather imagines the town of Moonstone, Colorado as a relief map in various colors of sand. Such a map “could easily have indicated the social classifications of Moonstone, since these conformed to certain topographical boundaries, and every child understood them perfectly” (SL 31). On the very outskirts of this imaginary map, far from the fashionable part of town and bounded by a deep ravine, is “Mexican Town.” The presence of a Mexican community within the pages of *The Song of the Lark* is, for Cather, a unique depiction of a nonwhite community in a novel with a relatively contemporary setting.¹ This community’s most visible member is Juan Tellamentez, known affectionately to the townspeople as “Spanish Johnny.” Spanish Johnny and “Mexican Town” allow Thea to explore cultural difference within a narrative and historical context that does not threaten her own centrality. Ultimately, Thea’s experiences in “Mexican Town” prove to be a catalyst for an examination of her loyalty to family and community and its potential opposition to the requirements of art. Despite the centrality of Thea’s experience as a mediating factor in *The Song of the Lark*, Johnny and his community emerge as more than simply a useful plot device.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said confronts the fraught project of addressing the political dimensions of high culture: “It is difficult . . . to make observations about art that preserve its unique endowments and at the same time map its affiliations, but I submit we must attempt this and set the art in the global, earthly context” (7). Mapping Cather’s affiliations has been the basis of a number of ongoing scholarly conversations among her critics. Margaret O’Connor has termed her “a regionalist of many regions” (815), and indeed Cather does set her dozen novels in an extraordinary variety of locales. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea’s hometown Moonstone’s Colorado setting belies its similarity to Red Cloud, Nebraska, where

Cather lived from the age of nine until she left for the University of Nebraska at sixteen. As Susan Rosowski and others have noted, Cather returned to her Midwestern roots in *The Song of the Lark* even more thoroughly than she did in *O Pioneers*. The novel has numerous autobiographical components, including the use of a vernacular Midwestern narrative voice, a departure for Cather. The presence of such a “highly-particularized, personal point of view” (74), to use Susan Rosowski’s phrase, and the novel’s wealth of detail encourage an initial look at Cather’s biography for the genesis of Spanish Johnny and *The Song of the Lark*’s Mexican community.

Willa Cather traveled to Arizona to visit her brother Douglass in April of 1912, a mere two months after that state joined the United States—the last of the contiguous forty-eight states to do so. Cather’s first visit to the Southwest thus coincided with the delineation of the U.S.-Mexican border and the establishment of the Southwest as an irrevocably American and (in theory at least) English-speaking territory. James Woodress notes in the Prologue to his 1987 biography that her letters from this trip are “filled” with stories of a handsome and charismatic young Mexican man named Julio (6). A few clear correlations exist between Cather’s time with Julio and events in *The Song of the Lark*. Julio, like Spanish Johnny, was a musician. The Mexican dance and serenade Thea attends with Spanish Johnny and the Ramas brothers is drawn from the dances she attended with Julio, and the music Julio and his friends performed for her (Lewis 82, Woodress 6). Julio also transcribed folksongs for Cather, just as Spanish Johnny does for Thea in *The Song of the Lark*.

Woodress claims that “Cather never found occasion in her later career to put Julio in a novel, unless there is a bit of him in Spanish Johnny in *The Song of the Lark*” (7). Edith Lewis says of Julio, “He is Spanish Johnny from *The Song of the Lark*, and the Mexican part of the book is, I think, entirely taken from this time” (82). Complicating Spanish Johnny’s antecedents is a letter Cather wrote to S.S. McClure stating (in Janis Stout’s paraphrase) “she is glad he likes ‘Spanish Johnny’ who is a real person she knew as a child.” Stout dates this letter March 13, 1912, adding a question mark (Stout 217). James Woodress refers to what must be the same letter, claiming “Spanish Johnny was a guitar-playing Mexican who lived in Red Cloud” (267). Woodress identifies the letter’s date as February 1, 1915 (537 n. 267). But Stout’s date appears to be the correct one, since the letter also refers to the stroke suffered by Isabelle McClung’s mother. Cather

was in the McClung home in Pittsburgh during March of 1912, her first trip to the Southwest delayed by the illness of Mrs. McClung who died a short time later—long before 1915, when Woodress dates the letter. Using Stout's date for the letter indicates that Cather had written a version of the character of "Spanish Johnny" before she made her first trip to the Southwest and met Julio. The 1923 reissue of *April Twilights* contains a poem entitled "Spanish Johnny"; perhaps it is to this that Cather's letter to McClure refers. Thus, the complicated nature of the origins of the character known as Spanish Johnny provide a partial index to the competing influences that shaped Cather's depiction of Mexicans in *The Song of the Lark*. Sharon O'Brien recognizes the imaginative possibilities of the historical Julio stating that in her letters Cather "refers to him as silent and opaque" (412). O'Brien asserts that, for Cather, Julio is more of a potentiality than a person, claiming "perhaps because of the language and cultural differences he did not speak enough to intrude upon her as a real human presence. Because he was so different and in a sense unknowable, Cather could create him imaginatively" (412).

Cather, in her letters, is at least aware of Julio as mestizo, a person of mixed Spanish and Native ancestry, and her descriptions of him imply an Indian as well as colonial background. In fact, for Cather one of Julio's most entrancing characteristics is his connection to the indigenous past of the North American continent. E.K. Brown, Cather's first biographer, comments on Cather's view of the Mexicans she met in Arizona: "She felt in some of them a tragic and heroic quality, associated with the Aztec strain which gave to their other traits an intensity that was quite new to her" (130). John N. Swift and Joseph R. Urgo note in 2002, almost fifty years later, that Julio enabled Cather "to imagine a high Aztec civilization that might rival that of the classical Europe she loved" (3). Cather obviously connects Julio with a pre-Columbian North America; according to Woodress it is Julio who tells her the Aztec legend "The Forty Lovers of the Queen" that appears in the short story "Coming, Aphrodite!" (Woodress 6). In her essay on "Coming, Aphrodite!," Michele Barale notes the way the frame of the short story shifts the embedded legend's origins: Instead of coming from a contemporary indigenous person, the tale is told to Don Hedger by a Mexican priest who "found it in an old manuscript book in a monastery down there, written by some Spanish missionary who got his stories from the Aztecs" ("Coming" 42). According to Barale, such a change in provenance

shifts the story from an expression of indigenous culture into a paradigm of colonial transcription and appropriation (270).

The Mexicans portrayed in *The Song of the Lark* similarly lack any indigenous associations. As his name indicates, it is Spanish Johnny's colonial Spanish background that the novel emphasizes. Indeed, he sometimes refers to himself as Spanish rather than Mexican, at one point telling the well-traveled brakeman Ray Kennedy, "You been all over pretty near. Like a Spanish boy" (SL 45). Johnny has a profile that is "strong and severe, like an Indian's" (SL 40), but his wife, known only as "Mrs. Tellamentez", possesses a type of face "not uncommon in Spain" (SL 40). Superficially, it appears that Cather intentionally deracinates the novel's Mexican inhabitants, stripping them of any indigenous background and depicting them as both ethnically and culturally Spanish. Brown obliquely refers to this phenomenon when he writes, "The picture of Johnny Tellamentez and his 'Spanish' friends in *The Song of the Lark* caught a great deal of what she must have felt in her first encounter with Indians and Mexicans in the Southwest" (130). Brown's enclosure of the word "Spanish" with quotations questions the authenticity of the Mexicans' European antecedents.

Discussing modes of self-representation among Chicano authors, Raymund Paredes explains that in the context of early twentieth-century American literature the use of the determiner "Spanish" for Mexicans was not particularly unusual:

Historically, the very term "Mexican" has had so harshly pejorative a connotation in the United States that a number of Mexican-American writers shrank from it and, ultimately, from their true heritage, creating in its place a mythical past of unsullied Europeanism. The New Mexicans particularly venerated and exaggerated the Spanish component of their heritage. (87)

In an endnote, Paredes connects this idea specifically to Cather using *The Song of the Lark* as an example:

The dynamics of this phenomenon are effectively portrayed by Willa Cather in *The Song of the Lark*. The novel features a Mexican named Juan Tellamantez who is so esteemed by the Anglo residents of Moonstone, Colorado, that they decorously avoid reference to his

correct ethnicity; rather he is known as "Spanish Johnny." (109 n. 63)

Cather, at moments in the text, seems to indicate an awareness of the phenomenon Paredes is addressing, remarking at one point, "The 'Spanish Boys' are reticent about their own affairs" when explaining why none of Moonstone's white residents know about the adobe dance hall in "Mexican Town" (*SL* 193). Both her use of quotation marks and her acknowledgment of the Mexicans' discretion reinforce Paredes's reading of the descriptor "Spanish" as a kind of tactful evasion. Paredes's reference to *The Song of the Lark* appears in an article entitled "The Evolution of Chicano Literature" that was published in 1978, years before there was any significant critical discourse regarding Cather and race. That Paredes chooses to call attention to this particular text in an article about Mexican American literary history indicates the historical significance of Cather's portrayal of Mexicans. Paredes's interest in Cather's depiction of Mexican Americans reflects the "critical urgency" Said claims informs the reading of non-white scholars when they read white authors' depictions of themselves and their communities (65).

Despite the novel's use of the descriptor "Spanish" and refusal to acknowledge any vestiges of indigeneity (a fact that is particularly remarkable considering how indigenous culture is so venerated later in the novel), details from *The Song of the Lark* indicate that Cather had some understanding of the settlement patterns of Latinos at the end of the nineteenth century. She terms the Mexican community an oddity "north of Pueblo" (*SL* 39), indicating an awareness of the presence of Mexican enclaves in southern Colorado. David Wishart credits the Latino migration to Colorado to two major factors: the construction of four rail lines running from central Mexico into California and New Mexico and the "social upheaval" of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 (348).² The fact that men move to Moonstone first in search of work and then bring their families is typical of the migratory patterns of late nineteenth century Mexican workers. The handsome Ramas brothers, en route to their "job-as" in Salt Lake City, are originally from Torreon, a city in the Mexican state of Coahuila (193). One of the Ramases is transporting a double bass, probably indicating that he and his brother came to Colorado via one of the newly built rail lines from Mexico and could take a certain amount of bulky luggage. Woodress establishes that "Colorado" functions as "familiar territory" for

Cather, largely because of regular visits to her brother Roscoe in Wyoming (4). Perhaps on these visits she also gleaned some knowledge of aspects of Colorado's Mexican population.

Despite distinct historical reasons for increased Mexican migration into Colorado and the novel's own acknowledgement of the presence of jobs in Moonstone, *The Song of the Lark* states, somewhat curiously, that the Mexican community within the town's borders "had come about accidentally" (SL 39). According to Cather, "The Mexicans arrived so quietly, with their blankets and musical instruments, that before Moonstone was awake to the fact, there was a Mexican quarter, a dozen families or more" (SL 39). It is difficult to see anything "accidental" about moving to a place with available jobs and then staying and putting down roots. In contrast to the purposeful homesteading of the other immigrant groups Cather depicts, the Mexicans suddenly appear. One way of looking at the Mexicans' quiet arrival indicates that they divined (probably correctly) that provincial Moonstone might not have welcomed their presence in any large and permanent numbers. Read within turn-of-the-twentieth-century (as well as present-day) rhetoric surrounding immigration to the United States, however, Cather's depiction of the Mexicans' covert entrance into the community also seems disturbingly close to a portrayal of a non-white group deviously infiltrating the country.

The Mexicans' precarious position in Moonstone and the dangers of proudly inhabiting a Mexican cultural identity are brought to the foreground when Johnny himself offers a rare detail of life in Mexico. During her birthday outing to the nearby sand hills, he casually remarks to Thea that Mexican families often keep a snake inside the house to prey on rodents: "They keep a little mat for him by the fire, and at night he curl up there and sit with the family, just as friendly!" (SL 45) Johnny tells this story outside the boundaries of Moonstone and in the presence of both Thea and Ray Kennedy, two white people with whom he feels comfortable. Moonstone prejudice nevertheless rears its head when Thea's younger brother Gunner replies to this confidence with "disgust" declaiming, "I think that's a dirty Mexican way to keep a house; so there!" (SL 45) Thea's brother's aggressive prejudice reveals Moonstone's less than positive attitude toward cultural difference and emphasizes Paredes's interpretation of the Mexican community's and Johnny's "Spanish" identities as necessary cloaking devices.

Johnny responds to Thea's brother by shrugging his shoulders and saying equivocally, "Perhaps" (*SL* 45). Since Thea is only twelve in this scene, Gunner is still very much a child and has presumably been taught to respect adults, particularly grown men; his insolence, as well as the frank, intentional racism of his comment (capped by the aggressive and childish "so there"), indicates both his belief that the Mexican man, despite superior age, experience, and talent, is his inferior while also reflecting his clumsy assumption of the privileges of white patriarchal authority. Johnny's non-confrontational reply signals his own necessary acknowledgement of his subordinate position within the Moonstone hierarchy. The narrative obliquely acknowledges both Gunner's racism and the necessity of Johnny's passivity: "A Mexican learns to dive below insults or soar above them, after he crosses the border" (*SL* 45). Cather, however, crucially does not explain why such evasive action is necessary, nor does she elaborate on what might befall a Mexican who chose to confront ridicule directly. Mob violence targeting Mexican Americans in the Southwestern United States was not uncommon in both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb have uncovered 597 documented lynchings of Mexican Americans between 1848 and 1928 (413). While this number appears small beside the recorded number of lynchings of African Americans, the smaller numerical presence of Mexican Americans makes the numbers statistically significant.³ Carrigan and Webb explain, "Because of the smaller size of the Spanish-speaking population, the total number of victims was much lower, but the chance of being murdered by a mob was comparable for both Mexicans and African Americans" (414).⁴

Moonstone's persistent racism and the latent threat of mob violence might offer one explanation for Johnny's frequent disappearances. Johnny was the first Mexican to arrive in Moonstone and is the town's most visible and popular Mexican inhabitant. For many of Moonstone's white residents, he is probably the representative face of the Mexican community and accountable for their behavior as well as his own. At the same time, as a fluent English speaker and established independent artisan, Johnny is probably a mediating figure for his Spanish-speaking neighbors in their interactions with white Moonstone. A talented decorator and painter, Johnny has no difficulty finding employment; however, he is periodically overtaken by a kind of mania and runs away, performing with his mandolin in various cities and returning impoverished and

sick. Johnny's wanderings always take him across the border and into Mexico as he "plays his way southward from saloon to saloon". This behavior is depicted in the novel as utterly irrational or "crazy" (SL 41). Admittedly, Johnny's actions could be the result of alcoholism; they could also be the frustrations of a gifted musician with no outlet for his talent. But the pressures endemic to double-consciousness might be the most plausible reason for what the novel calls his "craziness" (SL 41). Mrs. Tellamentez tries to explain Johnny's periodic absences to Thea and Dr. Archie: "He is good at heart, but he has no head. He fools himself. You do not understand in this country, you are progressive. But he has no judgment, and he is fooled" (SL 42). She holds up a conch-shell to Dr. Archie's ear to illustrate her point, claiming that for Johnny the sound inside the shell "is the sea itself" (SL 42). According to Mrs. Tellamentez's explanation her husband simply has no sense of proportion and is unable to function in modern, "progressive" America.

Marilee Lindemann affirms Cather's knowledge of the racial dynamics at work within the novel, pointing to incidents where "the subversive, celebratory mood of *The Song of the Lark* is at times undercut by signs of dis-ease and anxiety about the security of white racial power and civilization" and claiming that "the text manifests some superficial awareness of these anxieties" (60). Lindemann gives two examples of this textual consciousness: one is the narrative's explanation of Johnny's evasive reply to Gunner's insult, while the other is Mrs. Kronborg's comment, "No use spoiling your Sunday dinner with race prejudices" (SL 201), offered as a rebuttal to Thea's brothers' complaints about her association with the Mexican community. The complaints of Thea's siblings result from her attendance at a dance in the Mexican section of town soon after she arrives home from her first winter of study in Chicago.

This dance is the longest and most detailed interaction Thea has with the Mexicans. It takes place in the "adobe dance hall" whose existence the people of Moonstone are unaware of (SL 193). Thea is immediately struck by how different this dance is from the Moonstone dances she has attended where "the boys played rough jokes and thought it smart to be clumsy" and where "the bawling voice of the caller" was always in evidence (SL 229). Noticing the apparent accord among the Mexicans, Thea questions "whether the Mexicans had no jealousies or neighborly grudges as the people in Moonstone had" (SL 195). Ann Romines describes the Mexican dance as one of the novel's

“artful liminal occasions of inclusion” that gives Thea entrance “into a world of art far more generous than anything Moonstone has to offer” (197). Cather’s idealization of the Mexican community appears superficially positive; however, their community’s designation as a utopian space forces the Mexicans outside the boundaries of America’s historical framework and encourages them to be read as anachronistic and quaint. The picturesque velvet outfits that the Ramas brothers and the other Mexican men wear during the dance give the scene an arcane quality; in fact, in *O Pioneers!* Cather shows Emil Bergson wearing a similar “Mexican outfit” to the church bazaar as a type of fancy dress.

As the dance scene proceeds, the sharp distinctions between “Mexican town” and the rest of Moonstone fade into the background as Thea loses her slight awkwardness and becomes caught up in the festive atmosphere. The novel’s depiction of the Mexicans’ difference has thus far, despite the twenty-first century reader’s awareness of the dangers of cultural essentialism, been a positive thing, since, as Romines notes, the Mexican Americans’ more generous attitudes compare favorably with Moonstone’s narrow-mindedness and rigidity. Now, though, the locus of contrast begins to shift until it situates itself between Thea and the Mexicans themselves. The physical differences between Thea and the Mexicans begin to come into relief as Thea’s blonde hair and white skin captivate the young Ramas brothers, who find her “dazzlingly beautiful.” (SL 195). Thea’s beauty is described through a number of religious allusions. Silvo and Felipe Ramas say she is “*Blanco y oro, semejante la Pascua!*” (White and gold, like Easter!)” (SL 195-6). Silvo, when his brother asks if there will be girls like Thea in Salt Lake City rejoins, “Plenty more *a paraiso* maybe!” (196). Later, when the group has left the dance hall and adjourned to Spanish Johnny’s for a “‘lil’ *musica*”, the brothers position themselves beside Thea “one on her right, one on her left.” Johnny refers to Felipe and Silvo as “‘los acolitos,’ the altar boys” (SL 196). These Christian, specifically Catholic, references to Thea, although seemingly innocent, and even humorous, subtly deify her; and she becomes a blonde goddess attended by darker ministrants. Although Thea, as she herself frankly admits, is the “poorest dancer” (SL 195) there, the Ramas brothers gaze continually at her, even when they are dancing with other (Mexican) women; this feat, according to Cather, “was not difficult; one blonde head moving among so many dark ones” (SL 196).

When Thea begins to sing, the physical boundaries that separate her from her ethnically different audience dissolve. She is again the center of attention, and her performance is depicted in a striking blend of sensory images. The brightness of the moon illuminates the scene, and the moon itself “looked like a great pale flower in the sky” (*SL* 196). The moonflowers that surround the Tellamentez’s door are “wide open and of an unearthly white” (*SL* 196). The faces of her Mexican audience appear “out of the shadow like the white flowers over the door” (*SL* 197). The moonflowers, the moon itself, and the faces of Thea’s listeners become lovely, interchangeable images. The aesthetic confusion that renders the Mexican people so prettily at one with the natural world also makes them part of the background that effectively highlights Thea and her performance. As she sings for her audience, “they turned themselves and all they had over to her” (*SL* 197). Stout in her essay “Brown and White at the Dance” points out the fact that Thea’s “ultra whiteness not only structures the hierarchy of the situation [. . .] but is expressly given tribute at the one point when the text presumes to reach into the minds of ‘the Mexicans’” (39). Strikingly, Thea is singing folksongs that belong to the culture of her listeners. Cather describes the Latino audience’s faces as “eager, open, unprotected,” highlighting their vulnerability to Thea’s cultural theft (*SL* 197). Her appropriation of their music is followed by the figurative acquisition of their very selves:

She felt as if all of these warm-blooded people debouched into her. Mrs. Tellamentez’s fateful resignation, Johnny’s madness, the adoration of the boy who lay still in the sand; in an instant these things seemed to be within her instead of without, as if they had come from her in the first place. (*SL* 197)

Thea’s ready seizure of the music and personalities of her audience is expressed in startlingly physical terms: what has been exterior, foreign, and “other” is now internalized and native.

The bodily connection Thea feels with this racially and culturally different group of people foreshadows the connections she will make later in the novel in Panther Canyon. Hermione Lee reads this scene as having potential sexual implications that go unfulfilled (127). On the other hand, Demaree Peck is more concerned with Thea’s ready appropriation of Mexican culture: “Although on the surface Thea seems to incorporate *other* personalities and cultures, all selves

collapse into her insatiable ego” (123). Both sex and race are at issue here; the scene, with its depiction of a white woman as the desirable central personage thrown into relief by darker, peripheral figures, invites twenty-first century judgment due to Cather’s casual assumption of white centrality and privilege. Although it is undeniably problematic, this vivid depiction of cultural amalgamation as a positive experience was radical for 1915, when *The Song of the Lark* was published.

The text’s depiction of Thea’s connection to the Mexicans in terms of commingled blood is particularly striking. In this passage, Cather clearly indicates that there are racial as well as cultural differences between Thea and the Mexicans who surround her, whose blood is literally different, “warmer,” than hers. Blood in the early twentieth-century was still seen as a racially marked substance. Shawn Smith explains, “Blood had increasingly become central to definitions of race and delineations of racial differences in the sciences of biological racism over the course of the nineteenth century, culminating in the science of eugenics at the turn of the century” (139). This mingling of blood is symbolically akin to miscegenation, foreshadowed by the handsome Ramas brothers lounging around Thea. Cather has to some degree (probably unconsciously because the rhetoric was so prevalent) assimilated this idea of blood as linked to race and uses it somewhat like a turn-of-the-twentieth-century version of the doctrine of the humors: the Mexicans are a “warm-blooded people” because they come from a warm place and are artistic and responsive, while Thea is colder because her ancestry is Scandinavian (The novel also mentions the “strain of Norwegian blood” Thea possesses and its influence on her character). Significantly, Mexican blood flowing symbolically into Thea is a positive phenomenon rather than evidence of contamination. Thea takes the essence of these “warm-blooded” people and so thoroughly synthesizes it that she feels she has originated it. This combination of music, ethnic others, and sexuality is a potent mixture, akin to the scene in *My Antonia* where Blind d’Arnault plays the piano for a white audience. Here, however, the situation is inverted: instead of an African American performer playing for a white audience in a parlor, we have a European American performer playing for a non-white group outside in the open air.

Thea’s performance has additional auditors. Across the gully from “Mexican Town,” the Kohlers hear her triumphant voice and exclaim

“*Ach, Wunderschön!*” (SL 199). The centrality of Thea’s voice in this aural landscape reflects her body’s earlier visual prominence. The Kohlers can distinguish “Johnny’s reedy tenor” and “the bricklayer’s big, opaque baritone” but “the others might be anyone over there—just Mexican voices” (SL 199). Again, the individuality of Moonstone’s Mexican inhabitants is casually negated as their voices serve as mere background for Thea’s soprano: “How it leaped from among those dusky male, voices! How it played in and about and over them, like a goldfish darting among creek minnows, like a yellow butterfly soaring above a swarm of dark ones” (SL 199). Even this soundscape is depicted in terms of color. Thea’s voice is gold, (“oro,” like her hair) while the other singers have dark, “dusky” voices to match their ethnicity. Thea’s whiteness, to use Stout’s earlier phrase, “structures the hierarchy” of the music itself, making great art categorically white. The progression of language and images in the Mexican dance scene is contradictory. Cather first establishes Thea as physically distinct from her Mexican listeners, then depicts a complete deletion of the boundaries between Thea and the audience, and finally redraws the borders, emphasizing the contrast between “*blanca y oro*” Thea and the darkness of the racially different people who surround her.

By this point in *The Song of the Lark* it seems clear that Cather is far away from Julio and her visit to Arizona, having transformed the events of that first Southwestern trip into an entirely different narrative. The ultimate fate of the Mexican community in Moonstone is not discussed in *The Song of the Lark*, but we do get one final glimpse of Spanish Johnny, who attends a performance Thea gives once she has become an opera diva. Johnny is in New York because “a Mexican band had happened to be a feature at Barnum Bailey’s circus that year” (SL 396). His wife has died, and his life is now one of complete itinerancy. The elderly Johnny is described as “as withered and bright as a string of peppers beside a ‘dobe door” (SL 396). Far away from the Southwest, he performs Mexican music under the auspices of that ultimate impresario of the side show, P.T. Barnum. The novel’s last image of a Mexican American is one of sadness and failure. Johnny has become completely displaced from community and is one of those urban wanderers Cather so pities. Curiously, Johnny is not unhappy; his great pride in Thea and her accomplishments seem to be ample reward. In the context of the novel, Johnny is like Ray Kennedy or Thea’s teacher Wunsch, one of

the “halfway people” (SL 108) who help great talents succeed. But in the context of early-twentieth-century America, he is reduced to a racist caricature.

Addressing the topic of non-white diversity in Cather’s fiction, Janis Stout has remarked that “Cather’s attitude toward the multicultural makeup of the Southwest and people of color in general remains a puzzle. In a large part they seem to have remained merely accessories to a picturesque scene. The place itself is made morally emblematic, but, with rare exceptions, not the people” (*Picturing* 193). The latter portion of *The Song of the Lark* and Cather’s later foray into the Southwest in *The Professor’s House* bear out Stout’s assertion. Despite the depiction of Spanish Johnny and “Mexican Town,” the Southwest for Cather is not a multicultural space in the twentieth-century. Arizona, where Cather encounters Julio and absorbs Mexican culture, is depicted in the novel as free not only of Mexicans, but of non-white people in general. Beautiful Panther Canyon is rife with Native cultural heritage, yet contains no living First Nations people to disturb Thea’s own process of self-definition. Ultimately, the Mexican community Cather depicts in Colorado, despite its positive attributes and possible historical antecedents, evokes a sense of removal and displacement, embodied by Johnny’s status at the end of the novel as a refugee from a contemporary American Southwest that has no room for him.

Notes

¹ Both *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* contain non-white communities; however, each of these novels is a work of historical fiction with the significant action taking place before Cather’s birth.

² The majority of *The Song of the Lark*’s narrative action occurs in the late nineteenth-century; however, since Cather’s first trip to the Southwest took place in 1912, it seems reasonable that contemporary events partially informed her knowledge of the region.

³ Many scholars estimate the number of lynching victims of both races to be significantly higher than the documented totals (412).

⁴ According to Webb and Carrigan’s statistics, between the years 1880 and 1930 there were 27.4 lynchings per 100,000 Mexican Americans compared to 37.1 per 100,000 African Americans (414).

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**“You Are What You Read”:
Wharton’s Undine Spragg
and Cather’s Thea Kronborg**

Julie Olin-Ammentorp

In 1597, the English essayist Francis Bacon remarked that “some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested” (1631). Today, people often remark that “we are what we eat”; in the late nineteenth century, as Steven Mailloux has demonstrated, the parallel between reading and eating was drawn frequently, and concerns about good physical nutrition extended themselves to the mental consumption of reading material. One 1891 advice book for girls urged them, “Do not read as a glutton eats. Digest your books, turn them into nourishment, make them a part of your life that lives always” (Ryder, qtd. in Mailloux 133). Similarly, an 1884 editorial, in response to the letter from a young lady who feared she had “seriously impaired [her] mind by novel reading,” responded by praising her for her concern, scolding “young ladies who feed their brains with novels, and their palates with confectionery,” and exhorting her to eschew “silly or pernicious trash” and the “wishy-washy, sensational or at best neutral fiction” so much in circulation (qtd. in Mailloux 134).

The idea of reading as mental food is vividly illustrated in two novels from the early twentieth century, Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* (1915). Though the novels were published only two years apart, they have rarely been compared, perhaps partly because readers have seen the protagonists, Undine Spragg and Thea Kronborg, in very different terms. Undine has been shocking readers since her arrival on the literary scene, with early reviewers calling her (among other things) “an ideal monster,” “the most repellent heroine we have encountered in many a long day,” and “[c]old, greedy, heartless, and wayward, without a soul” (Tuttleton et al, 202, 204, 210). On the contrary, most readers immediately took to Thea, with one early reviewer praising her as a character “we believe in” and another remarking that “sorry indeed must be the condition of one in whom Thea Kronborg’s struggle would not stir some answering pulse” (O’Connor 63, 62).

Yet these novels and their heroines have similarities. Both works describe the ambitious climb of a young woman from the “west”: Undine Spragg is an energetic social climber from Apex City (located somewhere in Wharton’s undifferentiated, uncultivated Midwest), while Thea Kronborg is an aspiring opera singer from Moonstone, Colorado. Moreover, as unlikeable as Undine is and as sympathetic as Thea is, they have much in common. Both discover that their provincial backgrounds have ill prepared them for success in more cosmopolitan settings; both are hard-headed, stubborn, jealous of their rivals (especially when they believe their rivals’ abilities to be inferior to their own), self-centered, and focused on success. Moreover, Wharton and Cather both portray the ways in which their protagonists’ reading habits shape their worldview—and ultimately the success or failure of their ambitions. But what Undine and Thea read differs significantly, as do the uses to which each puts her reading; consequently, each is affected quite differently by her consumption of mental food. Undine’s reading is the “confectionery” or “trash” dreaded by the 1884 editorialist; she is mentally and spiritually malnourished to an extent that stunts her moral growth. Thea, on the other hand, reads deeply in what we might call much more nourishing material; the novels and poems she consumes become (as the 1891 advice book recommended) “a part of [her] life that lives always,” helping her grow into the artist she eventually becomes.

When Undine reads, she generally reads newspapers—to be specific, the society sections of newspapers, which serve as her guide to navigating New York society. In the novel’s opening scene, the *Town Talk* newspaper functions as a who’s who for Undine and her mother: the “‘society’ manicure and masseuse” (4) Mrs. Heeny pulls it out of her carry-all bag to show Undine an article mentioning Mrs. Laura Fairford, a demonstration of that lady’s social importance which Undine finds irrefutable. The extent to which Undine relies on the society sections is further illustrated when she sits down to compose a response to the dinner invitation she has just received from Mrs. Fairford. Having read in the “‘Boudoir Chat’ of one of the Sunday papers that the smartest women were using the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white ink” (12-13), Undine’s inclination is to do just that. Further, she interprets Mrs Fairford’s invitation—written on plain white paper—as unfashionable; unless, she wonders, “What if white paper were really newer than pigeon-blood? It might be more stylish, anyhow” (13). In this moment of thinking Undine is starting to make

her own distinctions: she realizes that "newer" might not be quite synonymous with "stylish" (neither term, of course, is one that Mrs. Fairford and her social set would use). But, as she almost always does, Undine takes the newspaper as her authority.

As this passage makes clear, the society sections are Undine's primary source of information about the upper strata of society into which she is trying to climb. Readers are told that "Even in Apex," her hometown, Undine had learned "all of New York's golden aristocracy by name, and the lineaments of its most distinguished scions had been made familiar by passionate poring over the daily press" (19). She interprets the newspapers both as reporting and as conferring status; when her engagement to Ralph Marvell has been announced in the paper, she luxuriates in "the delicious sense of being 'in all the papers'" (62).

But Undine never quite grasps that newspaper reports have certain limits. Although her attempts to find her way into New York aristocracy gradually reveal to her "unsuspected social gradations" (19) that the newspapers do not discuss, she has been married to Ralph Marvell for some time—that is, married into one of the best Old New York families—before she realizes that the "best" families are not necessarily the richest families; she had assumed that in marrying someone of high social status, she had also married into a family of great wealth. The distinction between wealth and social status was one the newspapers never made; hence it never occurred to Undine that she could marry one without the other. (Ironically, Undine makes the same mistake a few years later in France when she marries Raymond de Chelles, assuming that because his family is prominent, he must have a large disposable income—income for *her* to dispose of, that is; she is bitterly disappointed to find that this is not the case.) Clever as she is, Undine never learns to distrust the society sections, reading them avidly throughout her social-climbing career. Late in the novel, when Undine visits Elmer Moffatt in his Paris hotel room, the only reading materials he has are copies of *Town Talk* and the New York *Radiator* (355-56)—a subtle indication that the two are, after all, meant for each other.

Occasionally, Undine does pick up a novel, a type of reading generally considered more substantial, and therefore more respectable, than the society sections of newspapers. But when Undine reads novels, it is only because she is bored and wishes (sometimes nearly literally) to kill time. In an early scene, Undine is in her hotel room

with “an unread novel on her knee” (34); in reality, she is “plunged” in a “mood of bitter retrospection” (34). When her father shows up with the opera tickets Undine has begged for, however, she jumps up, and the novel falls unheeded to the floor (38). Similarly, when Undine is in a hotel in the Dakotas awaiting her divorce from Ralph, she wiles away the time “upstairs with a novel while the drawing-room below was given up to the enacting of an actual love-story” as her friend Mabel Lipscomb is wooed and won by a “gentleman from Little Rock” (231). Undine, of course, bitterly resents the inferiority of her own situation: she is merely reading a “love-story,” while Mabel is, Undine thinks, living one. The “new engagement ring blaz[ing]” on Mabel’s hand, emblematic of that “love-story” and, for Undine, the point of it as well, reminds Undine of her own failure, sending her into a fury of hatred (231).

Moreover, Wharton implicitly reminds her readers that not all novels are either great literature or “good” for their readers—a point hard for today’s readers to keep in mind, since, as Mikita Brottman has recently pointed out, libraries, bookstores, and even government agencies encourage us to think that any reading is good for us (44).¹ But there is a long history of concern with the effects of novel-reading, particularly on women. As early as 1694, Mary Astell, in urging that women be educated more systematically, argued that “bad” reading caused a kind of moral deformity:

There is a sort of learning indeed which is worse than the greatest ignorance: A woman may study plays and romances all her days, and be a great deal more knowing but never a jot the wiser. Such a knowledge as this serves only to instruct and put her forward in he practice of the greatest follies[.] (116)

A century later, in her groundbreaking *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft addressed the evils of novel-reading in particular. Wollstonecraft “advise[s] [her] sex not to read such flimsy works” in order “to induce them to read something superior” (185). Further, she sees novels as a “muddy source” of “knowledge” and states her concern that “[i]gnorant women . . . allow their imagination to revel in the unnatural and meretricious scenes sketched by the novel writers of the day” (185). Wharton herself distinguished between “bad & good fiction (using the words in their ethical sense)” as those that “might be defined as the kind which treats of life trivially &

superficially, & that which probes deep enough to get at the relation with the eternal laws" (*Letters* 99). Cather made a similar distinction in her famous essay "The Novel D meubl ," contrasting "the novel as a form of amusement" with the novel "as a form of art" and remarking that "[t]he novel manufactured to entertain great multitudes of people must be considered exactly like a cheap soap or a cheap perfume" (35-36). When Undine does manage to read a novel, it has a title like *When the Kissing Had to Stop*. Although Wharton borrowed her title from Browning² (as a bit of humor for her more literary readers) it is clear that that this novel is of the sort Wharton describes as "bad" and Cather as "cheap." It is not something Mrs. Fairford, who asks Undine what "new books" she has read, would consider literature (24).

Such cheap romances, Wharton implies, do more than help Undine kill time: they distort her imagination, her vocabulary, and what she expects of life and of the men in her life. Once she has become dissatisfied with Ralph, for instance, Undine detects (not incorrectly) a certain affinity between Ralph and his married cousin, Clare van Degen. But when she imagines a scene between the two, she models it on "the glowing pages of fiction" (40). Little does she guess that when Ralph and Clare are together they discuss "books, pictures, plays" (202)—the kind of discussion that bores Undine and in which she never learns to participate. Her poor choice of novels is also indicated by her thinking that the shallow portrait painter Popple talks "like the hero of a novel"; the narrator tells us that "Mr. Popple's rhetoric . . . abounded in favourite phrases and in moving reminiscences of [McGuffey's] Fifth Reader" (119).³ In addition to novels and excerpts, Popple takes in "the lighter type of memoirs," items with titles like "A Royal Sorceress" and "Passion in a Palace" (119). Yet his reading list impresses Undine, as does the language he borrows from such readings: for instance, he hints that his life has been "stained by the darkest errors" and that she has been a "purifying influence" upon him (119). Further, he allows Undine to gather that "[p]assion' . . . would have been the dominant note of his life, had it not been held in check by a sentiment of exalted chivalry, and by the sense that a nature of such emotional intensity as his must always be 'ridden on the curb'" (120). Although the reader sees through Popple's faade to the poseur behind, his reading, his diction, and his poses impress Undine both because she is not well-read herself, and because they align so well with the novels she has been consuming.

Later, after her liaison with Peter Van Degen fails to lead to a marriage proposal, Undine romanticizes and rationalizes that relationship in terms of “the ‘powerful’ novels which Popple was fond of lending her” and in which “she had met with increasing frequency the type of heroine who scorns to love clandestinely, and proclaims the sanctity of passion and the moral duty of obeying its call. Undine had been struck by these arguments as justifying and even ennobling her course, and had let Peter understand that she had been actuated by the highest motives in openly associating her life with his” (229). Although Wharton gives us no clues about any actual novels she may have had in mind, Undine’s language suggests a debased version of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester Prynne says to Arthur Dimmesdale of their clandestine relationship that “What we did had a consecration of its own” (133).⁴ Van Degen, however, seems not to have read either *The Scarlet Letter* or Popple’s “‘powerful’ novels,” and, “since Undine had insisted on being carried off like a sentimental schoolgirl[,]” concludes that he must “shroud the affair in mystery” (229). Consequently he “shun[s] fashionable hotels and crowded watering-places,” a course of action which gives “their journey an odd resemblance to her melancholy wedding-tour” with Ralph (230)—not at all what Undine had planned.

When Undine later realizes that Van Degen has abandoned her, her novel-reading again shapes her responses. We are told that second-rate fiction “had filled her mind with the vocabulary of outraged virtue” (236); this lexicon shapes her thoughts as her newfound “hatred of Van Degen” (the result of his failure to propose to her) fills her with “loathing of Van Degen’s pearls” when she handles the expensive necklace he had given her (236). She now wonders, “How could she have kept them, how have continued to wear them about her neck? Only her absorption in other cares could have kept her from feeling the humiliation of carrying about with her the price of her shame” (236).

Undine cannot admit (even to herself) what is really bothering her: she has miscalculated, taking her affair with Van Degen too far on the assumption that if she did so, he would divorce his wife and marry her. Instead she employs the melodramatic “vocabulary of outraged virtue” perfectly as she thinks of her pearls as “the price of her shame.” Indeed, if there is an allusion to Hester’s “What we did had a consecration of its own” in the earlier passage, there may be a continued allusion to *The Scarlet Letter* here. Hester’s daughter,

whom she refers to as “the token of my shame,” is, of course, Pearl; Undine echoes the phrase as she handles Van Degen’s pearl necklace. But unlike Hester, who keeps her Pearl close to her, Undine ultimately decides that since the pearls are “hers,” they are hers to sell—and she does so, turning “the price of her shame” into a tidy profit. In Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Gus Trenor tells Lily Bart when she assumes the grand manner, “‘don’t talk stage-rot’” (145). Undine seems similarly given to novel-rot, as it were, to the kind of language and literature that treats life “trivially & superficially.”

In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton implicitly contrasts Undine’s superficial grasp of fiction and Pople’s faux intellectualism with Ralph Marvell’s serious reading habits. Ralph’s room at his mother’s house (the room to which he returns after Undine divorces him) overflows with books, which are not, as they are for Undine, merely ways to fill a vacant hour, but essential to him. For a period, Ralph entertains the possibility of writing a novel himself, and his thoughts about composition are serious ones. When he meets Elmer Moffatt, for instance, he thinks that Elmer’s “epic effrontery” would be a capital choice for a book. But Ralph has his limitations as well: his reading romanticizes him into seeing the practical, even ruthless Undine as an Andromeda he must save. And, although he has the perception to see Moffatt as the possible subject for a book, it never crosses his mind that his own wife would be an even better subject. Reading alone, it appears, is not enough to save someone in the brave new world of the Gilded Age.

But though reading may be inadequate for survival in that world, limiting the reading of someone who loves books also has tragic potential. Wharton illustrates this in Paul, Undine’s son from her marriage to Ralph. At the novel’s end, Mrs. Heeny reappears with her bag full of newspaper clippings. It seems all too likely that Paul will come to know his mother not so much through spending time with her as through reading Mrs. Heeny’s newspaper clippings describing his mother’s remarriage to Elmer Moffatt, their social successes, and their noteworthy purchases (365). Just as bad, little Paul’s room in the Moffatts’ mansion contains neither toys nor books (362). While the house boasts a vast library with books that “all looked as if they might have had stories in them as splendid as their bindings[,] . . . the bookcases were closed with gilt trellising,” and a servant tells Paul that the cases are locked “because the books were too valuable to be taken down” (363). The books, like everything else owned by the

Moffatts, are valued merely as expensive objects, not as stories that might spark the mind of a boy who has already won a prize in composition—a prize his mother is too busy to hear about (368). Little Paul, his literary father's son, will not be allowed to nourish his mind and his talent on the mental food locked up in his newest stepfather's library.

Late in *The Song of the Lark*, Fred Ottenburg observes to Thea that

most of the people in the world are not individuals at all...
A lot of girls go to boarding-school together, come out the same season, dance at the same parties Such women know as much about the reality of the forms they go through as they know about the wars they learn the dates of. They get their most personal experiences out of novels and plays. Everything is second-hand with them.
(SL 298)

Undine is a perfect example of the girls Fred describes: her ideas are not really her own, but are gathered from those around her. Though she reads very little, she reads just enough to assimilate false ideals; she models her expectations on “second-hand” experiences extracted from second-rate “novels and plays.” All of these convince Undine that she is experiencing real life when she is not, thus accounting for her constant dissatisfaction, her constant wish for a position or an object just beyond her social or financial reach. In contrast, Thea Kronborg, as Fred observes, is “not that sort of person”; on the contrary, she is one who “will always break through into the realities” (SL 298). Not only Thea's artistic success but also her reading habits indicate the vast difference between herself and Undine.

Unlike Wharton, who gives us very little information about Undine's early years, Cather tells us a great deal about Thea's childhood and early adolescence. In fact, she portrays Thea as a dedicated reader and frequently tells us what Thea is reading. Early in the novel, Thea tells Dr. Archie that she “like[s] to be sick” because (among other things) “I can read all I want to” (SL 16). Similarly, when she finally has a room of her own, she tells Ray Kennedy that one of its advantages is that “I can read as late as I please and nobody nags me” (SL 95). While Undine reads newspapers to learn facts (or what she perceives as facts) about the New York social scene, or reads

novels to kill time, Thea reads for no specific goal or purpose, but looks forward to reading and reads intensely, absorbed in her material. Moreover, Thea reads more broadly and deeply than Undine, taking in (among other things) Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and poems by Byron and Robert Burns. (The difference between Thea and Undine might be summarized by the fact that it is as hard to imagine Undine getting through *Anna Karenina* or "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" as it is to imagine Thea wasting her time on *When the Kissing Had to Stop*.) Undine finds it impossible to discuss the few books she has read, while Thea, even at age eleven, has a short but meaningful conversation with Dr. Archie about the volume of Byron's poems she has been reading.

When Dr. Archie visits the convalescent Thea, he asks her what she is reading; he knows her well enough to be aware she is hiding a book under the covers of her bed. Seeing the thick volume of Byron's poems, he begins the conversation:

"Do you like this?"

She looked confused, turned over a few pages rapidly, and pointed to "My native land, good-night." "That," she said sheepishly.

"How about 'Maid of Athens'?"

She blushed and looked at him suspiciously.

"I like 'There was a sound of revelry,'" she muttered. (SL 17)

Even this short conversation reveals much about Thea as a reader. The way in which she handles the book—"turn[ing] over a few pages rapidly" and pointing to a poem—indicates that she has spent time poring over the volume, taking in the poems and remembering where in the volume her favorite stanzas are located. Even her "suspicious" look at Dr. Archie when he asks about "The Maid of Athens" shows her knowledge of Byron's poems. She recognizes the title of this fairly conventional love lyric and may suspect that Dr. Archie is leading into questions about whether she has a "sweetheart," to use the Moonstone term—hence her blush and her countering with a stanza that places less emphasis on romantic love. Although the conversation is brief, Thea demonstrates her already-literary nature and her understanding of Byron's lines through her quick responses to Dr. Archie's questions.

Thea's references also indicate the extent to which she is making Byron's work her own. All the lines mentioned in this conversation

are from Byron's long work "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage";⁵ the parts of this poem to which Thea refers also offer an indication of both who Thea is and who she is becoming. The stanza beginning "There was a sound of revelry," for instance, describes the assembling of Belgium's "Beauty and Chivalry"—its aristocracy—at a famous ball held in Brussels shortly before the Battle of Waterloo.⁶ Whether or not Thea was aware of the historical basis of this stanza, she may be attracted to it not only because of its briefer attention to romantic love (she is parrying Dr. Archie's question), but because its description of an impressive scene corresponds to, and even fosters, the future opera singer's taste for spectacle.

The passage Thea refers to as "My native land, good-night" indicates even more about Thea's increasingly romantic nature. This passage, from Canto I, is a poem-within-a-poem spoken as Childe Harold and others traveling with him bid their native England farewell. Several lines hint at the course Thea will later follow. The "page" and "yeoman" traveling with Childe Harold will miss those they are leaving behind; Childe Harold, however, remarks that "my greatest grief is that I leave / No thing that claims a tear" (ll. 179-80). Similarly, Thea will finally leave home with few regrets at the end of Part II of *Song*, knowing that she will not return (*SL* 208). Moreover, the setting of "My native land" is tempestuously Romantic: "The Night-winds sigh, the breakers roar, / And shrieks the wild sea-mew" (120-21). The poem-within-a-poem concludes with the title character saying,

"With thee, my bark, I'll swiftly go
 Athwart the foaming brine;
 Nor care what land thou bear'st me to,
 So not again to mine.
 Welcome, welcome, ye dark-blue waves!
 And when you fail my sight,
 Welcome, ye deserts, and ye caves!
 My native Land—Good Night!" (ll. 190-97)

The eleven-year-old Thea is inherently drawn to this passage, so representative of the romantic (indeed, the Byronic) hero with his sense of being both superior to and cast out by his society.

The determined farewell of "My native land, good-night" also presages the lyrics of Grieg's song "Tak for Dit Råd," which serves almost as a motto for Thea. She paraphrases the lyrics as

Thanks for your advice! But I prefer to steer my boat into the din of the roaring breakers. Even if the journey is my last, I may find what I have never found before. Onward I must go, for I yearn for the wild sea. I long to fight my way through the angry waves, and to see how far, and how long I can make them carry me. (SL 227)

The words, which could almost have been spoken by Childe Harold, capture the spirit of romanticism, which is also Thea's spirit.⁷

Although Thea tells Dr. Archie at one point that "I can't read every night" (76), she is what Wharton calls a "born reader," someone who "reads as unconsciously as he breathes" ("Vice of Reading" 99). As Wharton further remarks,

The value of books is proportionate to what may be called their plasticity—their quality of being all things to all men, of being diversely moulded by the impact of fresh forms of thought. . . . [T]he greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them. The best books are those from which the best readers have been able to extract the greatest amount of thought of the highest quality. ("Vice of Reading" 99)

Both the quality of Thea's mind and the quality of the material she reads—poems by Byron and Burns, novels by Tolstoy—are attested to by her interaction with these works; she "moulds" them with her "fresh forms of thought," even while they subtly mold her into the artist she will become—long before she is aware that she will become a great singer.

Although Wharton and Cather do not delineate exactly how each character's reading shapes her personally, both authors describe their characters' reading to such an extent that it is nearly impossible not to attempt such a delineation. Undine's reading has confirmed her own tendencies toward duality and deception. On one hand, she quietly plots her way up the social ladder; on the other, she has learned from both her observations and her reading that she must assume the passive attitudes which are appropriate for a young lady of the upper classes. She believes she must appear to be a damsel in distress, waiting for a knight in shining armor to rescue her from her current predicament and elevate her to a higher status. In contrast, Thea's reading of Tolstoy, with its grittier realities and unhappy outcomes,

may help her deal with some of the obstacles she encounters in Chicago and later in her career. Further, her reading of Byron both encourages her romantic individualism and makes her a more active person than Undine. Thea neither sees herself nor portrays herself as a helpless heroine, but rather assumes the role of the romantic hero, bidding her “native land” farewell and risking a great deal in the hope of success.

If there is a negative effect of Thea’s reading, it may be that she is drawn into what Susan Rosowski calls “negative romanticism”: it is all too easy for “[t]he superior individual pitted against a common world” to “come to feel contempt” for others—in Thea’s case, “for the complacency of second-rate singers” (*SL* 65). In Part III, “Stupid Faces,” this is exactly the pit into which Thea falls—despite, and yet partly because of, the example of her jaded voice teacher Madison Bowers, who looks down on everyone and everything. Significantly, this is a pit from which reading cannot rescue Thea.

In fact, Thea’s career from this point onward demonstrates not the power of reading, but rather the need to go beyond reading; she recovers from her despondency and moves further along her road to artistry during her trip to the Southwest, when she reads very little. In his 1837 lecture “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasized that reading must be secondary to life: “books are for nothing but to inspire” (862), he states; similarly, “books are for the scholar’s idle times” (863)—or in Thea’s case, the artist’s. As an adolescent, Thea had read much and intensely. In one scene, for instance, Thea is anxious to become reabsorbed in the pages of *Anna Karenina* after a prayer meeting; in Emerson’s terms, reading inspires her. But as she becomes a serious musician she reads less. Even as Thea sinks back into Tolstoy’s novel after the prayer meeting, the narrator tells us that “Thea would have been astonished if she could have known how, years afterward, . . . those old faces [at the prayer meeting] were to come back to her . . . ; that they would seem to her then as full of meaning . . . as the people who danced the mazurka under the elegant Korsunsky” (*SL* 114).

Unlike Undine, Thea does not model herself on fictional ideas of what she should be or even on the singers and musicians she has known. Conversely, Undine is “passionately imitative . . . modeling herself on the last person she met” (13) as well as on the characters she reads about in newspapers and novels. Although Thea has read extensively and known a number of musicians (Wunsch and Spanish

Johnny early in the novel, Harsanyi and others later), she does not have a preconceived "type" of the musician to which to mold herself; instead she becomes what she has it in her to be. Her teacher Harsanyi tells her that "every artist makes himself born" (SL 150). Thea "makes [her]self born" as an artist by becoming an artist: by living her own life. Books are of no use to her in this crucial matter.

Indeed, during her important weeks in Panther Canyon—the period in which she comes to her own understanding of what art *is*—Thea lives in a state which is almost wordless. Emerson's remark that "books are for the scholar's idle times" is followed by the reflection that "When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings" (863)—a thought Cather realizes in this part of the novel. In Panther Canyon, Thea transcends language and "read[s] God," or in this case art,⁸ "directly":

[Thea] could lie for half a day undistracted, holding pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind—almost in her hands. They were scarcely clear enough to be called ideas. They had something to do with fragrance and color and sound, but almost nothing to do with words. (SL 251)

This removal from words and immersion in the senses contribute profoundly to making Thea an artist; she sings little, but finds that a song "would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up" (SL 251).

The relative unimportance of reading later in Thea's life is also suggested by the fact that, though Cather says much about what the young Thea reads, she says little about the adult Thea's reading habits. We know only that her apartment contains "white bookshelves full of books and scores, some drawings of ballet dancers" (SL 356-57); there are no details beyond this, much less titles of specific works. (Thea is strangely like Undine in this way. In their success, books are useful to neither of them, although for different reasons.) *The Song of the Lark* reiterates the idea of the transitional nature of books through its portrayal of Dr. Archie, who goes through a process parallel to Thea's. When he is a young doctor in Moonstone, his office is, in effect, a library; he spends much of his spare time there, avoiding his unpleasant wife and unpleasant home and burying himself in his books. Later, after his wife's death, he leaves medicine and becomes wealthy through his investment in mining ventures. His beautiful

mansion in Denver includes a library, but Cather—in sharp contrast to her opening description of the volumes in Dr. Archie’s Moonstone office—tells us none of the titles it contains and never shows Dr. Archie reading there. His bookish phase seems to be behind him; it was more a substitute for real life than a real life for him, though, as with Thea, it may also have prepared him for his later successes.

Yet there can be no doubt that the young Thea’s reading helped her become the consummate artist she is becoming. In the final book of the novel, “Kronborg,” Fred Ottenburg recounts a brief encounter with the historical Gustav Mahler, who remarks that, in the role of one of Wagner’s Rhine maidens, “Miss Kronborg . . . seems to sing for the idea. Unusual in a young singer” (*SL* 330). In a review of a book on Wagner, Cather wrote that “opera is a hybrid art—partly literary to begin with. It happens that in the Wagnerian music-drama the literary part of the work is not trivial . . . but is truly the mate of the music” (“Gertrude Hall’s *The Wagnerian Romances*” 62). Surely, Thea’s early immersion in the Romantic poets, particularly Byron, laid the groundwork for the singer who unites ideas and singing, words and music, so seamlessly and beautifully. If, in one way, Thea has left books behind, in another, her books have only changed; her real books are now the musical scores which she knows so well and sings so beautifully.

For both Wharton and Cather, reading was crucial; both were lifelong readers, and were, moreover, concerned with what people read and how they read it. In “The Vice of Reading” Wharton noted summarily “That reading trash is a vice is generally conceded” (99); but she also deplored “mechanical” reading—reading worthwhile material merely for the sake of reading under the (false) idea that reading in itself is virtuous, an attitude which, as we have seen, has now become nearly universal in the United States. In “The Novel Dêmeublé” Cather attempted to acknowledge the “novel as a form of amusement,” remarking that “[o]ne does not wish the egg one eats for breakfast, or the morning paper, to be made of the stuff of immortality” (36). Yet she ends by comparing the novel-for-amusement to “a cheap soap or a cheap perfume” (36). In a talk given in 1925, three years after the publication of “The Novel Dêmeublé,” she expressed her fear that novel as a form of art was nearly extinct, remarking that “[t]he novel has resolved into a human convenience to be bought and thrown away at the end of a journey” (*Willa Cather in Person* 155).

As both novelists conclude, “trash” and novels of mere “amusement” have few benefits for anyone. At worst, as we see in *Undine*, they mislead and misinform, misdirecting lives. Undine is restricted by nothing so much, finally, as her own mental limits. Late in the novel her friend Mme. de Trézac—an American friend who has also married into the French aristocracy, but who has assimilated French culture more successfully than Undine—tells her that her social success is limited by her failure to “keep up,” explaining that in France “a woman has got to be something more than good-looking to have a chance to be intimate with [the best society]: she’s got to know what’s being said about things” (339). Undine’s inability to take an interest in anything outside her own appearance has been her weak spot since her marriage to Ralph Marvell, when she had no interest in participating in discussions of the latest books and exhibitions. But even at this point in her life, Undine has no idea why anyone would want to do so. After some fruitless half-hearted attempts to cultivate her intellect—undertaken much as Wharton’s deplored “mechanical reader” undertakes reading, merely because she believes that doing so is virtuous—Undine apparently concludes that Mme. de Trézac was simply mistaken. Instead of attending additional lectures or spending more time in museums, she “prolong[s] her hours at the dressmaker’s” and devotes herself to further “scientific cultivation of her beauty” (340). French society is tired of her long before she divorces Raymond de Chelles in order to remarry Elmer Moffatt; readers may wonder whether, as the years pass and Undine’s beauty inevitably fades, even Elmer will tire of this woman with endless desires, a short temper, and a limited mind.

Emerson argued that “[b]ooks are the best of things, rightly used; abused, among the worst” (862), a variation on Bacon’s remark two and a half centuries earlier that “some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be digested.” Wharton and Cather might have suggested a synthesis of the two: that to nourish one’s self on the best literature, “digest[ing]” it well, is the “right use” of literature; that works of lesser quality should be, at most, “tasted,” lest they cause harm. If Wharton’s *Undine Spragg* illustrates the negative potential of reading, surely Cather’s *Thea Kronborg* demonstrates the opposite: that good or great literature has the potential to be beneficial, even transformational, to those who read and “digest” it.

Notes

¹ Brottman notes the proliferation of such slogans as “Get Caught Reading,” “Get Real @ Your Library,” “Read and Grow,” “Books Take You to Wonderful Places,” and “Reading is Fun-damental” (44).

² This was drawn to my attention by Frederick Wegener, in his paper given at the 2004 “Edith Wharton in London” conference held under the auspices of the Edith Wharton Society. It is also noted by Stephen Orgel in his notes to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Custom of the Country*.

³ For the identification of the “Fifth Reader” as McGuffey’s, see notes to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Custom of the Country*. As Stephen Orgel notes, *McGuffey’s Readers* were “standard school texts.” Popple is not nearly as well-read as Undine thinks.

⁴ Wharton may also have had the popular novels of Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée) in mind. Ouida’s *Under Two Flags*, for instance, dwells extensively on the wealth and chivalry of the main character, who loves from afar and is willing to sacrifice his life for a woman’s honor. In the end, however, his life is saved by the heroic self-sacrifice of a young woman, and he is united with his true love. The novel is full of long speeches similar in both content and tone to the ones Popple makes.

⁵ Thanks to my colleague Anca Munteanu for locating these lines in Byron’s oeuvre.

⁶ I am indebted to David Perkins’ notes on this poem in his *English Romantic Writers*.

⁷ For more on Thea as romantic, see Susan Rosowski, Chapter 5. Grieg’s lyrics also echo Cather’s epigraph to the novel, taken from Lenau’s *Don Juan*: “It was a wond’rous lovely storm that drove me!”

⁸ As many critics have noted, Cather frequently correlates the two, most famously in a speech by Professor St. Peter in *The Professor’s House*.

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A Tale of Two Sisters: The Influence of “Goblin Market” on Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*

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Christina G. Rossetti’s 1862 poem, “Goblin Market,” and Willa Cather’s 1915 novel, *The Song of the Lark*, initially seem to have little in common. Rossetti’s long narrative poem recounts the tale of two young sisters, apparently living alone, who are tempted by evil goblin merchant-men. Laura gives in, nearly dies as a result, and is saved by her sister Lizzie. *The Song of the Lark*, in contrast, is a *Künstlerroman* of a gifted opera singer, Thea Kronborg, daughter of Scandinavian immigrants, whose passion and drive lead to fame and fortune. Her sister Anna, however, disapproves of Thea’s choices and chooses a more conventional path geared toward validating what she perceives as the values of her small town.

Although Cather does not quote from “Goblin Market,” directly, we can clearly see in *The Song of the Lark* how the tale of Rossetti’s sisters, Laura and Lizzie, weaves its way through Cather’s novel. On the one hand, we have two sisters in *The Song of the Lark* who take different paths in regard to their central life choices: one acts out of desire, and the other acts out of conformity which is possibly fueled by fear of social condemnation. Both the poem and the novel also feature a sense of the ambivalence about home. Another common feature, which this paper will also explore, is the central concept of women’s power to work with myth-making and the sacred, and to do so in discerning ways, which becomes the impetus for creating a life fueled by desire. Both “Goblin Market” and *The Song of the Lark*, therefore, may have more in common than one might expect. The fundamental question of the relationship of Thea and her sister Anna, at its root, explores the relationship of women and women artists to the concept of home and homemaking, as well as women’s powers of myth-making and connection to the sacred.

Ann Romines, in *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*, notes that “throughout her writing life, Cather was engaged with the problem of domestic ritual” (133). While her mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett, was “deeply marked by her commitment to domestic

ritual” as a subject, it was a fate Willa Cather wished to avoid (128). As Romines notes, “it was baggage she could never entirely abandon” (133). Looking at the connections between “Goblin Market”—so concerned with sacred power, artistry, and domestic ritual for women—and *The Song of the Lark*, where the heroine moves from place to place, successfully avoids domestic ritual for much of the novel, and, like the sisters in “Goblin Market”, is also concerned with female artistry, the sacred, and the heroic for women, may better help us understand Cather’s ambivalence toward the home and home-making.

According to Ellen Moers, Willa Cather probably belonged to the “last generation to grow up with “Goblin Market” (100). Shortly after Rossetti’s death in 1894, Cather paid tribute to Rossetti, declaring her 1862 poem her “one perfect poem” (*Kingdom of Art* 347). As Cather noted, “she wrote the best sacred poetry of this century,” and added that, in “Goblin Market,” “Never has the purchase of pleasure, its loss in its own taking, the loathsomeness of our own folly in those we love, been put more quaintly and directly” (*Kingdom* 347-8). Her admiration of Rossetti also stemmed from the fact that Christina seemed to know how to celebrate desire. Cather compares the role of the poet with the women of the stage, with the women of the stage coming out ahead: “Learned literary women have such an unfortunate tendency to instruct the world,” Cather writes. “They must learn abandon. The women of the stage know that to feel greatly is genius and to make others feel is art” (348). Cather’s valorization of the woman of the stage here springs from their ability to feel deeply and then transmute that feeling into art—a quality shared by both sisters in “Goblin Market,”—who turn their adventure into art and share it with their children. This quality is also shared by the heroine in *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronborg. In both cases, the heroines of “Goblin Market,” and the heroine of *The Song of the Lark* find that by embracing a world of myth and ritual, they are better enabled to create their home and a sense of their own autonomy and desire in a world of art.

Cather’s delight in “Goblin Market,” also extended further to her using a quotation from the poem: “We must not look at goblin men, / We must not buy their fruits: / Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?” (42-45)¹ as one of two epigraphs to her first book of stories, *The Troll Garden*, in 1905. As Bernice Slotte notes in *The Kingdom of Art*,

By the time she put together *The Troll Garden*, Willa Cather was skilled enough in construction and allusion so that she might expect the epigraphs to suggest its theme. In the nature of things, poison and corruption are built into the magic, and though the cycle may be inevitable, they can be qualified by the integrity of those who refuse the forbidden fruit, or saved by those who sacrifice and love. (93-95)

What Laura and Lizzie must come to realize, of course, is that the mythic world of the goblins evokes deception. There is, of course, a long literary tradition here too of deception vs. truth, from Homer's sirens to the novels of Iris Murdoch. In Cather, we can see this operating in the small town of Moonstone, where Thea is at loggerheads with girls such as Lily Fisher and the petty world of the Baptists, as well as, later in life, her own family, whom she comes to see as being small-minded and petty as those she had identified as her "natural enemies" (*SL* 203).²

In his article, "'A Full, Perfect, and Sufficient Sacrifice:' Eucharistic Imagery in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*," Steven Shively notes the attention to religion and religious imagery in the novel, as well as the notion of sacrifice in its religious sense. As he explains, Cather's earliest journalistic writing and her early fiction recognizes the inherently religious nature of sacrifice, a concept that is crucial in *The Song of the Lark* (254). Until Cather wrote *The Song of the Lark*, she presented in her writings a "traditional, even harsh view of gender, art, and sacrifice" (77). In an earlier piece of writing, Cather wrote that she had "not much faith in women in fiction" (*Kingdom* 409). In *The Song of the Lark*, however, "Cather's novel offers a new world where sacrifice is balanced by reward, where women can claim the artist's role, where sensuality has power, where desolation succumbs to rebirth" (78) and where the religious imagery is, as Shively explores, placed in the hands of a woman.³

In this regard, the influence of "Goblin Market" on Cather's views of religion art, and domestic ritual seems important to note. For "Goblin Market," too, is keenly involved in the imagery of a woman who has a powerful Christian iconography, and sacrifices all out of love. Lizzie's offering of herself to the goblins to save her sister involves putting her body in the line of fire—a Eucharistic sacrifice of herself. When she wins the fiery antidote from the goblins, she returns

to her sister and uses the words of Christ: "She cried 'Laura,' up the garden, / 'Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises, / Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices / Squeezed from goblin fruits for you;" (464-69). Salvation in "Goblin Market" comes through the one sister, Lizzie's, re-enactment of Christian ritual: taking on and performing the role of Christ by placing her body in danger in order to save her sister's life.⁴ Like Cather, Rossetti saw a powerful role for women, both as artists (for the sisters are storytellers) and as powerful women in their own right. A part of "Goblin Market's" power comes from its dramatic re-enactment of sacred events and their transformative qualities on those involved, as well as on the audience—a matter that was also of interest to Cather.

As Evelyn Funda notes in her study, *Reading Willa Cather's "The Song of the Lark"*, "Cather asks how an artist learns to read an audience, how the presence of an audience affects and completes art, and how an artist can express something sublime even to people who may not fully comprehend fine technique" (19). Part of what Thea Kronborg learns throughout the novel, as Funda points out, is that an artist must not sell out—as Lily Fisher and her cohorts do—but that "any successful performer, to some degree, must offer to her audience something that they can personally recognize and accept as a gift from the performer's heart" (Funda 21). Translation, interpretation, and passion become the key elements in the interchange between artist and audience. Thea must learn to read herself as much as she must learn to read and respond to the audience for whom she performs. As an artist, Cather was concerned with art that was "collaborative, mutual, reciprocal" (Funda 23).

Attentive critical interpretation is also important in "Goblin Market" because the seductive rhythmic quality of the verse is intentionally calculated to confuse the reader as much as the goblin's shrill cries confuse both Laura and Lizzie. "Goblin Market," like Cather's novel, therefore, emphasizes ambiguity. Rossetti, through her lush and melodic verse, tempts the reader as much as she tempts the two girls in the poem, with its listing of twenty-nine luscious fruits at the beginning of the poem, the very same fruit that tempts the girls. Rossetti casts her audience in the same situation as Laura and Lizzie: the audience/reader must listen to the long, lush musical rendering of twenty-nine recited orchard fruits "All ripe together/In summer weather" (15-16) and decide how to interpret what they hear. As a result, "Goblin Market" begins by confronting the readers with the

issue of interpretation as performance, questions that were also central to Cather from earliest beginnings as an artist and a music critic from Lincoln, Nebraska. How does an audience interpret and understand what it sees and hears? How do we accurately name and understand what we are presented with in the world around us, whether it be on the stage or on the page, or within our own home or heart?

Thea, as an artist, must engage in similar questions as Laura and Lizzie, deciding what is authentic, and what is fake. Her earliest lessons involve the world of Moonstone and the petty world of small-town politics, where she must distinguish the world of Lily Fishers (and their goblin-like wares) from what she identifies as real artists. For Thea, there are many instances in Moonstone where what, for her, would be considered “sacred” is somewhat ambiguously rendered. From the very beginning of the novel, where we are led to consider Dr. Archie a true friend of Thea’s, his close intimacy with the child is somewhat ambiguously rendered. Is he, as Thea’s sister Anna suspects, “too free” with Thea, (*SL* 117) or is he the kind and caring mentor that he seems to be presented as? The world between the two—the goblins and the girls, the sacred and profane, the real and the true—are sometimes very difficult for the reader to discern.

Cather, in fact, consistently plays upon doubleness. When Thea moves into the spare room upstairs, from that moment on she “began to live a double life” (*SL* 53). She has an outward appearance to the world at large, and an inner self that she guards, much as the sisters do in “Goblin Market”: “One content, one sick in part; / One warbling for the mere bright day’s delight, / One longing for the night” (212-214). The sister who eats the fruit feels that only at night does her true self awaken—so too does Thea guard an inner self that to her seems far more real than the self that she lets the conventional world witness. That secrecy is the key to her artistic self; as Bernice Slote notes, “There were hidden selves, as she said often in her novels, and created selves, and masks to transform the literal” (Murphy 1). For Laura, who breaks from the tried and true path and tastes the fruit, the fruit born of desire is far more real than the world her sister brings her back to—the world of borders and boundaries.

As in Rossetti’s poem, the two sisters in *The Song of the Lark* make some divergent choices. Anna embraces the world of the domestic, the conventional, while Thea actively seeks the outside. One might even suggest that it is Anna who makes the sacrifices in *The Song of the Lark*, for, as Cather notes, Anna’s embracing of the world

of evangelicalism is viewed as deadening in *The Song of the Lark*. Thea and her brothers are all secretly relieved that, since it had to be one of them, it was Anna who made that choice: "A preacher ought to have one child who did more than merely acquiesce in religious observances, and Thea and the boys were glad enough that it was Anna and not one of themselves who assumed this obligation" (*SL* 115). Thus, we might view Anna's sacrifice of herself (a sacrifice that Cather sees as akin to a deadening of the life and mind and the spirit) as making it easier for Thea to embrace the world of art.

Lark does use the word sacrifice several times in describing Thea's artistic world, as Shively notes, for the artist must sacrifice in order to produce art (76). But we can also see in *Lark* that the sacrifices Thea makes are of a different quality. The word sacrifice, like sacred, has a range of valences, such as Eliade's interpretation of the sacred: "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural "profane" world" (11). Cather's novel (with its own unique portrayal of the sisters⁵) calls into question those boundaries between the sacred and profane much as Rossetti's novel explores the ambiguity of the rescue of one sister by the other in "Goblin Market." Is it good or bad that one sister rescues the other in "Goblin Market" ? Which sister made the right risk? While domesticity and the home, to which the sisters return, are seemingly celebrated in "Goblin Market," the opposite seems to be the case in *The Song of the Lark*. The difference, however, is that "Goblin Market," celebrates sacrifice born out of desire, rather than fear. Anna's world, unlike the world of both of the sisters in "Goblin Market," is about fear, and the choices that Anna makes stem from that fear.

Anna's world is all about the surface, rather than the substance. As Cather notes, "The Scandinavian mould of countenance, more or less marked in the other children, was scarcely discernable in her, and she looked enough like the other Moonstone girls to be thought pretty" (*SL* 115). Anna's choices tend to involve loss of individuality. Thea embraces her Scandinavian self and her individuality: "the most important thing," she muses on the train back home, "was that one should not pretend to be what one was not . . . Thea felt that she was coming back to her own land" (*SL* 186). Anna is set apart because she chooses to meld with society, rather than embrace what sets her apart.

Lest the reader think this is a compliment, Cather is quick to add: “Anna’s nature was conventional, like her face” (*SL* 115).

Anna’s choice of reading is conventional as well, for she reads sentimental story-books and emulates the spiritual struggles and magnanimous behavior of the persecuted heroines. “Everything had to be interpreted for Anna,” Cather explains. “Her opinions about the smallest and most commonplace things were gleaned from the Denver papers, the church-weeklies, from sermons and Sunday-School addresses” (*SL* 116). Her world belongs to the ordinary and the everyday and every choice and decision must be interpreted according to the standards outside the self. To be conventional, in Cather, is to belong to the world of the profane, the everyday: the world of the goblins. The sacred involves risk-taking and individuality (Eliade 11). The artist was, according to Cather, a being apart; as she stated,

Conventions which are necessary to other men suffocate him and bring upon him the deadly sickness which warns him. He needs ceaseless variety and change, a thousand complex inexplicable things, whereas his manager needs only beefsteak. If he has the courage he throws off the yoke of management; if not the strength to work leaves him, and he drifts on. . . The fewer friends he has the better; every man means one more manager. (*Kingdom* 142)

Social niceties, social conventions, the ordinary round and joys of the everyday merely distract from the ultimate goal, the ultimate desire—the need, the desire, for the transforming, consuming work.

Thea’s decisions are born out of this desire, rather than fear, as are Anna’s. An example would be the night Thea decides to leave and sing with the Mexicans. Cather’s descriptions of the evening serenade are as lush as the list of fruit Rossetti cites at the beginning of her poem: the gravel is “shining” and the “moonlight was so bright one could see every glance and smile, and the flash of their teeth.” Even the moonflowers over Mrs. Tellamantez’s door are an “unearthly white” (*SL* 196). The evening clearly belongs to the mythic. The world of the Mexicans, in Cather, is a world that is lush and lived for the pursuit of joy and pleasure. Anna’s response (as with most of Thea’s family) involves not simply disdain for mingling with them, but fear of the reputation that follows, and how it will affect them.

Anna sees Thea as “fast” and berates Thea for jeopardizing “father’s position” by hanging out with the Mexicans: “I must say you choose your company! You always had that streak in you, Thea” (*SL* 201). Anna clearly feels that the pursuit of desire leads to social troubles. While Anna may see the Mexicans as goblin-like, and therefore best avoided, she has no intention of following Thea to the dance to rescue her. Anna is not one for bold action, as is Lizzie in “Goblin Market,” whether in terms of gaining salvation or plunging into sin, and it is for this inability to act that Cather clearly finds Anna wanting.

However, Cather is not without her criticisms of Thea, criticisms which present her as a somewhat ambiguous figure. While Thea appears as a glorious artist figure, one whom Cather clearly admires deeply, it is also true that she has, essentially, no real positive relationship to any female figures (outside of her mother, although she does not even come to see her when she is dying). Thea is, in some ways, as isolated from female companionship as Laura and Lizzie are in “Goblin Market,” existing simply within the confines of her narrow world—a world perhaps as narrow as Anna’s. The spouses of Thea’s male friends are also portrayed in a negative light. Critics such as David Stouck have responded to Thea’s childhood friends, Dr. Archie, Wunsch, Spanish Johnny, and Ray as “failures” who “find an outlet in bizarre and pathetic gestures” (188), and some of the blame has rested on their spouses, who are portrayed either as enablers (Mrs. Tellamantez gets the blame for Spanish Johnny’s alcoholism and Mrs. Archie is portrayed as a miserly mean-spirited woman).

Thea’s all-consuming interest in herself is another ambiguous point in Cather; is it necessary for an artist, or is she merely rather selfish? Or is it perhaps both? Thea’s character is, at times, as confusing and ambiguous as the blurring of the two worlds—the goblins and the girls—in “Goblin Market.”

Anna’s flat morality, and the flat morality of the town that she sides with, is not celebrated in Cather. However, Thea’s defying of convention, and lack of sympathy for the choices others make, sometimes makes her come across as something of an artistic fascist. Cather’s portrayal of small-town life is as biting as Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*, with the depictions of the Lily Fishers and the Livery Johnsons and the Tillies as largely unsympathetic figures. Her enemies are the women of the town, particularly her sister Anna and Mrs. Livery Johnson. When her brother is born, Thea says, “Good. Brothers are better” (*SL* 10). Thea has clearly little sympathy for the

choices and compromises some women choose to make, or must make. Home becomes a place, in Cather, that one must break free from. It is necessary to live there in the mind only if one is to be extraordinary, rather than align oneself with the “stupid faces” (SL 211). Those stupid faces she sees are largely other women. They are either cheap commercial copies of an artist or the Lily Fishers, who is Thea’s childhood rival. And they are her family, too: Anna, her sister, and her brothers, “had all grown up to become persons. They faced each other as individuals, and she saw that Anna and Gus and Charley were among the people she had always recognized as her natural enemies” (SL 203). Thea rejects female companionship, and the companionship of her family altogether, rather than enter their world. She views that world as contaminating—perhaps as profane as the world of Rossetti’s goblins.

Some may, of course, argue that in becoming “Kronborg” rather than “Thea” at the end of the novel, Thea too has become a product. And there would be some truth to that: Thea comments on her lack of a personal life (SL 378) and Dr. Archie comments on her looking “clipped” and “plucked” (SL 345). However, one also becomes a part of all the stories of others: a dying and a re-entering into a human collective as Cather makes clear at the end of the novel when Thea, as a protagonist, vanishes, and we learn of her through other characters and their mythologizing of her life. The same pattern, interestingly enough, occurs also in “Goblin Market,” where the sisters are conjoined on one stem, essentially identified as the same, rather than as individuals, until Laura rebels, consumed by desire, and eats the goblin fruit. The act of empathy, of sacrifice, when Lizzie offers herself to the goblins to save her sister also is an act of individuality, of risk. Afterwards, the sisters re-create their lapsed paradise through narrative, through art: thus re-creating a heroic re-telling of their struggles.

Home, and the mythology surrounding home, is thus a profoundly ambivalent concept in both “Goblin Market” and *The Song of the Lark*.⁶ Both authors upset the reader’s conventional assumptions about morality surrounding female expectations. “Goblin Market” initially seems to valorize the home, while *The Song of the Lark* does not. When Thea’s lover Fred asks Thea if she wanted what most women would want, musical evenings, a husband, children to bring up, she cries out, “Perfectly hideous!” (SL 266). Unlike her sister Anna, who

wishes for the Victorian script, Thea clearly rejects it, as do most Cather protagonists.

Cather's male and female protagonists seldom marry or bear children and if they do marry, they marry in mid-life (Brennan 120). They also have difficult relationships with their family: Patricia Brennan points out in her dissertation that "Goblin Market" echoes throughout Cather's sister narratives. From her earliest short stories in the 1890s to her last novel, in 1935, Cather presents a steady stream of sisters who are bound by blood and by love just as often as they are divided by jealousy and dislike, as Thea is with her sister Anna, as well as with her brothers. As Brennan notes:

Unlike other turn-of-the century narratives, Cather does not treat the sister bond in terms of master-plot conventions of romantic love and angelic or fallen sisterhood; instead, she focuses on sisterhood in terms of traditional roles inside and outside the conventional family unit. With Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" as the touchstone for sisterly devotion, Cather brings the ideals of Victorian womanhood into the 20th century sister narrative." (120)

Unlike in Cather, the sisters in "Goblin Market" only have each other, and they cling to and celebrate the sisterly bond, even if they make different choices. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea has an entire family, and she chooses to cut that family off, rather than sacrifice any sense of herself to them. To do so would, to her, mean death. However, in "Goblin Market," the opposite is true: sacrificing that sibling bond clearly implies death. Lizzie would rather risk her life than to let her sister Laura escape into the outside world and the threats that exist there. Interestingly, in "Goblin Market," there are no other family members present. When the sisters do have children, we see no husbands present. This lack of traditional male figures suggests a certain ambivalence toward the traditional home. What is present is an emphasis on the sisters as artist-figures and mythologizers of their own lives: the telling of the sisters' sacrifices for each other—the true celebration, the true bond, occurs in the world of art and myth-making. The family bonds—and the home—that are celebrated in "Goblin Market," exist in art and myth. Home is never actually specified in "Goblin Market"; it too apparently exists predominantly in the world of myth. We have no specific location, no sense of a real

place in the world of “Goblin Market”; we exist outside of space and time, in the world of myth and the erotic life of the imagination.

As with Rossetti’s goblins, Thea too often points out the crass commercialization that she sees around her that corrupts what she sees as the more sacred in art. Mrs. Priest, with her “cargo of splendid merchandise,” (*SL* 214) so reminiscent of Rossetti’s goblins lugging their “dishes and plates,” as well as Jessie Darcy, who for want of her ignorance, “what a singer might be” (*SL* 222). Madison Bowers, Thea’s voice teacher in Chicago, who is so long and lean, so humorless, so without feeling, is in direct contrast to what Cather connects with art—the communication of feeling—and belongs to the crass commercialization along with the Jessie Darceys and the Mrs. Priests, who lug their wares across the stage. As Susan J. Rosowski notes, Thea’s Chicago voice lessons are an example of false art, uninspired by love (63). The most popular of Bowers’ protégés is “only Lily Fisher under another name” (*SL* 220). Thea is merciless in her rejection of these women.

The “stupid faces” Thea encounters function as threats to Thea’s sense of artistry and threaten her ability to function as a healthy artist. Thea faces a struggle similar to the sisters in “Goblin Market,” in terms of creating a safe, sacred space for art in *The Song of the Lark* when she undertakes music lessons in Chicago. Cather divides the world in categories similar to “Goblin Market’s” sacred and profane (girls and goblins), only her categories being the good artists and the “good fakirs” (*SL* 218). A classic example that Cather provides is Harsanyi’s art studio, where Mrs. Harsanyi functions as a buffer between the sordid outside world and the artistic haven that she makes possible. Cather makes clear that because she is not an artist, her function must be to act as an intermediary between him and the outside world, the world of the goblins. Harsanyi only gains a sense of health and well-being when he has the opportunity to leave the sordidness of his existence in Chicago: as Mrs. Harsanyi tells Thea, “He is never tired, never discouraged, now” (*SL* 218).

Cather also uses motifs of threatened sexual assault to emphasize the intrusion of the sacred into the profane. In “Goblin Market,” this is clearly evidenced in the goblin’s attempted rape of Lizzie. Lizzie’s sacrificing of herself—taking on the role of Christ by putting her body on the line for her sister—answered the question for Rossetti of how to envision a female Christ. Lizzie not only enacted Scripture—sacrificing herself much as Christ sacrificed himself—but

also showed women that they had the power to interpret as well as to enact Scripture. Lizzie, for instance, uses the words of Christ when she offers herself up to her sister—"Eat me, drink me, love me; / Laura, make much of me: / For your sake I have braved the glen / And had do with goblin merchant men" (471-474). Rossetti's interpretation of women as interpreters—as well as enactors—of Scripture was truly radical for the time, for no less a critic than John Ruskin referred to interpreting Scripture for women as "the dangerous science for women" for this knowledge, and power, had the ability to render the hearth and home as less important to women than, perhaps, the power of their own personal relationship to Scripture.⁷

In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea's awakening to her sense of herself as an artist is also critically linked to her ability to distinguish herself as a being apart from her family, and to realize that Moonstone, as a home, can really exist only in her mind. Cather also links the desire to protect a sense of the sacred—of oneself as an artist—from the profane world to moments of potential sexual violation, as Rossetti does in "Goblin Market." Such a moment for Thea occurs outside the Art Institute in Chicago where, after she has listened to Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, one of the men passing by mistakes her for a prostitute. As Rosowski notes, the lesson here, for Thea, is that she is indeed alone in a "mechanical, soulless universe" (64). Thea clutches her cape more closely around her, wondering "why did these men torment her?" (171). Both Lizzie and Thea are determined to preserve themselves from the contamination of the outside world—a clear linking of Thea with the role of a high priestess of art. As an acolyte might, Thea confronts the world as her enemy: "All of these things and people were no longer remote and negligible; they had to be met, they were lined up against her, they were there to take something from her. Very well; they should never have it" (*SL* 254). Thea is depicted here like an ancient goddess figure; the preservation of her virginity is linked to her sacred power. She is like a vestal virgin guarding the fire, the home of the sacred that, like Lizzie and Laura in "Goblin Market," is housed within her.

The intrusion of the tramp into the Moonstone community seems to function in a similar manner, with its evocation of violence and perceived threats. The tramp is all dressed up as garishly as Mrs. Priest (and as Thea's landlady likes to dress her up) and wears a mask like the goblins. He wears a clown suit and has a white face. When he passes through town, no one wants him, and Thea presses a

handkerchief to her nose and feels terrible when she notices the tramp can tell she finds him offensive. Because the town throws him out, the tramp throws himself down the well, poisons the water, and several children die. As Stephen Monroe notes, “the suicide is a performance. . . a creative act of hostility—one that betrays the tramp’s desire to be recognized by the town even as it reflects his obvious desire to escape” (151), a curious link to Thea and her desire to escape Moonstone even as she continuously comes back to it in her mind.

The tramp’s use of a mask connects him to “Goblin Market,” in several interesting ways. In “Goblin Market,” the goblins wear masks. Rossetti clearly indicates that the goblins are intentionally altering their features for an intended effect: “pulling wry faces” and “demure graces” and moving “catlike” and “ratlike” in an attempt to simulate a foreign identity (339-341). Ronald Grimes defines masking broadly enough to include “any bodily transforming device concerned with the head area . . . for masking is the making of a second face, often used for concealing identity and wielding power” (*Beginnings* 76). Thea initially wears a mask, in that she feels it is vital for her to conceal her identity in order to protect herself as an artist, going to the extent of hiding this “second self” from Harsanyi. As she tells him, “There was always something” (*SL* 179). Thea later thinks, “Hitherto she had felt but one obligation toward it—secrecy; to protect it even from herself. . . Perhaps each of them carried concealed another person in himself, just as she did. . . How deep they lay, these second persons, and how little one knew about them, except to guard them fiercely” (*SL* 184).

Thea’s concealment of her identity gives her power until she comes to realize that without revealing that self, she will not be able to fulfill her dream as an artist. Through their concealment of identity, through masking, the goblins also wield power over Laura. As Grimes notes, the use of masks increases the power of performance; the goblins’ myriad of facial features and gestures can be interpreted from the desire to wield control by appearing as something other. This Otherness lends them the element of mystery, of seduction, perhaps even of the Transcendent. Lizzie, through her ability to accurately read goblins as evil (“We must not look at goblin men / We must not buy their fruits”) (42-43) gains power over the goblins through this ability to identify and name them, which in turn gives her the strength to resist their assault. Thea, like Lizzie, must have the ability to accurately name the things of the world around her—including

herself. Revealing her true nature---both to Harsanyi and to herself—enables her to further embrace her power as an artist.

Likewise, Lizzie's ability to accurately read the goblins' true nature grants her God-like powers: an ability to transform herself and the world around her. Salvation in "Goblin Market," therefore, comes through Lizzie's re-enactment of Christian ritual: taking on and performing the role of Christ. Such a re-enactment of Christian ritual, described by Mircea Eliade, seeks a "reactualization of the same mythical events" and with each "reactualization" humanity has the opportunity to transfigure their existence in the present (106-107). While Lizzie does not literally nail herself to the cross, her gesture is equivalent in female terms: she leaves herself vulnerable by placing her body in the line of danger at the goblins' hands. She allows herself to be assaulted in order to take back the restorative fruit. The goblins "Scratched her, pinched her black as ink / Kicked and knocked her, / Mauled and mocked her, (427-429) as they turn to violence in an attempt to make her eat. However, Lizzie's assault—an attempted rape rather than Laura's seduction—, willingly endured for another, is depicted as the source of her strength, for as she crosses the bank, on her pilgrimage, she sees and hears in a new way: "for the first time in her life / She began to listen to and to look," Rossetti writes (327-8).

Thea, like Lizzie, retreats to her room, and her room functions as a type of sacred space. Cather writes, "It was one of the most important things that had ever happened to her" (*SL* 52). But instead of a shared space, as the sisters in Rossetti's poem have, Cather celebrates the power of the single space that enables Thea to hear the voice inside her. Thea's domestic stronghold is first celebrated by her literal, physical presence, and then in her imagination (much as we see in "Goblin Market.") We also see this in the trajectory of paintings in Cather; the painting most loved by Thea is not the allusion to a William Holman Hunt painting, "The Awakening Conscience," alluded to in the novel as "The Awakening Soul," depicting a young woman's awakening to sin, as she sits on the knee of a young dandy in a parlor room, which Cather derides as the choice of most Moonstone parlors, but the Jules Breton painting "The Song of the Lark," depicting a single girl out in the field, listening to the lark, her face open to a different kind of awakening. This painting is Thea's choice as the type of art she would prefer to look at.

The choice of the two paintings is significant, for one depicts an interior world, while the other depicts the true home in the world of an

interior feeling—the young girl’s face, flushed with the experience of being out in the open fields, listening to a bird song. In viewing the girl’s joy in the song, that song, and that joy, is communicated to the viewer. What marks the home is the ability to exist within the world of myth and art—the world that can be housed within you. This is the appeal of ritual for Rossetti, for it creates that space, and it is clearly also the appeal for Cather. As Bernice Slote has noted, myth and ritual held great appeal for Cather (*Kingdom* 96) and the strongest moments for Thea are when she exists within this world. As Cather makes clear, although home is ordinarily a specific place, it need not be. Ultimately, as with Thea, it is a state of mind. Although we tend to think of home as a singular concept, it may be plural, a composite of many different places or states of mind. It is a world that Thea only lets herself return to in her mind, and it offers her healing, inspiration, and comfort.

The fact that, for better or worse, women came to be identified as the sacred core of what the home stood for is made clear in the Panther Canyon scene, for Panther Canyon becomes the artistic home for Thea, the place to which she comes to make herself re-born. She enters here into the world of myth and ritual, where she, too, re-enacts the sacred in a manner reminiscent of the sisters in “Goblin Market.” Performing the ancient rituals on a daily basis, as do the sisters in “Goblin Market,” brings the sacred time into the present. Thea performs the same kind of functions everyday—she bathes in water, which, for instance, has a “ceremonial gravity” in the canyon where the atmosphere was “ritualistic” (*SL* 254), much as the sisters in “Goblin Market” perform the same domestic tasks on a regular basis: kneading cakes of “whitest wheat” (204) and milking cows. Thea finds a purity in the world around her where she had previously felt debased.

As Ann Romines notes, Thea comes to embrace domestic ritual in Panther Canyon, but Cather makes it clear that she separates domestic ritual from housekeeping. She has no interest in being a housekeeper, but domestic ritual is part of what informs her art (146). She heals in Panther Canyon because the world here is sacred—and part of being sacred means being set apart, as Eliade notes, “every sacred space involves a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (26). Panther Canyon is a home—albeit a temporary one—but a home that, as with the girls in “Goblin Market,”

becomes housed within herself. Thea learns to embrace silence and to hear the music within her. She is like one who has taken vows. (Thea's name, after all, translates as "goddess").

Both Rossetti and Cather question the sight of home as a sacred site—at least home in terms of how it has been defined in the Victorian era. Although it appears ambiguous, we can nonetheless also see a thread of critique of home as in Rossetti. The girls that embrace the concept of the traditional home are diseased and sickly products in "Goblin Market." Jeanie, for instance, dies and no flowers bloom now on her grave—an allusion to her fallen state. The girls have children with no husbands present—leading one to question whether the offspring are goblin-spawn. D.M.R. Bentley hypothesizes that "Goblin Market," was written, and read aloud, to an audience of fallen women and Anglican Sisters at the St. Mary Magdelene Home for Fallen Women at Highgate Hill, where Christina Rossetti worked as an associate sister (58); thus the critique of home, and the traditional Victorian values that that concept embraced, was at the forefront of Rossetti's mind as she wrote the poem. While one might expect her sympathies to lie with Lizzie, who calls her sister back from the bank, both women nonetheless are imbued with a heroic script.

In Cather, Lily Fisher, the Baptist *Wunderkind*, is a blonde automaton; the women in the prayer groups are sickly and eventually die and Thea must sing at their funerals. Anna, the embodiment of Victorian self-sacrifice, and Christian evangelical passion, is in some ways the most sickly of them all. In fact, she does not even receive a physical description. While Thea is described as white, healthy, and milky, Mrs. Kronborg as strong, and her brothers also have physical descriptions, Anna is only long and tooth-like. She literally vanishes from the pages, so unimportant that we don't know if the beau coming to see her eventually proposed and married her. Anna's posturing leads to a physicality and emotional self that is so sickly that it requires itself to be airbrushed from the pages. Thea is saved from this fate through the ritual of music, a sacred art that leads, in contrast to her sister, to an embodied, sacred self.

H.R. Haweis's *Musical Memories*, a book that Thea reads as a teenager, notes the "medicine of music to disease" (71). Thea becomes sickly while studying music in Chicago and does not seem to gain health until she gains an understanding of music and how integral music is to her physical self. Haweis also notes that part of this health

is the regulation of the self and the regulation of the emotion in music: “Music, in short, is bound, when properly used and understood, to train us in the exercise of our emotions, as they gymnasium trains us in the exercise of our limbs”(76). While prior to her trip to Panther Canyon, Thea was all uncontained emotion, as she lay there on the floor in her upstairs bedroom, or all hostility towards what she perceived as false, insincere, commercialized art, in Panther Canyon, she has an integrated sense of self that helps her realize that “what any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould, in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself?” (*SL* 255). As she recognizes, art is about desire. While in Panther Canyon, thinking about the ritualistic qualities of water, and how it mirrors in those qualities in the human voice, Thea “sometimes felt as if the water must have sovereign qualities, from having been the object of so much service and desire” (*SL* 254). Although her artistic awakening occurs here through identification with women—particularly native women—it is important to note that unlike the other women in the novel, these women are dead. They inspire her because she can make them into anything she wants or needs them to be—much as Aunt Tillie makes Thea out to be anything she needs her to be. They become the channel through which she regulates her own desires

In both works, then, the rituals become a part of the body—an embodied self—that Thea, like Laura and Lizzie in “Goblin Market,” gives back. The internalized sense of home that Thea carries within her is the art of storytelling, the art of music, that she gives to her true family, each of whom we get to see responding to her in her triumphant performance at the Met. It is no accident, for instance, that the Wagnerian roles that Thea performs are those which represent a mythic sense of home.⁸ Fricka, the role that she performs brilliantly, represents the transformation that Thea underwent in her own life. Fricka, the wife of Wotan, is the goddess of the hearth, and represents domesticity and the household. Fricka has, as Thea notes, most often simply been portrayed as a crank. However, Thea transforms her, much as Thea transforms herself, to go from being a traditional Victorian woman—much like Laura—to one who recreates those sacred rituals into something that is uniquely her own. Thea thus looks to her mother, a strong woman, for inspiration for this role. Thea tells Dr. Archie that she parts her hair differently for this role, transforming Fricka from a scolding housewife to someone more ancient, strong,

and mythic—much like the character of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, in Greek myth (368).

The ending of *The Song of the Lark* has often confused readers, but it is also part of the myth-making and storytelling that occurs throughout the novel. As in Rossetti, the power of the sacred—and the power of artistry—is intrinsically tied to the audience's reception, interpretation, and re-enactment of the sacred event. In Cather, of course, that sacred event is the artistic event itself. It is no accident that we are there, with each of Thea's friends, as she comes into the height of her artistic power. We experience her triumph through her own interpretation, and reception, of the event. But for Cather, the experience cannot end there—for one of the first people to experience Thea's triumph was of course her Aunt Tillie. Tillie is the teller here, much as the sisters are in "Goblin Market." The interesting question here is why Cather would give Tillie the last word in the novel, Tillie who sentimentalizes everything. Yet Cather chooses to end the novel with her point of view. As Cather notes, "If you chanced to be passing down that Moonstone street and saw that alert white figure rocking there behind the screen of roses, you might feel sorry for her, and how mistaken you would be!" (*SL* 403). Tillie lives in the world of dreams and possibilities—she is, in essence, a myth-maker herself, and for the people in Moonstone, no matter how much they smile at her, she serves that function as well. Cather writes, "So, into all the settlements of quiet people, tidings of what their boys and girls are doing in the world bring refreshment; bring to the old, memories; and to the young, dreams" (*SL* 407). Those who tell the stories and sing the songs help others to gain entry into language that brings meaning to our lives.

However, this unreliable narrator might also be complicating the ambiguity surrounding Thea. We must, in the end, ourselves be the ultimate myth-makers. Looked at this way, *The Song of the Lark* is perhaps not so much the story of the fascist artist—the extraordinary being with super powers who towers above mere mortals, as Wagner saw it—but a tale of how a single community, no matter how flawed, manages to produce greatness—not just for one person, but for themselves and the community, and to make the story of the great individual the story of the community that helped to produce her. In this sense, *The Song of the Lark* continues to parallel "Goblin Market" in one significant respect: the sacrifice embodied in the poem is sacrifice that springs from the enaction of desire in the world. And

that desire, as both Rossetti and Cather make clear, must be pure. The content of the desire needs to be as much the focus as the valorization of the passionate desire of the heart itself.

As both Cather and Rossetti make clear, the passion is not just sexual—it is also aesthetic and intellectual, and it is a passion that demands greatness. But that passion comes at a price, and the price is separateness. The girls in Rossetti live alone (although later with children) and their lives are devoted to telling the stories that imbue their existence with meaning. Thea achieves greatness but the price of that greatness is an aloneness, a separateness from the ordinary, workaday world. It would be remiss, of course, not to mention another potential link, which suggests an additional type of separateness and lack of conventionality beyond the scope of this paper and one that has often been explored both in Cather and Rossetti—Cather’s lesbianism, as well as the common interpretation of “Goblin Market” as a poem celebrating lesbian love. Marilee Lindemann, in *Willa Cather, Queering America*, discusses Thea as a queer figure, and the literature on “Goblin Market” as a lesbian manifesto would be too numerous to explore here. The sublimated eroticism of the poem, the Bride/Bridegroom imagery from the Biblical *Song of Songs*, as well as the doubleness of the sisters as endemic of a lesbian identity, has received considerable attention in Rossetti studies.⁹

When looked at through the lens of shared artistic desire, Thea is similar to Laura, after all. Laura’s passion isn’t conventional: it partakes too much of the mythic. And perhaps the puzzle here is that, in the tradition of John Bunyan, there is an allegorical/mythic expression of the crass, profane worlds and artistic as well as presumably sexual passion. But Anna, unlike Laura, doesn’t seem to have any passion at all. I might suggest that Cather loved “Goblin Market,” because of the passion of both sisters in it. She surely preferred their combination of noble error and noble rescue (both sacred gestures to her) to the dull conventional-assimilation instinct of Anna. Laura sins boldly; she’s seduced into assimilation to something not ultimately real or life-giving, while Anna seems to act more on the basis of fear and an impulse to fit in. While “Goblin Market” ultimately gathers out back at the hearth, rather than the world, Cather challenges us that we rethink, and remake, the scripts that focus on the embracing of the individual self and the enactment of our own desire.

Notes

¹ Christina G. Rossetti, *The Complete Poems of Christina G. Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump, 3 vol. (Baton Rouge, 1979-90). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

² All subsequent references are from *The Song of the Lark*, ed. Sherrill Harbison, New York, New York: Penguin Classics, 1999.

³ The scholarship on Cather and religion is fairly extensive. A good introduction would be John J. Murphy's edition, *Willa Cather and the Culture of Belief*, Brigham U P, 2002.

⁴ Lizzie's role as a female savior is discussed in Marian Shalkhauser's article, "The Feminine Christ." *Victorian Newsletter* 10 (Autumn 1956), 19-21, among others.

⁵ A large number of critics have written on sisterhood in "Goblin Market." Among them are Helena Michie, "There is No Friend Like a Sister: Sisterhood as Sexual Difference," *ELH* 56(Summer 1984), 401-421, as well as Dorothy Mermin's "Heroic Sisterhood in 'Goblin Market,'" *Victorian Poetry* 21 (Spring 1983), 107-118, and Janet Calligani Casey, "The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" *Victorian Poetry* 29 (1991), 67-78. An earlier study of sisterhood is Winston Weathers' "Christina Rossetti: The Sisterhood of Self," in *Victorian Poetry* 3 (Spring 1965).

⁶ See Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi's *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*, for a discussion of housework as a sacred, feminine activity.

⁷ See Joel Westerholm's article, "I Magnify My Office: Christina Rossetti's Authoritative Voice in Her Devotional Prose." *Victorian Newsletter* 84(1992) 11-17.

⁸ A pioneering study of music in Cather would be Richard Giannone's *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction*. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1968. Also of interest would be Cather's preface to Gertrude Hall's *The Wagnerian Romances found in Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art (1949)* Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1988, 60-66. Finally, worth exploring would be Willa Cather's article, "Three American Singers," *McClure's Magazine*, 42(Dec. 1913), which contains, among others, a portrayal of Olive Fremstad, the Scandinavian singer on whom Thea Kronborg was modeled.

⁹ Germaine Greer's introduction to "Goblin Market" (New York: Stonehill, 1975) would be a good place to start. For additional criticism of "Goblin Market," consult Jane Addison, *Christina Rossetti Studies, 1974-1991: A Checklist and Synthesis*. Bulletin of Bibliography 2 (March 1995), 73-93.

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**“The Inevitable Hardness of Human Life”:
The Song of the Lark as Naturalism**

Richard S. Pressman

I

If ever an early-twentieth-century character looked like a romantic hero, it would be Thea Kronborg, of *The Song of the Lark*. The protagonist of Willa Cather's 1915 masterpiece, Kronborg rises from obscure origins in narrow, small-town America to become a leading New York Metropolitan Opera singer, a performer who communicates the broadest, most urbane of æsthetic experiences to her audiences. Like a typical romantic hero, Kronborg is exceptional, parlaying her powerful imagination into the very essence of a great artist, one who reaches for the sublime. Since she appears to be outside the influence of society, Kronborg is essentially alone, tends toward the misanthropic, and asserts her individual self over the social self.

The view of Cather as a romantic is widely, indeed perhaps universally accepted. But the heyday of the romantic rebellion in the United States had taken place in the 1840s and '50s. Since that time, the novel as genre had passed through the realist revolution and, by *Lark's* publication in 1915, was well into the next revolutionary literary stage, that of naturalism.¹ Given that the novel was written when the naturalist mode was predominant, viewing *The Song of the Lark* through the lens of the contemporary naturalist theory can amplify our understanding of the work's significance. In recent years, there has developed such a view. Amy Ahearn, for example, notes that in Cather's journalistic career, "We see Cather's engagement with the then emerging naturalist school of writing in the United States" (144). Similarly, Martha H. Patterson, explains that "Cather would use the logic of naturalism [...] to legitimate Thea's success" (175).

The historical stage of naturalism, from the late nineteenth century to the early-mid twentieth, saw the consolidation of big industry and finance capitalism, a major shift of population from the countryside to the cities, the end of internal imperialism with the demise of Indian resistance, and the beginning of external imperialism with the acquisition of colonies through the Spanish-American War.

In addition, the rise of urban-mental work marked the steady increase of women in the workplace. Along with the rise of the big city came big-city political machines and political corruption, to which the muckraking reform movement soon responded, led by contemporary journalists, with whom Willa Cather—though little interested in muckraking herself—would work.

Despite her popular reputation as a late romanticist, Willa Cather was very much immersed in the naturalistic work of the day.² Prior to becoming a full-time fiction writer, Cather worked as a journalist, mainly as a reviewer, from 1897–1914, including from 1906–1912 as managing editor for *McClure's*, the nation's best-known muckraking magazine. As the managing editor, it was her responsibility to see that the articles selected accorded with the magazine's philosophy. Articles that Cather would have approved dealt with the seamy side of urban life, such as prostitution, syphilis, child labor, and alcoholism, which is essential naturalist subject matter (Ahearn 150).

Many of the naturalists had begun as or remained journalists themselves—with both journalists and naturalist fiction writers attempting to get at the facts of quotidian life. In favorably reviewing Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899), a work often seen as central to the naturalist aesthetic, Cather wrote, "Mr. Norris has dispensed with the conventional symbols that have crept into art, with the trite half-truths and circumlocutions, and got back to the *physical* basis of things" (italics added, rpt. Curtin 747).

While a commonality to naturalism, at least that produced by males, was the muckraking tendency toward the sordid—the writer himself was to be one who can front such facts of life, one who is "bold," "virile," "brutal," "manly": "Inasmuch as good writers were defined in terms of hyper-masculinity, bad writers were defined as 'feminine,' 'anemic,' and 'diminutive'" (Ahearn 148). Though Cather herself embraced and tried to emulate a few great women writers such as George Sand, George Eliot, and Jane Austen, she still subscribed to such terminology (Ahearn 149):

I have not a great deal of faith in women in literature. As a rule, if I see the announcement of a new book by a woman, I—well, I take one by a man instead.[...] I have noticed that the great masters of letters are men, and I prefer to take no chances when I read. (rpt. Curtin 362)³

As a result of working as a reviewer of contemporary literature for as many as sixteen years, Cather became steeped in the masculinist rhetoric so common at the time, while supporting Darwinian/Spencerian beliefs in survival-of-the-fittest.⁴ And while no direct evidence exists to prove that in 1913, when Cather began *Lark's* composition, she believed whole-heartedly in the naturalist aesthetic, the circumstances of the world she was immersed in, as well as the ideological thrust of *The Song of the Lark*, indicate a strong sympathy with its principles.⁵

Cather's opinion of Rudyard Kipling and Émile Zola, for example, was that they "are the only living writers who have at their command the *virility* of the epic manner" (italics added, rpt. Curtin 559). In her 1900 tribute to the recently deceased American novelist Harold Frederic, she observes that in his last novel, *The Market-Place* (1899), he writes of finance as "a field for the exercising of talent, daring, imagination, appealing to the strength of a strong man, filling the place in men's lives that was once filled by the incentives of war..." (rpt. Curtin 710). And, again, in praise of Norris's *McTeague*, Cather uses masculinist rhetoric: "There was something very unusual about it, about its solidity and mass, the thoroughness and firmness of texture, and it came down like a blow from a sledge hammer [...]" (rpt. Curtin 746).

Naturalism is often thought of as the dialectical opposite of nomanticism—as an aesthetic of scientific determinism. And from the point of view of Zola, generally regarded as its pioneer, naturalism indeed does offer an aesthetic of the scientifically determined. In "The Experimental Novel" ("Le Roman Expérimental," 1880), Zola argued the point:

[T]he novelist is both observer and experimenter. The observer in him presents data as he has observed them, determines the point of departure, establishes the solid ground on which his characters will stand and his phenomena take place. Then the experimenter appears and institutes the experiment, that is, sets the characters of a particular story in motion, in order to show that the series of events therein will be those demanded by the determinism of the phenomena under study. (166)

But its leading contemporary practitioner, Frank Norris—despite calling himself "the boy-Zola"—saw Zola's naturalism as a version of

romanticism. In the oft-quoted passage from “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (1901), Norris argues that true romanticism is closer to the nitty-gritty of life than ‘mere’ realism: Unlike realism,

Romance [...] is the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life. [...] Romanticism may even treat of the sordid, the unlovely. [...] If you choose to look for [Romance], you will find her equally at home in the brownstone house on the corner and in the office building downtown. And this very day she is sitting among the rags and wretchedness, the dirt and despair of the tenements of the East Side of New York. (280–81)

In other words, that which is naturalistic is “natural”—but exceptional *within* nature. Considering Zola’s subject matter, Norris had a point; Zola’s novels depicted the extremes of life in industrial society: poverty and alcoholism among the industrial working class (*L’Assommoir*, ‘The Drinking Den,’ 1877), the destructiveness of prostitution (*Nana*, 1880), and the violence that can come when miners are forced to strike (*Germinal*, ‘Germination,’ 1885).

II

As it was in Zola and Norris’s own time, the definition of naturalism has been sharply debated in ours. But perhaps no more solid basis for understanding has been developed than that by Charles Child Walcutt a half-century ago. Working from his perception that Western and, in particular, American thinking has long been divided “between the ideal of perfect unity and the brutal facts of experience,” Walcutt saw the naturalist impulse as emerging from this “never-resolved tension” (20).⁶ He saw that tension as expressed in four themes: *determinism*, *survival*, *violence*, and *taboo*.

First, and perhaps most essentially, in the Walcutt model, naturalism professes that human life is highly subject to cosmic laws that are *deterministic*, that human choice and human will have little effect on the massive forces at play in the universe. This idea is believed to have its origins in the philosophical speculations of Lamarck and Darwin, Nietzsche, and Spencer, thinkers whose ideas anticipate the fundamental shift in Western civilization that came with the arrival of urban-industrial life, with its new machine uniformity

and its narrowed space for individual volition. Much naturalist fiction, in fact, demonstrates the impotence of the individual endeavor. This shift, then, functions in reaction against the relatively positive outlook of realism which, while granting the presence of large social forces, still sees the individual as having meaningful room to maneuver: Huckleberry Finn (1884) can still "choose" to "go to Hell" and can still choose to "light out for the Territory." William Dean Howells' Silas Lapham, of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), though he will lose his business because of an ethical lapse, can still retire in reasonable comfort to the farm from which he began. However, by century's end, such possibilities seemed to most naturalists to have narrowed to insignificance.

Secondly, within this overriding structure, the individual embarks on a life-long struggle for *survival*, often in the process succumbing to powers far greater than the individual. Stephen Crane's eponymous Maggie (1893) succumbs to the life of a prostitute, only to die in a river; Norris's eponymous McTeague's (1899) sham career as a dentist declines to non-existence and to McTeague's demise; and Theodore Dreiser's Hurstwood, in *Sister Carrie* (1900), steadily loses his status as the famous bar manager when his embezzlement and subsequent business failures lead to his suicide.

Thirdly, such an environment of struggle is, by its nature, *violent*—the physical violence of human confrontation or of overwhelming nature, or the emotional violence of overwhelming circumstances that are societal. Crane's Henry Fleming, in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), barely survives, by luck, the murderous fire of weapons in the Civil War and, in a failed revolution in Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907), more than a million people die. On the other hand, Hurstwood commits suicide because the capitalist marketplace makes his survival seem increasingly impossible, and McTeague, handcuffed to his arch-enemy and without water, dies in the desert, overwhelmed by circumstances both social and natural.

Finally, because naturalism seeks to understand how traditional values of a positive nature are not true, or are true no longer, it explores areas of human life that, because they do not conform to those positive images, are considered *taboo*—the seemingly *unnatural* within the natural. Prior to the naturalists, these subjects were taboo because they could not be discussed in literature. Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is set in the previously little-explored-in-fiction Lower East Side's impoverished tenements, McTeague is abnormally

big and slow-witted, and Cowperwood shockingly defies social stricture in pursuit of his appetites for sex, money, and power. Each of these categories fits, as well, with the fictional construct of Zola. As corollaries, (a) the focus is almost entirely on the individual, as if isolated in a hostile universe, (b) there is a tendency, if not toward the animalistic—appropriate to a hostile universe—then toward the instinctual and the physical, so that consequentially, (c) the central characters seem constantly in motion.

III

Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, however, would seem not to fit into these categories neatly enough. Not only does the novel seem traditionally romantic in temperament—hence not fitting into Norris's description—but it also is precisely about, not the central character's defeat, but her victory as an artist. Here, however, the *taboo* is not about the sordid, the degenerate of life, but instead the traditionally unacceptable triumph of a woman in a public role. Thea Kronborg is a woman who consistently defies the traditional role expected of a young female—that of the domestic, maternal, deferential, self-sacrificial, decorative bourgeois. She remains unmarried until she turns forty, her marriage appearing as almost an afterthought on the part of Cather, as it only appears in the brief Epilogue, and then rather too late for maternity. After maturing in Chicago, Kronborg travels unaccompanied from Chicago to Arizona, spending time there unaccompanied, and then travels with her nominally married love, Fred Ottenburg, to Mexico; and while the text is never explicit, the solitary situations in which they are together suggest a relationship that is sexual. Thea never defers to men's opinions and pursues her career over traditionally assumed familial duties, such as being at her dying mother's side. Rather than cultivating a studied bourgeois leisure, she works enormously hard and is physically active, even physically competitive with Ottenburg.

Kronborg's defiance of taboos begins in her origins. The daughter of Norwegian and Swedish people, Thea is raised in a town, Moonstone, Colorado, where nearly everything is narrowing. Although both parents recognize Thea's potential, they lack the understanding of the world to wish her to become more than a local piano teacher. Both her elder sister, Anna, and one of the town's

leading female figures, Mrs. "Livery" Johnson, try to reduce her to a mere conformist in a place where the only recognized goal for a female is an advantageous marriage. Sadly, the one figure who can help her find a way out through her talent for music, her piano teacher, A. Wunsch, is hopelessly restrained by the lack of stimulation in the rural environment, which leads him to seek solace in alcohol, which, in turn, reduces his creative capacity still further.

Even those most sensitive to and sympathetic with Thea's talent are limited. Thea's most helpful friends are always males older than she is. In Moonstone there are A. Wunsch, Spanish Johnny, Ray Kennedy, and Dr. Archie, each something of an outsider to the social norm. Wunsch is a German immigrant, a wanderer who settles in Moonstone, surviving by giving music lessons. His intellectual and æsthetic level is far above Moonstone, but he cannot maximize his talent and so he drinks. Spanish Johnny, Juan Tellemántez, is a musician who lives in Moonstone's Mexican ghetto, where it is considered incorrect for a Euro-American to venture. However, Thea gains inspiration from his non-traditional music and his non-traditional lifestyle. While he is a dissolute, irresponsible drifter who causes his wife unhappiness, he remains for Thea a model of self-expression. His friendship is so valuable to her that to pursue it, she violates a social taboo of race and class, earning her the enmity of Moonstone's conformists.

Ray Kennedy is a railroad worker, much older than Thea (thirty when she is eleven), who, seeing that she is special, wishes to do better in life so he can eventually marry her, a marriage that would, of course, stifle her as artist. Because of his love for her, he takes out a life-insurance policy that, when he dies in an accident at thirty-five, allows the now sixteen-year-old Thea to go to Chicago to begin serious musical study. Finally, Howard Archie is a local physician whose own life is stultified by his small town, but who, after recognizing Thea's talent early-on, befriends her, eventually chaperoning her to Chicago to begin her life there. Later, Archie will finance her studies in Germany, where she will learn to sing the most demanding of all operas, those composed by Richard Wagner (1813–83). All four men, however, like the other men who will come into her life, must be seen as instruments whose purpose is to advance her career as artist. In this way, it can be argued that they serve a role in Thea's universe that is deterministic—not to limit her role in life, as conformist Moonstone so wills, but to enable her to advance.

In Chicago, a site of greater receptivity to the artist, including the female artist, Thea will meet three more men who will be instrumental in advancing her career—and hence can also be seen as instruments of Thea’s destiny. Andor Harsanyi, a concert pianist and brilliant tutor of piano, will discover Thea’s true talent, the operatic voice. But he will find himself, as a pianist, unable to teach her to sing. That role is reserved for Madison Bowers, reputedly the best voice teacher in Chicago, but who nevertheless lacks the spirit of a true musician, for he has “the soul of a shrimp” (*SL* 183). Finally, there is Fred Ottenburg, a beer prince who is highly cultured and sophisticated, who recognizes Thea’s talent immediately, aiding her in advancing her career and representing the possibility of real, conjugal love, but who thereby represents to her a domestic life that would stultify her career. And so she must keep him at a distance (which he well understands). As such, the Chicago men also serve a role in Thea’s life and career that is also deterministic.⁷

In contrast, nearly all of the female characters will, in one way or another, serve as deterrents to Thea’s advancement and, hence, serve simultaneously as foils to her genius and catalysts to her success. The narrow-mindedness of the women in *Moonstone* spurs Thea to find her own way. And, later, her operatic rivals’ superior positions, but artistic inferiority spur her on to greater success. “There is such a thing,” Kronborg says, “as creative hate” (*SL* 380). In this way, the women, too, serve Kronborg’s determined destiny.

IV

The deterministic sense is something like that achieved in a classic of naturalist fiction, Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912), published only three years before *The Song of the Lark*. Early in the novel in a well-known scene, the young Frank Cowperwood sees a tank of fish living in a big-fish-eats-little-fish environment, from which he draws the proper Darwinian-Spencerian lesson of the survival of the fittest. Similarly, Cather, in true naturalist fashion, creates in *Lark* an aura of inevitability for Kronborg’s triumph, as she is the most “fit”—such that the other characters are depicted as serving the greater cosmic need of enabling that triumph. For example, Ray Kennedy must die (in a railroad accident) in order to provide the insurance money to give Kronborg her start in Chicago through her music lessons with Harsanyi. Later, Howard Archie must

gain a goodly amount of money through mining investments, not so much to provide for his own comfort as to provide for Kronborg's final training in Germany. Her sweetheart and major *aficionado*, Fred Ottenburg, understands his instrumental place in her universe all too well, as he tells her:

I've decided that you never do a single thing without an ulterior motive. You ride and fence and walk and climb, but I know that all the while you're getting somewhere in your mind. All these things are instruments; and I, too, am an instrument. (SL 265)

Ottenburg understands what Frank Cowperwood, in Dreiser's novel, does: that it's "dog eat dog, in this game [of opera] as in any other" (SL 364). The self-educated Kennedy understands it as well:

[T]here are a lot of halfway people who help the winners win, and the failers fail. If a man stumbles, there's plenty of people to push him down. But if he's like "the youth who bore,"⁸ those same people are foreordained to help him along. (SL 108)

In turn, Kronborg comes to understand what she perhaps sensed early in life, that it is the reality of others' serving her cause that propels her to the top. Just as Lawrence Selden, in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), understands that the exquisite Lily Bart "must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her" (5), so, Kronborg learns that "It takes a great many people to make one—*Brünnhilde*" (SL 386), the female opera role that is perhaps the most challenging, the most powerful of all roles for a diva.

Much like Cowperwood, Kronborg has a sense about her of inevitability, as if the very force of the universe were infused into the main character. These characters, then, exude a sense of power that is not generally associated with naturalism, suggesting that there is not only a determinism to naturalism that is "negative," moving toward unremitting disaster, but also a "positive," moving toward unremitting triumph. Seeing determinism as potentially positive is suggested even in Zola himself, for example in the novel title "Germination," which implies the possibility of change for the good. In "The Experimental Novel," Zola argues:

The idea of experiment carries with it the idea of modification. [...] When we use the experimental method we must modify nature without departing from nature. [...]: Observation shows, experiment instructs. (168)

That is, Zola believed that naturalism has the potential to show the way to something better. The very purpose of depicting the sordid of life is to argue for its alleviation.⁹

The Song of the Lark may well be one of the few examples, however, of a naturalist work that is finally triumphal—unlike Dreiser’s initially triumphal Cowperwood, who eventually will be defeated and have to start anew, with no guarantee, this time, of success.¹⁰ Herein may lie a key to how *Lark* can be seen as a work of naturalism, despite its difference from the classic works of that genre. Until recently, naturalism was treated as virtually a masculine genre, whose leading lights were Crane, Norris, London, and Dreiser, as well as, perhaps, the Henry James of the Final Phase.¹¹ Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber, too, of *Sister Carrie* (1900), for example, beginning, like Thea, in a small town and buffeted by the fortunes of the city, finally triumphs on stage.

Similarly to Cowperwood, Kronborg, cost what it may, is single-minded in her determination, in her case to become a Brünnhilde despite a dog-eat-dog competition. At the age of eleven, the young Thea is reading the great English romantic poet Lord Byron, suggestive of an individual of great talent who possesses passion for that talent, one who, to remain as undefiled by social corruption as possible, rejects social institutions of conformity, one, then, who feels “a deep contempt” for those who do conform (*SL* 215), and thereby accepts a necessary solitariness. As early as Thea’s age of eleven, her piano teacher, Wunsch (which means “wish”) notes “his pupil’s power of application, her rugged will” (*SL* 29). Reflective of her single-mindedness of purpose, she concludes that in place of gaining favor with others, she “would rather be hated than stupid” (*SL* 57). She is “like the yellow prickly-pear blossoms that open there in the desert; thornier and sturdier than the maiden flowers [Wunsch] remembered; not so sweet, but wonderful” (*SL* 86–87). Eventually, in Chicago, a fellow student will refer to her as “the savage blonde” (*SL* 152) and later, while studying in Germany, students will call her “*die Wölfin*” (“the she-wolf”) for “the fierceness of her nature” (*SL* 207).

Unlike the Byronic hero, Thea exhibits not so much a defensive struggle as an almost-violent movement toward her destiny. In this sense, she is *determined* for success: "It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere" (SL 184). As she travels to meet that self, she becomes entrapped in that destiny, a consequence which she fully recognizes: "Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does. It's like being woven into a big web. You can't pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the picture." (SL 378) Whereas in most Naturalist texts, entrapment is negative—hence the usual sense of an unwanted "determinism"—here, however, determinism is a good, for it produces the highest level of meaning in life. This is true even though Kronborg must be ruthless in order to achieve her success, and even though that ruthlessness produces solitariness. Determinism in *The Song of the Lark*, then, is positive.

V

Recent work has widened our understanding of naturalism to include such female writers as Kate Chopin, Ellen Glasgow, Edith Summers Kelley, and Edith Wharton.¹² An essential characteristic of naturalist works created by women is the rejection of the traditional view of the woman's body as mainly serving the functions of sex and reproduction, demonstrating that various women's texts reject the idea through showing the negative aspects of child-bearing and -rearing.¹³ Such texts might be understood as, in the mode of Zola, criticizing in order to point to a better way. It would seem, then, that a difference between the naturalism produced by male writers and by female lies in the treatment of the body.

Some of that difference derives from the historical context of the wave of masculinist jingoistic imperialism which would culminate in the Spanish-American War of conquest (1898–1900). "Martial bellicosity paralleled the growing enthusiasm for boxing, football, bicycling, and outdoor life in general. All those tendencies coalesced in the cult of the strenuous life, whose most vigorous exemplar and prophet was Theodore Roosevelt" (Lears 108), an individual who who formulated his concept in his famous speech before Chicago's Republican Hamilton Club, in 1899, entitled "The Strenuous Life." But, rather than the zeitgeist being a nationalism based on collective, "we" ideas, Roosevelt's "the strenuous life" was individualistic.¹⁴

Roosevelt, like the naturalists, saw the individual striving alone in the world, seeking personal goals—and doing so through the physical, so much so that “Roosevelt turned worship of strength and the strong individual into a Nietzschean apologia of the ‘superman’ set above social and racial distinctions” (Dementyev 105). Men such as Roosevelt—who is still widely viewed as one of the iconic figure of the early twentieth century—fearing a rising feminism, wished to “revirilize” manhood, a movement which, in his persona, “reached its symbolic apotheosis” (Kimmel 181). “Although he supported woman suffrage ‘tepidly,’ he [Roosevelt] was more fervent in his support of women as mothers [...] suggest[ing] that women who did not bear at least four children be tried as traitors to America [...]” (187). This vision expressed deep-seated anxieties about contemporary society, identifying society’s enemies as “effeminacy, eroticism, consumerism, and pacifism” (Watts 3). The early twentieth century, then, was a period, that stressed the manly—hence the development of the sense that naturalism was a male genre.¹⁵

In turn, it might seem that the naturalism of women rejects the physical. But that rejection is couched in terms of the physical, terms that are based powerfully in traditional gender roles. Generally, we read women’s literature as oppositional to patriarchy, the hyper-masculinity of the Age of Roosevelt that created extreme stress in gender roles. That stress lay in material, economic social change, as women were pouring into the job market, challenging male domination and increasing demands for suffrage, challenging the traditional idea that women’s role in the economy was reproductive, and replacing it, to some extent, with production¹⁶—hence the rejection in women’s naturalist writing of the reproductive function. Kronborg avoids the reproductive question by, until in a brief Epilogue, precluding marriage altogether.¹⁷ Even so, the tendency of woman’s naturalism, and certainly Cather’s, does *not* necessarily represent a rejection of physical or even necessarily strenuous-life values, for Cather’s naturalism will be born of the contradiction Cather faced as a woman in a man’s world. At once, she adopts the masculinist rhetoric of the time and the proto-feminist rebellion against the traditional constrictive female role, as “feminine growing up becomes a perverse tale of compulsive behaviors” (Fleissner 23). So for Cather (and for Kronborg), there emerges the compulsion to succeed.

That sense of the strong female whose aggressiveness in the world is rewarded with success is expressed in an essay Cather wrote for *McClure's* that helped lay the foundation for *The Song of the Lark*, "Three American Singers: Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, Olive Fremstad," published two years before the novel. In it, journalist Cather describes all of her divas as having great strengths, though each possesses a different kind. Homer's "physical equipment is magnificent. Large, handsome, generous, she has reservoirs of strength and calmness to draw from [...]. During the entire opera season, [...] she manages her own house, her own nursery, and her five children" (Cather, "Three" 34). In contrast, Farrar "has a frankness that is quite splendid and wholly ingratiating—the frankness of one who has nothing to fear. She does not believe that conjugal and maternal duties are easily compatible with artistic development" (36). Similarly to Homer, she is comfortable with her body, which, as a singer, she not only depends on for her voice's power, but for displaying her character: "I can't sing if I feel my clothes. I don't wear stays [corsets], and I would like to sing without any clothes, if I could [...]. I sing with my body, and the freer it is, the better I can sing" (38). Fremstad, too—she who would serve as the primary model for Kronborg—feels free with her body on stage: "Her body looks straight and athletic, like a boy's. But everything goes back to the untamed energy, the rhythm of the Valkyr music" (48).

In *The Song of the Lark* itself, we see Cather's acceptance of masculinist values, values that had been manifested in her literary reviews for *McClure's*. Early on, when Dr. Archie comes to the Kronborg home to deliver a baby, he asks the ill eleven-year-old Thea—the only time she is not well—why she did not call for help. Thea does not answer the question. Instead, she is eager to know her new sibling's gender—Thea's first statement in the novel being "Good. Brothers are better" (*SL* 10). Early on, then, Thea demonstrates her self-sufficient orientation toward masculinist values. Read as a *Bildungsroman*, *Lark* can be seen as, a la Roosevelt, tracing the development of Thea's powerful body, a body necessary to support the powerful voice of a powerful person.

Thea Kronborg was modeled not only on the powerful opera singer Olive Fremstad but on the powerful Willa Cather herself as well. In her memoir of her friendship with Cather, *Willa Cather, A Memoir* (1953), writer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant wrote that on meeting Cather in the *McClure's* offices in 1910, her first impression

was of “an almost masculine personality” who filled “the whole space between the door and window brimming as a man might do” (33). Such conceptions of female power had developed in operatic singing theory which, at the time of *Lark’s* composition, was undergoing a progressive change: Fremstad’s and Kronborg’s ultimate teacher, famed historical voice coach Lilli Lehmann, “advocated using physiological methods in vocal training, [...] with [their] emphasis on the singer’s knowledge of the body” (Cumberland 63). That is to say, women singers were being taught to think of using their bodies as boys were to use theirs—strenuously.

Right from the first chapter, we are keyed into Thea’s body’s strength. Though her body is battling pneumonia, Thea “did not realize that she was suffering pain” (SL 12). She recovers rapidly because, as her father remarks, she “must have inherited the ‘constitution’” of her mother (SL 14). Once in Chicago, as she achieves a point of resolve for success, readers are told, “She would have it, have it, —it! [... S]he pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl’s no longer” (SL 172). Similarly, Harsanyi notices that she is “strong physically [...]like a horse, like a tree!” (SL 174). But it is never a hard, unfeminine body, rather “[h]er body had the elasticity that comes of being highly charged with the desire to live” (SL 190)—with the term *living* understood as struggling undauntedly toward a goal:

The girl was taller, her figure had become definite, her carriage positive. She had got used to living in the body of a young woman. [...] With that increased independence of body there had come a change in her face; an indifference, something hard and skeptical. (SL 216)

It is precisely this hardness, this skepticism that comes from the powerful independence of her body that enables her to cope with the dog-eat-dog brutal competition of indifferent city life,¹⁸ and that will, in turn, enable her to reach beyond others toward an idea, toward the ultimate transcendent rendering of the Brünnhilde role: “Fred noticed for the hundredth time how vehemently her body proclaimed her state of feeling” (SL 243).

Kronborg’s understanding of the need for force that is centered in the body emerges from Cather’s placing her heroine’s struggle in the context of deep history through experiencing the life of the aborigines of the Southwest, the Pueblo Indians. In the text’s middle section,

between Thea's formative education in Chicago and her culminating education in Berlin, Kronborg spends a few months in New Mexico at Panther Canyon, where she comes in touch with remnants of an ancient civilization of Native Americans. Recalling the thoughts of Ray, her railroad worker, who would speak of the Indians often and with respect, she remembers that "[h]e used to say that he never felt the hardness of the human struggle or the sadness of history as he felt it among those ruins. He used to say, too, that it makes one feel an obligation to do one's best" (*SL* 253).

As a result of her immersion, Thea "began to have intuitions about the women who had worn the path [...]. She found herself trying to walk as they must have walked." In a culminating moment, "[s]he could feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back [...]" (*SL* 253). This passage suggests that she gives psycho-symbolic birth to herself, a self that is, as she will say of the Indians near the end:

[...] reserved, somber [...] with only a muscular language, all their movements for a purpose; simple, strong, as if they were dealing with fate bare-handed. [...] I don't know if I'd ever got anywhere without Panther Canyon. [...] They taught me *the inevitable hardness of human life*. [As an artist, y]ou have to realize it in your body, somehow; deep. (italics added, *SL* 384)

Kronborg's return, for a time, to the basic, closer-to-nature life of the Pueblo allows her to realize her embodiment as a sublime performer of the most urbane of arts—the strenuous life translated to the operatic stage.

So it is that Thea Kronborg of Moonstone, Colorado, will, like Willa Cather herself, take the modal, male concept of the naturalist world and, beautiful woman that she becomes, resolve for herself that contradiction between the masculine and the feminine, the ancient and the modern, the soul and the body, in order to triumphantly become Richard Wagner's powerful Brünnhilde of the New York Metropolitan Opera.

Notes

¹ Normally, literary historians accept that in between the high phases of romanticism and naturalism exists the high phase of realism—some even arguing that Naturalism is best seen as an extension of Realism. Each of these modes can be assigned an historical range for its high phase: Romanticism from roughly 1820 to 1870, Realism from roughly 1860 to 1920, and naturalism from roughly 1890 to the Second World War. The locus of naturalism's ferment is generally thought to be the 1890s and into the first decade of the twentieth century. While most of the great works considered naturalist were published by 1910, a number of significant works were published afterward: notably Theodore Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *The Financier* (1912), and *An American Tragedy* (1925) and Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

² My analysis is based on the essay "Full-Blooded Writing and Journalistic Fictions: Naturalism, the Female Artist, and Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" (2001), by Amy Ahearn, the first I have found to discuss Cather in terms of Naturalism.

³ Elsa Nettels makes a similar argument in *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton and Cather* (1997).

⁴ The simultaneous support of reform and of Social Darwinism is inevitable, given that corruption was understood to be intervention in the process of natural selection.

⁵ Cather would later, in the 1930s, withdraw her defense of *The Song of the Lark* on the grounds of an excess of detail, a phenomenon highly associated with naturalism because of its journalistic drive for facts. However, that should have little to do with explaining the novel's production in its moment.

⁶ Since Walcutt's construction of his theory in 1956, any number of other theorists have followed suit in understanding naturalism as a dialectic. Notable among them is June Howard, in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), who argued that the naturalists tried "to combine high-minded idealism with the sobriety of detached observers" (37)—parallel to Walcutt's opposition of ideal and factual or material.

⁷ After Chicago, Thea will seek training in Germany, where she will be tutored by a woman, the historical Lilli Lehmann (1848–1929), who had trained the principal model for the character of Kronborg, Olive Fremstad (1871–1951). However, although Lehmann will be the crucial tutor in Kronborg's success, she never appears in the novel, thereby leaving the focus on those generally lesser men, and thereby on Kronborg herself.

⁸ From "Excelsior" (1841), by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), in which people's attempts to dissuade a youth from ascending a

dangerous Alpine peak only spur him on—though achieving his goal of the summit costs him his life.

⁹ Zola had a long record of supporting social reform. This culminated in his 1898 publication on the front page of a Paris daily of his opinion piece "J'accuse" ('I Accuse'), which defended Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish military officer unjustly accused of spying. His support is generally credited with saving Dreyfus, and the honor of the army.

¹⁰ Humphrey Van Weyden, in London's *The Sea Wolf* (1904), does triumph as well, as conditions force him to change from effete intellectual to a practitioner of what Theodore Roosevelt called "the strenuous life." See below, Section V.

¹¹ *The Wings of the Dove*, 1902, *The Ambassadors*, 1903, and *The Golden Bowl*, 1904. To this list of authors are sometimes added somewhat lesser novelists, such as Harold Frederic and Hamlin Garland.

¹² See, in particular, Donna Campbell's "'Where are the ladies?': Wharton, Glasgow, and American Women Naturalists."

¹³ For example, Edna Pontellier, of Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), resents the entrapment she feels as a child-rearer, Undine Spragg, of Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), is disconcerted by her pregnancy because it limits her amplitude, and Judith Blackford, of Kelley's *Weeds* (1923), resents pregnancy's discomfort and pain. The examples and the analysis are Donna Campbell's.

¹⁴ In that famous speech, Roosevelt began,

I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.

¹⁵ This emphasis can be understood as having a dialectical, symbiotic basis: On the one hand, a stern toughness was required for an imperialist venture, in the face of great obstacles (the British "stiff upper lip"), as well as to justify the robber-baron mentality of Social Darwinism; on the other, the "feminizing" of work itself, as it became less physical and more mental, threatened the male ego.

¹⁶ See the arguments of Jennifer L. Fleissner, in *Woman, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*.

¹⁷ Whether Kronborg ever has sexual relations before her marriage to Fred Ottenburg some time after thirty seems likely, at Panther Canyon and in Mexico, but is left uncertain. What is clear is that Kronborg avoids all commitments except to her career. As well, the late marriage's occurrence in an Epilogue adds nothing to the plot, and may have merely provided a sop for bourgeois critics.

¹⁸ On more than one occasion, the text references the city, Chicago, in typically Naturalist fashion, as a brutal environment. For example, "...Thea was conscious of the city itself, of the congestion of life all about her, of the brutality and power of those streams that flowed in the streets, threatening to drive one under" (*SL* 170). Here similarities can be seen to Dreiser's depictions of life in that same big, industrial city.

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Willa Cather's Transitional Novel: *The Song of the Lark* as a Romantic-Naturalistic Novel with a Modernist Center

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Because Willa Cather was so much a part of her time and her complex literary milieu, it has been impossible to place her within a single major movement—a fact that, ironically, left her outside of mainstream American literary studies for nearly half a century. Viewing *The Song of the Lark* as a major transitional novel in Cather's oeuvre, however, helps to establish an important context both for the novel and for Cather's work as a whole. The novel was itself written between the fall of 1913 and the spring of 1915, during a significant transition period in Cather's life after she had left her position as managing editor of *McClure's Magazine* in 1911 to become a full-time novelist and after she had taken a pivotal trip to Arizona in 1912 that included a visit to Walnut Canyon—the source for Panther Canyon in the novel. Preceded by the romanticism of her early stories and of *O Pioneers!* and followed by *My Ántonia* with its modernist point of view and the even more clearly modernist *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*, *The Song of the Lark* holds a pivotal position in Cather's canon. Even more specifically, however, the novel transitions internally from romanticism in Part I, to naturalism in Parts II and III, to modernism in Part IV, “The Ancient People”—which is the novel's central fulcrum, and finally back to romanticism—German romanticism in particular—in Part VI.

Cather's 1895 statement that “Children, the sea, the sun, God himself are all romanticists” (*Kingdom* 233) shows an early commitment to romanticism, and elements of romanticism thread their way—sometimes brightly, sometimes darkly—throughout her works, including *The Song of the Lark*. According to Rosowski, Cather's writing is shaped by the “English tradition” of romanticism (7). Images associated with English romanticism do appear in the novel, particularly in Professor Wunsch's Wordsworthian reference to the artistic knowledge that must be “inside from the beginning”,¹ in Thea

Kronborg's association of the artist with birth and childhood; and in Cather's description of a lamp² being "turned up inside" Thea when she perceives organically a passage she is studying with her Chicago piano teacher Andor Harsanyi (*SL* 162).

The literary and philosophical roots of both *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915) spring more clearly, however, from the mainstream of American romanticism, particularly transcendentalism. In giving her second novel the Whitmanesque title *O Pioneers!* Cather places herself in the line of succession of Emerson's true American poet—the visionary representative of Truth, Beauty, and the Good. In *The Song of the Lark*, she, like Whitman, portrays the rural and urban landscapes of America as well as the body and soul of an artist. From the beginning of the novel, Thea, like Emerson, studies nature and trusts herself. Similarly, in Anton Dvořák's *New World Symphony* she recognizes the "new song" of her own joyous country (*SL* 186)—a song she will later transfer to the powerful romanticism of Wagnerian opera. In her Emersonian independence and "stubborn self-assertion" (*SL* 185), Thea fiercely rejects threats against her life and her art, declaring that the "ecstasy" of art will be hers as long as she lives (*SL* 171).

Indeed, Cather gives Thea vital romantic experiences, including her quest for artistic understanding in the historical and even mythic landscape of the cliff dwellings, her organic understanding of forms and of art as a whole rather than as a combination of parts, and her symbolic birth as an artist in a sunny cave in Panther Canyon—experiences that foreshadow Cather's developing modernism. Through Thea's epiphany in Panther Canyon—"The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself" (*SL* 254), Cather provides a perfect illustration of Emerson's definition of art as "a nature passed through the alembic of man." (34). Three years later in *My Antonia*, Cather would fulfill the promise of *The Song of the Lark* by becoming, as Jim Burden writes of Virgil, "the first . . . to bring the Muse into [her] country" (256). In so doing, she becomes the first woman to fulfill Emerson's call for a writer to recreate the "America [that] is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres" (338).

Cather's literary principles and style were developing during a time of major transitions in dominant American literary movements.

Even as Cather was promoting the principles of romanticism in her columns in the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Lincoln Courier* during the 1890s, the new literary movement of naturalism was gaining momentum. Explaining the relationship between these two ways of viewing reality and expressing those views in literature, Charles Childe Walcutt asserts,

Naturalism is the offspring of transcendentalism. American transcendentalism asserts the unity of Spirit and Nature and affirms that intuition (by which the mind discovers affiliation with Spirit) and scientific investigation (by which it masters Nature, the symbol of the Spirit) are equally rewarding and valid approaches to reality. When this mainstream of transcendentalism divides, as it does toward the end of the nineteenth century, it produces two rivers of thought. One, the approach to Spirit through intuition, nourishes idealism, progressivism, and social radicalism. The other, the approach to Nature through science, plunges into the dark canyon of mechanistic determinism. (vii-viii)

Cather retained the idealism and reliance on intuition that she inherited from the transcendentalists and other romantics, but she rejected the completely mechanistic elements of naturalism as exhibited in the fiction of Émile Zola, whom she criticized for his insensitivity and empty soul (*SL* 139-40).

However, Cather did admire the writing of Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and even Theodore Dreiser. As Amy Ahearn points out, most of these “boy wonder” naturalists were reporters as she was (see 144-145 and 150-154) and, as Walcutt (22-23) and Donald Pizer (15) both recognize, these writers—all working at the point of Walcutt’s “division,” as was Cather—incorporated into their naturalistic fiction elements of romanticism. Indeed, Cather praised Norris’s *McTeague* on 8 April 1899 not only for its “dramatic and revelatory” style but also for its “mature, and accurate and comprehensive description” (World 607-608)—phrases that also describe the style of *The Song of the Lark*. For example, one of the most dramatic scenes in *McTeague* is McTeague’s drunken murder of his wife Trina, after which he takes not only all of her money but also her little canary in its gilded cage (258-60). The connection between Cather and Norris is most clearly seen in Part I of *The Song of the Lark*. A scene in *The Song of the Lark* comparable to McTeague’s murder of his wife is Professor Wunsch’s

drunken attack on the Kohlers' dove-house, which he completely destroys (*SL* 83). Yet, Wunsch's sad and desperate desire for artistic fulfillment is very different from McTeague's selfish and instinctual greed. Both men are naturalistic victims of alcoholism, but whereas McTeague desires only a huge golden molar to put in front of his dentist's office and the golden coins with which he absconds, Wunsch truly admires and believes in Thea's artistic imagination and beauty. Describing his parting thoughts about her, Cather writes,

Yes, she was like flower full of sun, but not the soft German flowers of his childhood. He had it now, the comparison he had absently reached for before; she was like the yellow prickly-pear blossoms that open there in the desert; thornier and sturdier than the maiden flowers he remembered; not so sweet, but wonderful. (*SL* 86-87)

Whereas McTeague dies in a desert, Thea blooms in one. In addition to these similarities in dramatic scenes, Cather was also aware of several of Norris's critical principles about the relationship between naturalism and romanticism, and she apparently agreed with them. Indeed, Norris's beliefs that art should be simplified and that "naturalism is . . . but a form of romanticism" (*Literary Criticism* 71) would certainly have been congenial to Cather.³

Cather may have met another naturalist author, Stephen Crane, when he visited Lincoln, Nebraska, in February of 1895, and she certainly knew his poems and stories, including *The Red Badge of Courage*, syndicated in the *Journal* in abbreviated form in December of 1894 (Slote 19-20; Cather *Kingdom* 587, 700-702, 771-778). Of the primary naturalistic styles identified by Walcut (22)—the sensational style of Norris, the documentary style of Dreiser, and the impressionistic style of Crane, it is the impressionistic style that Cather preferred. Prefiguring this technique in painting, Crane filled the palette of his fiction with the luminous colors he perceived, often ironically, in the landscape. For example, just after a ghastly battle in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane describes his youth as feeling "a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleaming on the trees and fields" (147). Cather achieves a similar artistic effect in her description of the sand hills of Colorado, the "Turquoise Hills" that provide

the illusion of the mirage [that] became more instead of less convincing; a shallow silver lake that spread for many miles, a little misty in the sunlight. . . . Beyond the phantom lake lay the line of many-colored hills; rich, sun-baked yellow, glowing turquoise, lavender, purple: all the open pastel colors of the desert. (*SL* 43-44)

Perhaps the most important connection between Crane and *The Song of the Lark*, however, is the similarity in tone and imagery between the naturalistic street scene near the end of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and the episode in which Thea leaves the concert in Chicago only to be propositioned by two men on a “windy corner, in front of a saloon” (170-171). These men clearly resemble those who hypocritically watch Maggie, now a prostitute, as she makes her final walk down the street before her suicide. Unlike the weak Maggie, however, Thea has the talent, strength, and will to protect not only her body but also her imagination—the ecstasy of art she experienced in the musical concert she has just heard.

The strong qualities of romanticism that dominate “Friends of Childhood” are punctuated only occasionally by dark scenes such as the death of the tramp, Professor Wunsch’s degeneration and drunken fit, and the wreck in which the dying Ray Kennedy realizes that according to the “natural law” Thea was never meant for him (*SL* 108, 128). However, as illustrated in the Chicago street scene, the romanticism in Part I gives way in the two Chicago sections to pessimistic, naturalistic imagery and occasional documentary style. Thea arrives in Chicago “in the rain, on that first disillusioning morning,” feeling dirty because she does not have her trunk and has therefore been unable to change into clean clothes, and then rides with Dr. Archie “through the depressing, unkept wastes of North Chicago” to consult with Reverend Larsen about a job and a place to stay (*SL* 139). Like Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*,⁴ Thea is a country girl who is ignorant of the evils of the city, which Cather describes in naturalistic terms:

The rich, noisy, city, fat with food and drink, is a spent thing; its chief concern is its digestion and its little game of hide-and-seek with the undertaker. Money and office and success are the consolations of impotence. Fortune turns kind to such solid people and lets them suck their bone in peace. She flecks her whip on flesh that is more alive, upon that stream of hungry boys and girls who tramp the streets

of every city, recognizable by their pride and discontent, who are the Future, and who possess the treasure of creative power. (*SL* 223)

Unlike Carrie, however, Thea does have the creative and moral resources to overcome the temptations of the city, although after she has been exposed to the dreary boarding-house environment and the artificiality and ignorance of the singers at Madison Bowers's voice studio, she does briefly exhibit despair. Moreover, as Professor Harsanyi realizes, nature has given Thea a real voice and a healthy body—the necessary machine—to project that voice (*SL* 160). As Dr. Archie had told her after the episode in which a tramp caused the death of several Moonstone citizens by deliberately infecting their drinking water,

Ugly accidents happen. . . . But the failures [including weak individuals like the coughing girl on the train] are swept back into the pile and forgotten. They don't leave any lasting scar in the world, and they don't affect the future. The things that last are the good things. The people who forge ahead and do something, they really count. (*SL* 121)

In Cather's romanticized version of naturalism, Thea is the chosen individual who masters herself to survive, yet she deserves to survive not only because of her inherent strength but also because of her talent.

One important philosophical influence that helped Cather transition between her early romantic principles and naturalistic influences to modernism was Henri Bergson. This popular French philosopher studied the theories of Herbert Spencer, who coined the term "survival of the fittest" usually associated with Charles Darwin; after discovering inconsistencies and inadequacies in Spencerian thought, Bergson rejected the mechanistic determinism associated with naturalism and, turning instead to intuition and idealism, developed his own revolutionary theories of intellect and intuition, time and space, memory and self, and the "élan vital"—the "vital principle" or force—behind the creation of life.⁵ As W. T. Jones explains, his "metaphysics was 'Romantic' in its emphasis on dynamism and continuity" as well as in "its denial of the capacity of reason to know the inner nature of reality, and in its assertion that reality can nonetheless be known—in intuition" (15-16).

Tom Quirk points out that *The Song of the Lark* is filled with Bergsonian ideas (145). While extant evidence connects Cather only to Bergson's popular *Creative Evolution*, which she praised in a 21 September [1912] letter to Elizabeth Sergeant, it is the idea of the two selves initially explained in *Time and Free Will* (1910) that most clearly influences the novel.⁶ Bergson explains that we should

distinguish . . . below the self with well-defined states, a self in which succeeding each other means melting into one another and forming an organic whole. But we are generally content with the first, i.e. with the shadow of the self projected into homogeneous space. Consciousness, goaded by an insatiable desire to separate, substitutes the symbol for the reality, or perceives the reality only through the symbol. As the self thus refracted, and thereby broken to pieces, is much better adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular, consciousness prefers it, and gradually loses sight of the fundamental self. (128)

Thus, Thea's social environment stills her inner voice until she begins to live a double life in her attic room by acquiring the "companions" (*SL* 53) that represent what Bergson calls the "real and concrete self" (*Time and Free Will* 139).

Thea has little communication with her fundamental self in the naturalistic sections of the novel, although she reveals to Harsanyi that she always felt there was "something" different about herself and that she had always thought she wanted to be a singer before she began studying with him. She assumed that "some day, when she was older, she would know a great deal more about it [her secret self]. It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere" (184). It is not, however, until Thea experiences very different surroundings—a natural rather than a naturalistic environment—that she is destined to find her primary self. On her way to the Ottenburg Ranch with the San Francisco Mountains behind her and the depths of Panther Canyon before her, Thea "seemed to be taking very little through the wood with her. The personality of which she was so tired seemed to let go of her" (*SL* 247). Thus Cather prepares for Part IV, "The Ancient People," a unique story in a spectacular setting that serves as the center—the fulcrum, if you will—of the novel and of Thea's growth into an artist. In this section, as Quirk observes, Cather "exchange[s] a mechanistic view of the

world for an organic one” as she had done in *O Pioneers!* (139). She has played the literary scale from romanticism and transcendentalism to naturalism in the first three sections of *The Song of the Lark*; and here, in the “mystical and aesthetic center” of the novel (Quirk 149), she will use Bergsonian qualities to fashion an essentially modernist episode that looks forward to “Tom Outland’s Story” in *The Professor’s House*.

Richard Lehan asserts that if the modernists had not had Bergson (who also influenced William Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens), “they would have had to invent him” (311) for he gave them a liberated sense of time and released them from the limitations of Darwinist mechanist philosophy “that robbed the universe of a creative unfolding and man of the corresponding creative power of a deep subjectivity within which the mythic, the primitive, and the intuitive could survive” (307). In her 1922 Preface to *Alexander’s Bridge*, Cather equates the guide that helps a writer “find his way home” with “what Mr. Bergson calls the wisdom of intuition as opposed to intellect” (197). In the romantic tradition, Bergson supports organic creation over the mechanistic and believes that life is best understood as a whole, “not only the parts of an organism with the organism itself, but also each living being with the collective whole of all the others” (*Creative Evolution* 43). Becoming almost inseparable from the lives of the prehistoric pottery makers of the canyon that live in her imagination and from her current natural environment there, Thea experiences vital organic growth as an artist in Panther Canyon as contrasted to the artificial singing lessons she had endured in Chicago. Through both her senses and her intuition, “the things which were for her, she saw; she experienced them physically and remembered them as if they had once been a part of herself” (*SL* 252).

Indeed, based on Bergsonian elements as well as on Linda Wagner-Martin’s analysis of modernism, “The Ancient People” is a modernist text within a larger romantic- naturalistic novel. “The Ancient People” employs the modernist techniques of juxtaposition, a search or a journey, mythic archetypes, and symbolic images such as “life-giving water or sunlight”—all formalistic qualities associated by Wagner-Martin with modernism (4-5). Although *The Song of the Lark* employs a traditional chronological plot structure, “The Ancient People”—like “Tom Outland’s Story”—metaphorically opens a window and lets in the “fresh air” of Panther Canyon between adjacent “overcrowded” sections.⁷ The canyon itself is a site imbued

with the unknown myths and rituals of the ancient Sinagua people. Moreover, the entire section portrays Thea's quest⁸ for a new understanding of herself and her art in a Freudian landscape rife with birth imagery—the “darkness [that] had once again the sweet wonder that it had in childhood” (*SL* 248) on her first night and the bright sunlight that wakens her on her first morning. Other rebirth images are the V-shaped inner gorge of the canyon itself with its fringe of cedars and piñons that Ellen Moers has called “the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature” (258); the sunny cave that she takes for her own as she sleeps and waits “for something to catch up with her” and holds “incomplete conceptions in her mind”; and the bathing-pool nestled below her cave at the bottom of the canyon (*SL* 250-50).⁹

The novel's central modernist image¹⁰ of the stream and the broken pottery further evokes Bergson's emphasis on a stable vision of life, which initially occurs as a snapshot but which can become a timeless Idea or Form (*Creative Evolution* 301, 317-18). Thea envisions this image during a personal and artistic epiphany that occurs one morning while she is bathing:

The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to love? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (*SL* 254-55)

In the canyon, as Quirk has recognized, Thea also experiences what Bergson called “pure perception” (26) as “her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation.” Indeed, “she could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas” (*SL* 251). Through her perception and her memory—both archetypal and personal, Thea also lives through Bergson's real time, or duration, as her past extends into her present so that she can relate imaginatively to her own childhood as well as to the primitive but artistic lives of the

Indian women who had lived in Panther Canyon hundreds of years earlier and inspired her for later “heroic parts” (*SL* 383). Finally, the “driving power in the blood” (*SL* 257) that Thea experiences in the canyon is reminiscent of Bergson’s idea of the vital force that creates life and art. To Bergson, an artistic experience is “a vital process, something like the ripening of an idea. . . . Nought as matter, it [art] creates itself as form. The sprouting and flowering of this form are stretched out on an unshrinkable duration, which is one with their essence” (*Creative Evolution* 340-41).

“The Ancient People” is followed by the transitional “Dr. Archie’s Venture” and the final climactic section, “Kronborg,” which, in spite of its detailed style—returns to romanticism. In “My First Novels” [There Were Two], Cather says that the “full-blooded method” of this novel tells “everything about everybody” (*On Writing* 96) as indeed—to use terminology from her essay “The Novel Demeublé”—the “overfurnished” presence of conversation and “material objects” in this last section does (*On Writing* 35). The descriptions of Oliver Landry’s material possessions—his “pot-bellied silver cream picture of an early Georgian pattern” and his “Boucher drawing in red chalk” (*SL* 370)—as well as numerous details of conversations between Fred and Dr. Archie, many of which Cather cut in her 1937 revision, co-exist uncomfortably with the more dominant romantic philosophy of the section. As Cather states at the end of the section, the novel is about the “growth of an artist” (*SL* 397), or a *Künstlerroman*.

The romanticism to which Cather returns in “Kronborg” is deeply influenced by that of Richard Wagner. Thea’s roles of Fricka in *Das Rheingold* and of Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* are examples of the “heroic parts” (*SL* 383) of German national epic, legend, and myth portrayed in Wagner’s tetralogy *The Ring of the Niebelungs*, of which these are the first two operas. As Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Thea participates in an opera focusing on a grail knight in the German romantic tradition described by Madame de Staël in 1859 as the type of German “poetry which is derived from the songs of the Troubadours; that which owes its birth to the union of chivalry and Christianity” (56). Cather’s references to *Tannhäuser*—another medieval, chivalric Wagnerian opera—highlight Thea’s actual role of the seductive Venus as well as that of the saintly Elizabeth that she and her prototype, Wagnerian opera diva Olive Fremstad, preferred.¹¹

Through the eyes of her admirers Fred and Dr. Archie, Thea not only plays romantic heroines, but she is also romanticized as a heroine herself. In describing her final performance as Sieglinde, Cather alludes to one of Wordsworth's Lucy poems, declaring that "the music born of murmuring sound passed into her face, as the old poet said,—and into her body as well" (SL 393).¹² At the triumphant climax of this performance, "All that deep-rooted vitality flowered in her voice, her face, in her very finger-tips. She felt like a tree bursting into bloom" (SL 395).¹³ This final performative image of Thea recalls not only Bergson but also Wagner's poetic description of the romantic recognition scene between Sieglinde and her brother Siegmund, in which the Spring "warms them, lo, the branches/ Break into blossom; /Bud and bough / Submit to his sway" (Wagner *Die Walküre* Act I, page 15), just as Thea herself feels "like a tree bursting into bloom." Her performance is appreciated not only by her "friends, old and new, seated about the house on different floors and levels" (SL 395) but also by the common people so important to the romantic writers—by Johnny Tellamantez standing at the rail in the top gallery and by the "little crowd of people . . . lingering about the door . . . hoping to get a glimpse of the singer" (SL 396).

The Epilogue also focuses on the common people—especially on Thea's aunt Tillie Kronborg—to re-emphasize the effects of art on its audience, even on uneducated audiences. In Thea's hometown of Moonstone, hung with paper lanterns on a moonlit night, Tillie "lives in her niece's triumphs" (SL 403). The highlight of her life has been seeing Thea perform on the road in Kansas City. After the first act of *Lohengrin*, Tillie tells Fred—now Thea's husband—that Thea "always seemed grand like that, even when she was a girl. . . ." Clearly, "when Thea came down the stairs in the wedding robe embroidered in silver, with a train so long it took six women to carry it" (SL 404), Tillie is unable to distinguish between Thea and Elsa. As Evelyn Funda has observed, "Fundamental to Cather's evolving principles of art was the notion that the personal encounter between artist and audience was, above all, sacred" (29). Funda continues by quoting Cather's statement from *The Kingdom of Art* that the stage "'is the kingdom of the emotions and the imagination' where a performer 'must rouse [the audience's] strongest emotions, stir their holiest memories'" (217). Tillie believes in fairy tales, and, in the Epilogue, she—not Cather—makes a fairy tale of the struggling artist's life and success and then passes that fairy tale on to the "humbler people" of Moonstone, thus

bringing “to the old, memories, and to the young, dreams” (*SL* 406-407).

Although the importance of romanticism and other literary influences has been recognized in *The Song of the Lark*, this novel has always been difficult to place in Cather’s canon. *The Song of the Lark* holds a pivotal place in Cather’s oeuvre, however, because it clearly portrays her early struggles to find a congenial literary philosophy and style. In this important transitional novel, Cather clearly employs the literary styles of both romanticism and naturalism to release in the book’s shimmering center “The Ancient People”—the fulcrum that holds the other parts of the novel together—her first truly modernist text and to prepare the way not only for the seamless assimilation of these styles in *My Ántonia* three years later but also for the full flowering of her modernism in *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor’s House* (1925). And it is no surprise that some of the modernist elements of “The Ancient People”—the artist’s quest; the images of birth, water, and light; and the use of myth and archetype—are also clearly romantic in nature.

Notes

¹ Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark*. 1915. Ed. Sherrill Harbison (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 70. All further references to *The Song of the Lark* (*SL*) refer to this edition.

² Abrams discusses the symbolic role of the lamp as representing the inner thoughts and emotions of English Romantic poets (53-69).

³ Cather’s references on 7 April 1900 to Norris’s abjuration of “tea-table psychology” (*The World and the Parish* 747) and to “small” writers who sing only “of the tea-table and the Odyssey of the Rialto” (749) clearly show that she was familiar with at least some of his criticism, published in the San Francisco *Wave* during 1896-1897 and in various other magazines and newspapers in 1901-1902. In “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” published in the *Wave* on 27 June 1896, Frank Norris had associated William Dean Howells with a negative realism: “It is the smaller details of every-day life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea. Every one will admit there is no romance here (*Literary Criticism* 71).” In contrast, Norris says, “The world of M. Zola is a world of big things; the enormous, the formidable, the terrible, is what counts; no teacup tragedies here” (*Literary Criticism* 72).

⁴ Murphy discusses naturalistic connections between *The Song of the Lark* and *Sister Carrie* (83-95).

⁵ Bergson explains the concept of the “*élan vital*,” or the “vital principle,” in *Creative Evolution*. See pages 43 and 340-41.

⁶While biographical evidence shows only that Cather read *Creative Evolution*, Bergson's popularity as well as Cather's own positive experience with *Creative Evolution* strongly suggest, as does evidence in her novels, that she was familiar with at least two other Bergson books: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), published as *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* in 1910, and *Matière et mémoire: essai sur la relation du corps avec l'esprit* (1886), which appeared in 1911 as *Matter and Memory*.

⁷Other modernist interpretations of *The Song of the Lark* have been made by Jo Ann Middleton, Phyllis Rose, and Richard Millington. In *Willa Cather's Modernism*, Middleton emphasizes juxtapositions in Cather's work and employs the term "vacuole" to describe the modernist technique Cather uses to "give us the space in which to experience an astonishing, emotional 'reader response'" (53-54), as in "The Ancient People." In discussing the modernist interpolation of an "abstract and lyrical" portrait of the cliff dwellers in *The Professor's House*, Rose also opens the door to viewing "The Ancient People" as modernist ("Modernism: The Case of Willa Cather" 123-46). And Millington explores Cather's modernism by analyzing formalist elements in a New Historicist context, emphasizing contrasting cultural dichotomies, including the anthropological interest in primitive cultures such as the Sinagua ("Willa Cather's American Modernism" 51-65).

⁸In her essay "On *The Professor's House*," Cather says that between the "overcrowded and stuffy" beginning and ending sections of the novel she "wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland's face and in his behavior" (*On Writing* 31-32).

⁹The search or journey that Wagner-Martin identifies as a major element in much modernist fiction has its origins in myth and romanticism. That is, the search for self, particularly the artist self, is shared by romanticism and modernism. Indeed, Harold Bloom states that the romantic poet "takes the patterns of quest-romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life, so that the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again" (5).

¹⁰In his 1912 essay on "Imagism," published in *Poetry* magazine, Ezra Pound defines an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in time" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 26). As Wagner-Martin argues, the development of Imagism developed alongside—and influenced—modernism, both movements drawing from Bergson (26-36, 42). Cather's image of the stream and broken pottery fits Pound's definition and is modernist in style and concept.

¹¹Thea's operatic career is drawn primarily from that of the Scandinavian American opera singer Olive Fremstad, who performed at the Metropolitan Opera from 1903 until 1914. Mary Watkins Cushing records Fremstad's preference for Elizabeth even though she was seldom given the role (22, 155-58), and Cather indicates Thea's situation on page 359 of the novel. During the seasons of 1912-1913 and 1913-1914 when Cather was incubating and writing *The Song of the Lark*, Fremstad gave many distinctive performances—one as Fricka in *Das Rheingold*, one as Elizabeth and six as Venus in *Tannhäuser*, eleven as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, and seven as Elsa in *Lohengrin*—including her final triumphant Metropolitan Opera performance on 23 April 1914 (Seltsam 241-67). In the novel, Cather transforms this final performance from Elsa to Sieglinde, one of Fremstad's most lauded roles. A record of Metropolitan

performances from 1883 through 1947 is found in William H. Seltsam's *Metropolitan Opera Annals: A Chronicle of Artists and Performances*.

¹² Cather's allusion here is to one of William Wordsworth's Lucy poems, "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower" (1799); the fifth stanza reads: "The stars of midnight shall be dear / To her; and she shall lean her ear / In many a secret place / Where rivulets dance their wayward round, / And beauty born of murmuring sound / Shall pass into her face."

¹³ The Bergson passage describing the sprouting and flowering" of an idea (*Creative Evolution* 340-41) was given on page 11 above. Cushing uses similar imagery to describe the lights blazing up and "the scenery [bursting] into flower and leaf" when Fremstad stepped onto the stage" (121).

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Gift Giving and Community in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*

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Late in *The Song of the Lark*, after Thea Kronborg has become the renowned diva “Kronborg,” Thea tells her old friend Dr. Archie, “I began the world on six hundred dollars, and it was the price of a man’s life” (*SL* 379). She is referring, of course, to Ray Kennedy’s insurance money that allows her to start on her musical career. A powerful moment: A man gives his life — the ultimate gift — for Thea to begin a new life. This significant gift appears within a fictional landscape abundant with gifts, which range from material objects, such as food, flowers, and books, to more abstract gifts, such as Thea’s artistic gift. Because Cather’s novels in general abound with gifts, any one of Cather’s novels would yield an interesting analysis of the significance of gift-giving.¹ Yet to date, Robert K. Miller is the sole scholar to address this aspect of Cather’s work extensively.² Miller’s essay, “Gloves Full of Gold: Violations of the Gift Cycle in *My Mortal Enemy*,” is informative in its focus on Cather’s *breaking* of the gift cycle to show Myra Driscoll Henshawe’s retreat from human relationships. Even within *The Song of the Lark*, Cather includes a similar tragic incident where the gift cycle is broken; however, in this earlier novel, the author focuses on the positive aspects of the gift cycle, using the concept of the gift to explore two interrelated ideas—first, the relationship between gifts and art and, second, how gifts, including artistic gifts, relate to human connection and community.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather creates concentric circles which expand gently outward, similar to the rippling effect in water when a pebble is dropped in to it, with her concept of gift-giving starting with the material gifts exchanged among characters. The next circle addresses the concept of talent or ability as a gift, rippling outward to include Thea Kronborg’s artistic gift. Cather explicitly connects art and the gift when, in their discussion of Thea’s abilities, Oliver Landy tells Fred Ottenburg that Thea’s talent is “a gift of the gods” (*SL* 372). Extending outward again, the final circle, by implication,

encompasses Cather's own artistic gift. Thus, *The Song of the Lark* should be understood as not only as the novel wherein Cather creates an artist-heroine but also as the novel wherein Cather formulates her theory of gift giving and community, a theory which encompasses her concepts of the artistic gift and the artist's community.³

In 1922, seven years after Cather's publication of *The Song of the Lark*, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote what is still known as the seminal text on gift giving: *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. In his text, Mauss demonstrates that the gift participates within a gift cycle, and he outlines the obligations inherent within that cycle. Through his work, Mauss shows how gift-giving is, in fact, a complex social ritual that creates and sustains communities. Since then, many anthropologists, with the most notable being Claude Lévi-Strauss, have addressed Mauss's ideas. More recently, Jacques Derrida has taken up the philosophical question as to whether or not there can be a "pure" gift.⁴ Of the scholars who apply Mauss to their respective fields, Lewis Hyde applies Mauss's work to artistic endeavors, most specifically to literature, and for our purposes here, is the most helpful to understand how gifts and the gift cycle function in relation to artistic talents.

The Gift

In *The Gift*, Mauss details the three obligations within the gift cycle: the obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (13). By their very nature, gifts between individuals indicate community or establish community. In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Hyde, building upon Mauss's ideas, outlines three basic ways that gifts differ from commodities, *i.e.* that a gift economy differs from a market economy. First, Hyde explains that unlike commodities, gifts cannot be bought or acquired; they are bestowed. Whereas material gifts are usually bestowed by a known source, the source for artistic gifts is often perceived as unknown, thus relating back to the idea that artistic gifts may be gifts from the gods. Secondly, using the Greek terms *eros* and *logos* to differentiate between gifts and commodities, Hyde asserts gifts are associated with *eros*, with love, imagination, the emotions, whereas commodities are associated with *logos*, with reason, logic, the intellect (xiv).⁵ Through *eros*, gifts link us, bind us to others. They recognize, establish, and maintain community. In contrast, due to *logos*, commodities and the

market economy based on them allow us to remain distant from others; for example, we feel no obligation to the salesclerk from whom we buy our merchandise. To complicate this point, Hyde also discusses that art, once completed, can be bought and sold in the market, yet that art always retains an essence beyond something that is strictly a commodity. This overlap between the two economies can be easily illustrated from the artistic world of music found within Cather's novel where music lessons are "given," a performance is "given," a concert is "given," and, in response, a standing ovation can be "given." Even though money has changed hands, placing music within the world of commodities, the concept of art as gift is always present, keeping its essence within the gift economy.

Finally, Hyde asserts that whereas commodities are meant to be taken out of circulation, gifts must always be kept in circulation, in motion. In a market exchange, there is a balance, a stasis, a state of equilibrium where there is "neither motion nor emotion" (10). A simple exchange takes place where neither participant receives a greater benefit. In a gift exchange, however, the movement of the gift from one person to another causes a shift in the balance, which the giving of a future gift will restore. This future gift is not necessarily the same gift as before but one that continues the cycle. Hyde stresses that "the spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation" (xiv). Hyde further clarifies his belief that a gift does not necessarily have to be returned to the original donor to restore the balance in the gift exchange, although gifts are often reciprocated. "In fact," Hyde claims, "it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: *the gift must always move*" (italics in original, 4). Thus, in a gift economy, the gifts can both move back and forth between a simple two-person exchange but better yet, they can move outward, extending to create a circle of exchange with three (or more) people.⁶

By applying the theory of the gift to Cather's novel, we can better understand the movement of gifts in Thea Kronborg's communities — first in Moonstone and later in Thea's cosmopolitan community which stretches from New York to Dresden and back to Moonstone. Because Thea is the central focus of the novel, most of the gifts either move toward her or from her. Thea is the primary recipient and, by the end of the novel, the greatest donor of gifts.⁷ Still, in Moonstone there is a strong sense of community, and other people receive gifts as well.⁸ Yet, in using the theory of the gift, we can appreciate how Cather's

representation of the many gifts being given to Thea in Moonstone manifest the imbalance being created by a gift economy, realizing that these gifts, in their very excess, foretell Thea's future success, a success that will allow her to continue the gift exchange.

Material Gifts

Tellingly, in Cather's construction of her novel, the first scene of gift giving is repeated, reappearing near the end of the book. First, Dr. Archie gives the young Thea a bunch of white grapes when she is ill with pneumonia (*SL* 15). Then, following the most basic principle of gift giving, Cather's heroine reciprocates this gift in kind when she reaches across the table to give Dr. Archie a bunch of grapes, thus giving a return gift for what she had received years before (*SL* 309). This gift exchange takes place twenty-five years apart, but the reciprocity is central to showing the continued bond between the two friends over time. Also important, in addition to Cather's signifying the friends' specific bond through this simple two-person exchange, Cather uses the original gift of the grapes to establish early in the novel how community grows — with more gifts. After the young Thea emotionally defends Professor Wunsch, Dr. Archie decides to give him an overcoat and, with Thea's young prodding, more grapes (*SL* 19). This extended scene indicates when Dr. Archie's acknowledges that, in his role as protector of Thea, he must also take into account the larger community of Moonstone. Thus, as the gift moves outward, the community that it creates extends and expands as well.

Other material gifts given to the young Thea in Moonstone also reinforce her connections with her home community. For example, both Dr. Archie and Ray Kennedy give Thea gifts involving fruit. Dr. Archie generously offers Thea the chance to pick as many strawberries as she wants at his home. Fruit, since it can be so obviously consumed, is one of the best examples of Hyde's precept that "a gift must always be used up, consumed, eaten. *The gift is property that perishes*" (italics in original, 8). In the strawberry-picking scene, we learn that Thea understands a gift economy just as Dr. Archie does and that she is both "angry" and "ashamed for Dr. Archie" when his stingy wife reduces his gift by replacing Thea's large willow basket with a little wooden butter-basket and by admonishing her not to trample the vines (*SL* 35). Not satisfied with homegrown strawberries, Ray gives Thea exotic fruits. He discovers

she loves pineapples, so he often brings her some from Denver. Besides gifts of fruit, both men give her other material items. Ray gives her a “string of pink coral and tiny white shells” that she will take with her to Chicago (*SL* 153) and a railroad lantern, a gift that Thea greatly appreciates since it allows her to stay up late at night and read the books given to her by Dr. Archie from his library.

While Dr. Archie’s books are material gifts, the literature they offer represents the gift of art, which moves towards the next level of my argument that discusses the concept of the gift in terms of artistic gifts. When Thea finds a quotation in Latin, she takes it to Professor Wunsch to translate (*SL* 27). Originally, the gift of the book itself strengthened the bond between Dr. Archie and Thea; now this bond extends itself to include Wunsch since he is also moved by the quotation and the memories it stirs up. This incident, though small, is not insignificant since it represents the first incident of many in the novel where art creates bonds, creates a type of community. Another example occurs when Thea visits the Kohlers. While Mrs. Kohler enjoys giving Thea material gifts of food, such as her little Christmas cakes, she also enjoys giving Thea a chance to appreciate her husband’s grand piece-picture of Napoleon, which Mr. Kohler had made out of pieces of wool when he was an apprentice tailor. Thea’s bond with the Kohlers is strengthened because of her appreciation of this piece of art as well as their appreciation for her voice. The circle of appreciation extends when Cather writes that Ray Kennedy “was so much impressed by Napoleon that the piece-picture formed a new bond between him and Thea” (*SL* 82). Similar to material gifts in *The Song of the Lark*, art — be it a book, a painting, a voice — brings people together and creates a bond of community between them. Here, Cather stresses her belief that artistic gifts form a complex bond which initially connects the artist (Kohler) with his audience (Mrs. Kohler or Thea or Ray) but which also unites the individuals who appreciate his art (Mrs. Kohler and Thea; Thea and Ray), creating another circle of community.

One material gift in *Moonstone* performs only two of Mauss’s three required obligations. Since a disruption in the gift cycle signals a break in connection, this fictional representation of such a disruption is worthy of our attention since Cather uses it to foreshadow Thea’s break from the more traditional feminine roles assigned her by her home community. On Christmas eve when Lily Fisher steals the show and Thea feels angry and disappointed, Cather has Ray give Thea a

present of “a hand-painted white satin-fan, with pond-lilies” (*SL* 57). Ray has fulfilled the obligation to give. Thea accepts it so it appears she has fulfilled her obligation to receive. Yet, the choice of flowers depicted is ill-fated, for Thea sees the lilies as “an unfortunate reminder” of Lily’s success (*SL* 57), and she tosses the gift aside, adamant that she “was not be consoled by toys” (*SL* 57). While it appears to Ray that she has accepted this gift, in reality Thea has rejected it.

This scene carries a double meaning. It presents Thea’s determination that she will not be content being a musician like Lily Fisher who thinks music, art, talent are merely “toys.” More importantly, it signals Thea’s intuition that Ray’s gifts involve more obligation to reciprocate than she is willing to give. Thea will not be content with the bonds that this gift establishes, bonds that could reduce her talent and her very self into “toys.” As readers, we are to foresee that there will be no romantic future between the two characters; the third obligation, the obligation to reciprocate the gift and the love it indicates, will not happen.

Moving beyond the focus on her young heroine, Cather includes a violation in the gift cycle that involves the entire community. Cather makes her readers aware of the tragic consequences of Moonstone’s failure to reciprocate a gift. When the Moonstone community does not extend its hospitality to a wandering tramp who is out of money and very ill, they must “pay” for the break in their compassion, for the break in *eros*. Elsewhere in *The Song of the Lark*, the three obligations — giving, receiving, reciprocating — inherent in gift-giving rituals are met (Mauss, 13). However, this particular case proves the exception. The wandering tramp has given the town his musical gifts — limited as they may be — that the town has listened to, thus receiving, accepting his gifts. However, rather than repay him with acceptable gifts of food, money, or kindness, the town members mistreat him. Consequently, all bonds are broken between the community and him, and the tramp decides to be avenged by contaminating the town’s water supply with his rotting body after his suicide. Significantly, this action perverts book’s otherwise consistent image of water as a life-giving source. The tramp’s actions imply that if the gift economy is ignored, human bonds will be perverted, and potential sources of life will become sources of death. As both Mauss and Hyde stress (contrary to Derrida), gifts come complete with inherent obligations.

Thea's Gift

Readers are drawn to Thea's compelling story of her growth as an artist, and many scholars — David Stouck, Sue Rosowski, Linda Pannill, Linda Huf, Sherrill Harbison, among others⁹ — have written detailed analyses of Cather's *Künstlerroman* to explore Thea's growth as an artist. Understandably, much of this work has focused on Thea as an individual, a woman strong enough to assert her own individuality as part of her process towards claiming her artistic gift. These readings are crucial to our understanding of Thea's growth and, in Harbison's case, of the price of this growth in terms of the artist's isolation for she notes that Thea is "presented as a woman both blessed and isolated by her divine gift" (xvii). However, Cather, with her love of dualities, makes the reality of her artist-heroine's life richly complex. Thea the artist *is* an individual, an individual whose gifts have isolated her, but she is simultaneously a member of several communities — her home community of Moonstone as well as her larger cosmopolitan artistic community. Cather's layered use of gifts and gift giving supports the idea that Thea's artistic gift by its very nature does connect her to others. Once readers connect the concept of the gift to Cather's work, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of Thea's artistic life, an understanding which can simultaneously take into account how Thea's artistic gift can nourish her, even on the occasions when she is in apparent isolation, and how Thea's gift always connects her to community.

While Thea is still at home in Moonstone, her community has given not only material gifts to her but also more abstract gifts that help her specifically towards developing her artistic gift. Mrs. Kronborg, Professor Wunsch, Ray Kennedy, Dr. Archie, and Spanish Johnny all contribute to her artistic growth through their respective gifts. Beyond Moonstone, with his own musical gifts, Mr. Harsanyi contributes his own intangible gifts to Thea's growth. Each of these gifts reinforces Thea's connection both to her art and to her ever-enlarging community.

Within her family, Mrs. Kronborg is the parent most fully aware of her daughter's potential, and, as a result, she gives her daughter an important but an intangible gift — the gift of space. Mrs. Kronborg gives Thea space in two fundamental ways: the space to be an individual and the space to practice her piano, thus allowing Thea's musical gifts to mature. The first concept of space is behind Cather's

explanation that “Mrs. Kronborg let her children's minds alone. She did not pry into their thoughts or nag them. She respected them as individuals” (SL 21). By giving her children space to be individuals, Mrs. Kronborg encourages their independence and feelings of autonomy, which is especially crucial to Thea since she is the child who chooses to leave Moonstone and to follow an untraditional role for a woman. The second concept of space is reinforced by Thea’s realization that “Her mother had always arranged things so that she could have the parlor four hours a day in summer” (SL 80). Years later, when Mrs. Kronborg is dying and is bed-ridden, she explains her idea of space as a gift to Dr. Archie: “I gave her what chance I could, in a crowded house. I kept the other children out of the parlor for her” (SL 338). Yet Mrs. Kronborg’s role as protectress goes beyond her looking out for Thea’s artistic gift. When Thea returns from Chicago, intent on protecting her voice from overuse, Mrs. Kronborg also protects Thea’s continued connection with the community by prompting Thea to sing at Maggie Evan’s funeral. Mrs. Kronborg understands both parts of her daughter’s artistic gift — both the need to protect the artistic gift in order to develop it and the need to share the artistic gift as part of the bond between the artist and her community.

Because of his own musical abilities, Professor Wunsch recognizes that “Thea had talent” helps validate her early efforts (SL 25). In addition, he teaches her the lesson of the importance of desire. As Linda Huf notes, in German, Wunsch means “desire” (85), so it is fitting that Professor Wunsch is the one to inform Thea that “There is only one big thing — desire. And before it, when it is big, all is little” (SL 68). In return, Thea even dares to make Wunsch hope again. Perhaps, this is Thea’s greatest gift to him. When he decides to leave Moonstone, he begins preparing his tattered score of *Orpheus* as a parting gift for her. Significantly, his preparations grow so that finally Wunsch’s gift involves gifts from several other people as well. Mrs. Kohler cleans the pages of the sheet music for him. Fritz Kohler stitches the score into pasteboards, covering it with “a dark suiting-cloth” and using a strip of thin red leather, given to him by “his friend, the harness-maker,” to hide the stitches (SL 84-85). A gift with this much love put into it from so many friends becomes a very special gift indeed, one to be cherished. Years later, while packing her trunk for Germany, Thea admits, “I haven’t got many [keepsakes] that I value so highly” (SL 315). Thea’s continued connection with this material

gift represents her continued connection with her home community. In this scene, because the internalized values of her home community force Thea to break from Fred, she tells him, “Well, I’ve never said I wasn’t Moonstone, have I? I am [Moonstone]” (SL 299). Here, Cather has her artist-heroine acknowledge explicitly that her own identity is inseparably connected to that of her community.

Similar to Wunsch’s gift that grows to encompass other people’s gifts, Ray Kennedy’s gift of the insurance money extends outward, allowing Dr. Archie to offer himself as companion and protector to Thea in her big move to Chicago. Significantly, Ray Kennedy’s gift also allows Thea to break away from her father’s plans of marketing of her talents in Moonstone, a point I will return to later.

Even though Cather never specifically uses the word “gift” or “give” in her representation of Spanish Johnny’s relationship with Thea, he is influential to Thea’s artistic development since he gives Thea an appreciation for secular songs when her youth has been so informed by religious music. At her request, he gives her lyrics to *Rosa de Noche*. Through Spanish Johnny, Thea also receives the invitation for the dance in Mexican Town, thus giving her the chance to sing for a community who can appreciate her growing talents, which proves to be a powerful moment for Thea in her development. She realizes, “she had sung for churches and funerals and teachers, but she had never before sung for a really musical people, and this was the first time she had ever felt the response that such a people can give. They turned themselves and all they had over to her” (SL 197). An artist needs an audience for her gift to be actualized, and here Thea has found hers.

Beyond Moonstone, Harsanyi is the first of Thea’s teachers to grasp that her true gift is a vocal one. During their discussion when Harsanyi persuades Thea that it would be in her best interest to leave off with the piano, Harsanyi reaches for her hand. Then, “he pressed it *as if to give her something*” (italics added, SL 179). Although there is no tangible gift here beyond the gesture itself and his words that accompany it, Cather represents Harsanyi’s gift as his acceptance and encouragement of Thea’s own gift. Harsanyi tells her,

But all the while you have been working [at the piano] with such good will, something has been struggling against me. See, here we were, you and I and this instrument — he tapped the piano

— three good friends, working so hard. But all the while there was something fighting us; *your gift*, and the woman you were meant to be. When you find your way to *that gift* and to that woman, you will be at peace. (italics added, *SL* 179)

In essence, Harsanyi is offering Thea two abstract yet interconnected gifts. First, he is giving her the chance to develop her gift with someone more qualified than he is — the gift of letting go. Second, he is giving her the chance to see her fears are understood to be the feelings of a true artist while declaring his own willingness to stand beside her until she is as confident as he is in her abilities, equally ready to see herself as a true artist.

These six specific characters understand Thea's artistic abilities as a gift. As a result, Mrs. Kronborg, Professor Wunsch, Ray Kennedy, Dr. Archie, Spanish Johnny, and Mr. Harsanyi are each willing to give Thea what they can and are willing to let her move on. They intuitively appreciate Hyde's insight that "*the gift must always move*" (italics in original, 4). In contrast to these individuals, three other characters within the novel — Mr. Kronborg, Mrs. Harsanyi, and Mr. Bowers — understand Thea's artistic ability more in terms of its value as a commodity, and, as a result, the movement of her gift is potentially in jeopardy. Back in *Moonstone*, Mr. Kronborg had wanted to benefit financially from Thea's talents by having her continue to give piano lessons for the town. Until Ray Kennedy's last request that Thea study music in Chicago, complete with Ray's provision of the necessary finances, Mr. Kronborg does not consider how his daughter's talents must be nurtured to develop them fully. He is satisfied with her teaching and making money, with her own gifts laying dormant, or worse yet, atrophying.

While Mrs. Harsanyi does appreciate Thea's artistic abilities as a gift, wishing "that her husband did not have to charge pupils like this one for their lessons" (*SL* 153), twice she expresses regret that her husband is not capitalizing on Thea's talents for his own benefit. In the first instance, Mr. Harsanyi's response stresses the importance of Thea's gift becoming fully developed rather than changing her gift, her art, into a commodity for his own personal gains. He asserts, "But some day I shall be able to look her in the face and laugh because I did what I could for her. I believe in her. She will do nothing common.... That is what I get out of it. It means more to me than if she played at my concert and brought me a dozen pupils" (*SL* 181). Later, still not

accepting her husband's commitment to the concept of art as a gift rather than a commodity, after seeing Kronborg perform, Mrs. Harsanyi remarks, "I wonder if she knows how much she owes to you." In this second instance, Mr. Harsanyi rebukes his wife even more strongly than the first time, with his rebuke moving from the language of commodity to the language of reciprocity connected with the gift. First using his wife's market-based terms, he declares, "She owes me nothing. She paid her way" (SL 394). Then he shifts his language to the gift economy of art: "*She always gave something back, even then*" (italics added, SL 394). As Hyde has pointed out, with realized gifts, the artistic gift exists simultaneously within both market and gift economies; however, as Hyde reminds us and as Harsanyi's passionate exclamation indicates, the essence of the artistic gift will always surpass its market economy value.

Similar to Mrs. Harsanyi, Mr. Bowers, considered to be the best voice teacher in Chicago, may value artistic gifts, but his attitude is such that he sees art not as a gift but rather as a commodity. Mr. Bowers earns his living by giving music lessons to anyone with enough money, regardless of their talent, or, as he more often perceives, their lack of talent. Mr. Bowers's cynical attitude makes him see art not as something to be nurtured and shared but as something to be exploited for his own personal gain. Not surprisingly, Thea's contact with Bowers drains her so much that she begins to wonder if she will fail to achieve her full potential as an artist.

Clearly, Mr. Kronborg, Mrs. Harsanyi, and Mr. Bowers value Thea's abilities primarily in terms of how these abilities can be of benefit to themselves. In each case, if Thea were to listen to their visions for her art, her artistic growth would become static. Her abilities would not grow, and her artistic gift would no longer have the movement needed to continue forward within the larger gift economy. Thus, it seems highly significant that in each situation of potential stasis, a gift is what pushes Thea forward. Just as Ray Kennedy's gift is the catalyst to move Thea's gift forward from Moonstone, and Harsanyi's gift is the catalyst to move Thea's gift forward in her shift from piano to voice, Fred Ottenburg's gift of offering Thea a period of relaxation while staying at his family's ranch in the southwest is the catalyst to move Thea's gift forward once more.

As Thea's artistic gift moves, her community grows and changes. In this metamorphosis, the community is recognized, established, and maintained by gifts. Sometimes, when a character bypasses the

occasion of giving a gift, even the simple gift of acceptance and understanding, this lack will redefine the community's boundaries. For example, when Thea returns home after her winter in Chicago, two of her brothers and her sister Anna refuse to accept her friendliness with the Mexicans and her interest in singing for them. The siblings' inability to understand, or to accept even without understanding, makes Thea realize they belong to the camp of people she regards as her "natural enemies" (SL 203). Before, everyone in her family had automatically been assumed to be part of her supportive community. Now, that community must be redefined.

Within the novel, Thea's concept of community is most significantly redefined in Panther Canyon, where Thea has her epiphany about art. This famous passage reads,

... the stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself... The Indian women had held it in their jars.... In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (SL 254)

With Thea's epiphany comes the realization that her community extends beyond Moonstone or even her cosmopolitan artistic community. Indeed, it extends beyond the present time to include all human community. Thea now understands Ray's idea that "you feel like it's up to you to do your best, on account of those fellows having it so hard. You feel like you owed them something" (SL 104), and she recognizes that "these potsherds were like fetters that bound one to the long chain of human endeavor" (SL 257). Here, in Panther Canyon, for the second time in the novel, Thea connects with the ongoing chain of human endeavor, with a form of *zoë*-life — life that endures.

Thea's first insight occurs when she stands at the top of a windy ridge with the old wagon-ruts of the pioneers under her feet, a gift of an old iron-ox shoe in her hand, the story of the first telegraph wire in her head, and with eagles above. Now, similar to that first time, she feels "the spirit of human courage seemed to live up there with the eagles" (SL 50), and she salutes that spirit, stating, "O eagle of eagles! Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art!" (SL 269). In Thea's contemplation of the pottery shards, she moves from

her earlier more generalized insight on all human endeavor to a more focused insight on art itself connecting to *zoë*-life. Hyde explains that whereas man's life is a form of *bios*-life, limited life, life that dies, art is a form of *zoë*-life, life that endures (32). First Hyde clarifies that *zoë* is "the thread which runs through *bios*-life and is not broken when the particular perishes" (32), later shifting his argument to artistic gifts, Hyde asserts, "In the realized gifts of the gifted we may taste that *zoë*-life which shall not perish even though each of us, and each generation, shall perish" (152). For Thea, the pottery shards of the ancient Indian women make her realize that art is a gift that is beyond time, that art is a gift that brings obligations with it from across the centuries. As David Stouck asserts, "The Indian pottery, moreover, reflects the communal aspect of art... [Thea] feels her art no longer alienates her from other men, but connects her vitally to a tradition of human aspiration" (195). When Cather concludes the scene, "The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations" (*SL* 258), readers are to understand two interrelated ideas: Thea's concept of art has been redefined from the individual struggle to a more communal vision of art and Thea's concept of community has broken wide open, extending beyond Moonstone not simply in terms of space but also time.

Many readers rightly read the Panther Canyon scene in *The Song of the Lark* as Thea's coming into her artistic gift. To understand this idea more fully in terms of art as a gift, let us return to Hyde's insight that gifts are bestowed rather than acquired and that in the case of talent, abilities, and inspiration, they are bestowed by an unknown source, which he refers to using the Latin term *genius*.¹⁰ Hyde writes that the *genius* "offers itself to us as we grow, and we choose whether or not to accept, which means we choose whether or not to labor in its service. For, again, the *genius* has need of us... [T]he spirit that brings us our gifts finds its eventual freedom only through our sacrifice" (53). Cather manifests Hyde's idea of an artist's *genius* within *The Song of the Lark* not only through Thea's early struggles to realize her art but also through Harsanyi's insight that "Every artist makes himself born.... Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play piano. That you must bring into the world yourself" (*SL* 150). In the Panther Canyon scene, Thea finds the inspiration needed to be reborn as an artist.

Even though the Panther Canyon scene signals this significant transformation, Cather represents Thea as being aware of her *genius* from a very young age. Thea first describes it thus:

She knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. She brought everything to it, and it answered her.... it was there — under her cheek, it usually seemed to be, or over her breast — a kind of warm sureness. And when it was there, everything was more interesting and beautiful, even people. When this companion was with her, she could get the most wonderful things out of Spanish Johnny, or Wunsch, or Doctor Archie. (SL 71)¹¹

Within this early description, two ideas of art as gift are already present. First, the idea of the reciprocity of the gift: “She brought everything to it, and it answered her” (SL 71). Cather’s insight about this inner reciprocity emphasizes the movement of the gift between the artist and her *genius*; this reciprocity is what allows the artist to be connected even when she appears to be isolated and alone. Secondly, the idea of the gift and community is present. When Thea’s *genius* is with her, she gives and receives “the most wonderful things” from those around her (SL 71). As we read *The Song of the Lark*, if we focus on the concept of art as a gift, we continually encounter Cather’s development of these two cyclical movements, the reciprocity between the artist and her *genius* and the reciprocity between the artist and her community.

Thea herself makes a comment that, yet again, reinforces the circular pattern of a gift economy. She exclaims, “Isn’t it funny, how we travel in circles? Here you are, still getting me clean, and Fred is still feeding me” (SL 366). Then, through Fred’s perspective, Cather describes Thea’s artistic abilities as her return gift:

During dinner she had been as kind as she knew how to be, to him and to Archie, and had given them as much of herself as she could. But, clearly, she knew only one way of being really kind, from the core of her heart out; and there was but one way in which she could give herself to people largely and gladly, spontaneously. (SL 366)

The climax of the novel, of course, is Thea's grand moment of "giv[ing] herself to people largely and gladly, spontaneously" through the actualization of her gift. Thea sings to a full house, to an audience that includes many of Thea's friends, such as Dr. Archie, Fred Ottenburg, Mr. and Mrs. Harsanyi, and Spanish Johnny. Using a flower metaphor to describe Thea's giving herself up to her art and to her audience, Cather writes, "All of that deep-rooted vitality flowered in her voice, her face, in her very finger-tips. She felt like a tree bursting into bloom" (*SL* 395). Since flowers are considered wonderful gifts, it seems appropriate that Thea's actualized gift is equated with flower blossoms on a tree. Emerson states it thus, "The gift, to be true, must be the flowering of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him" (307).

The audience's response to Thea's performance, particularly that of Spanish Johnny, reinforces that art is to be considered a gift. Cather writes, "he walked down Broadway... wearing a smile which embraced all the stream of life.... If the singer... was wondering what was the good of it all, that smile, could she have seen it, would have answered her. It is the only commensurate answer" (*SL* 396). Even without ever seeing it, Spanish Johnny's smile is the "answer," the return gift for Thea's gift; it is the gift that will keep the original gift in motion, extending outward.

Yet, many readers have questioned either Cather's choice to move the story beyond Thea's point of view or her choice to extend the story past Thea's individual struggle to become an artist. One early anonymous reviewer, in his review entitled "Diminuendo," attacked Part VI and Cather's epilogue, writing that the "last two parts seem an act of laborious creation, carried through after the author is really bored with her story" (qtd. in O'Connor 71). His response mirrored the more general critical response, so much so that even Cather herself states similar misgivings in the 1932 Preface: "The chief fault of the book is that it describes a descending curve; the life of a successful artist in the full tide of achievement is not so interesting as the life of a talented young girl 'fighting her way,' as we say" (433). Yet, if we are to work with Cather's original vision, Part VI and the Epilogue both serve important functions. If we are to understand Thea's gift as connecting her to her communities, these two sections are crucial since it is in them that we can see the ripple effect of art as it extends outward. In Part VI, as readers, we move beyond the artist to her immediate audience, those who have experienced her art directly, and

then in the Epilogue, we move beyond that circle to yet another audience — to Moonstone, to Thea’s home community where, if everyone has not had direct experiences of her art, all have heard stories of it.

This early unnamed reviewer condemned the “inscrutable epilogue,” calling it a “sociological treatise of the town of Moonstone” that attempts to account for “every last citizen of the girl’s early environment” (qtd. in O’Connor 72). Yet, with this epilogue, Cather reinforces the circular movement of a gift economy in an important way — by returning to Moonstone. Readers who follow this early reviewer, while enjoying Cather’s development of Thea’s individual gifts, have not yet understood that part of Cather’s representation includes Thea’s reciprocity to her home community as well as to her cosmopolitan artistic one. Cather emphasizes that “Thea Kronborg has given much noble pleasure to a world that needs all it can get, but to no individual has she given more than to her queer old aunt in Moonstone” (*SL* 403). Thea’s aunt Tillie is the last of the Kronborgs to live in Moonstone, and she thrives on hearing and telling bits of news about her famous niece. We learn that Tillie receives gifts from Thea, including a “draft for a good round sum from her niece at Christmas-time” and the chance of a lifetime during a week-long visit to enjoy Thea’s singing and to go through all of Thea’s trunks, trying on her wigs and her jewels (*SL* 402). However, these tangible gifts are less important to Tillie than the stories that her niece’s adventurous life provides her with to tell the locals. Just as Thea’s voice inspires, Tillie’s stories about her also inspire. Cather concludes her lengthy novel with an insight on the power of storytelling: “tidings...bring real refreshment; bring to the old, memories, and to the young, dreams” (*SL* 407). This conclusion takes us from the specifics of Thea’s musical gift to a more general understanding of the power of storytelling. Moreover, in this particular focus, it mirrors Cather’s concluding paragraph to Part VI, which reads,

This story attempts to... give some account of how a Moonstone girl found her way out of a vague, easy-going world into a life of disciplined endeavor. Any account of the loyalty of young hearts to some exalted ideal, and the passion with which they strive, will always, in some of us, rekindle generous emotions. (*SL* 397)

Twice, in these final sections of the novel, Cather moves from the story of her heroine to theorize about the significance of Thea's story. Clearly, Cather's doubled conclusion emphasizes her insight that art, be it music or story-telling, connects us to our emotions, to our memories, and to our dreams, all of which connect us to others, to our own communities.

Cather's Gift

Because Cather ends her novel with the art of storytelling, this concluding focus invites us as readers to rethink Thea's gift in terms of Cather's own artistic gift of storytelling. Scholars have already done this at the level of the narrative, for example, Woodress asserts that *The Song of the Lark* is Cather's "story of an artist's struggle for recognition...[which] fuse[s] the careers of both [Olive] Fremstad and herself" (255), and Rosowski reminds us that "Willa Cather's strong-minded personality became Thea Kronborg's, and Cather's struggles to find her way as a writer became her character's to do so as a singer" (62). Yet, if we are to move beyond this level of meaning with its focus on the representation of the artist's struggle to comprehend *The Song of the Lark* in terms of how Cather theorizes about her art — understanding it as a gift — and its relation to her home community of Red Cloud, we first need to acknowledge that Cather herself saw *The Song of the Lark* not solely in terms of its focus on its artist-heroine as an individual. One of Cather's letters helps in this shift: Cather's letter of March 15, 1916, to her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, records that her novel is about Moonstone, what Thea received from her hometown and what she returned to it.¹²

Because many critics, including Woodress and Rosowski, consider "The Friends of Childhood," Part One of *The Song of the Lark*, as some of the most compelling autobiographical fiction that Cather ever wrote, we can use it as a guide in seeing how Cather felt about coming to terms with her own artistic gift. Perhaps Thea's questions as she returns to Moonstone are Cather's own as she returns to Red Cloud:

Why had he [Ray Kennedy] cared so much? And Wunsch, and Doctor Archie, and Spanish Johnny, why had they? It was something that had to do with her that made them care, but it was not she.

It was something they believed in, but it was not she. Perhaps each of them concealed another person in himself, just as she did. Why was it that they seemed to feel and to find for a second person in her and not in each other?... What if one's second self could somehow speak to all these second selves?... How deep they lay, these second persons, and how little one knew about them, except to guard them fiercely. (SL 184)

When Thea concludes, “It was to music, more than to anything else, that these hidden things in people responded,” Cather implies that music is the greatest of the art forms, which may explain her continued efforts to combine music with her storytelling (SL 184).¹³

One scene from the novel, often overlooked, shows not simply Cather's love of opera, but perhaps her feeling of owing a debt to the great singers of her day, Olive Fremstad among them. After Harsanyi has “discovered” Thea's voice, he goes to his friend Theodore Thomas, the conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Thomas tells Harsanyi a story about his own birth as an artist, a story of gifts that Thomas had received from two great female vocalists, Jenny Lind and Henrietta Sontag. Thomas relates how he had been “awakened” by their two voices, claiming that they were “the first great artists he had ever heard, and he never forgot his debt to them” (SL 176). When Thomas tries to identify what they “gave,” he mentions both their voice quality that he strives to reproduce on his violin and the inspiration their singing gave to him. It seems feasible that Thomas's experience represents Cather's own experiences. Here, as in her essay “Gertrude Hall's *The Wagnerian Romances*,” Cather emphasizes the artist's ability to “reproduce the emotional effect of one art through the medium of another art” (62).¹⁴ In *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O'Brien mentions many actresses and divas whom Cather admired, but she specifies the two “who most impressed [Cather] in the early 1890s — Sarah Bernhardt and Eleanora Duse — [who] not only equalled their male colleagues; they also possessed the divine attributes Cather worshipped in male writers” (168).¹⁵ While it is interesting to speculate if Duse and Bernhardt are equivalent to Thomas's Lind and Sontag, Cather's greater emphasis is on realizing one's debt to earlier artists, an idea that artistic gifts belong to and inspire a larger ever-growing community, an idea which is, of course, revisited in Thea's Panther Canyon epiphany.

Two important aspects of Cather's theory of art can be found in her writings on Sarah Orne Jewett, her friend and writing mentor. Using the "he" pronoun to represent the universal artist, in her preface to *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, Cather writes, "If he achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift..." (51). Cather's idea of the "gift of sympathy" combines the artist's feelings of compassion with both fellow humans and with the art form itself. Again writing of Jewett, this time praising her artistic ability to capture the sounds and speech of particular people (and again using the "he" pronoun to represent the universal artist), Cather asserts "he himself must be able to think and feel in that speech — it is a gift from heart to heart" (57). O'Brien works with Cather's dual use of the word "gift" — as in "gift of sympathy" and "gift from heart to heart" — in these references to Jewett's writings (347). In her analysis of Jewett's influence on Cather, O'Brien successfully argues that Cather learned from Jewett how to connect to a larger female literary tradition, understanding that their own female friendship was a source of inspiration and support, and how to combine the "woman writer's gift of emotion with the male writer's command of form" (342). O'Brien concludes,

So, in Cather's writing, as in Jewett's, the gift suggests the magic of contradictions, being simultaneously a metaphor of selfhood and of relationship. The gift metaphor appears frequently in Jewett's fiction; after their meeting it begins to appear in Cather's fiction as well, where it signifies both creativity and attachment (347).¹⁶

Significantly, Cather succeeds in both of these writerly aspects that she attributes to Jewett — the gift of sympathy and the gift from heart to heart — within her own novel. While Cather's success at the first, "the gift of sympathy," is more apparent and easily discerned, Cather herself acknowledges her success at the latter, "the gift from heart to heart," when she explains to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, again in the letter of March 15, 1916, that she had, as Woodress phrases it, "written the book from the Moonstone point of view in Moonstone language" (271).

Cather's theory of art is most notably set forth in her 1922 essay, "The Novel D emeubl e." In it, Cather declares, "The higher processes

of art are all processes of simplification” (40). Woodress notes that at the time of writing *The Song of the Lark*, Cather had “not yet formulated” these artistic principles (272). However, throughout *The Song of the Lark*, Cather presents Thea coming to understand art as a process of simplification. For example, when she visits the Art Institute in Chicago, Thea finds herself drawn to the casts, to the sculptures more than the paintings because, as Cather explains, “they were at once more simple and more perplexing” (SL 167). As part of her Panther Canyon epiphany, Thea realizes that “[t]he things that were really hers separated themselves from the rest. Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer” (SL 257). Several times we are told of Thea’s ability to grasp the essence of the part she is to perform. Fred phrases it well: “It’s the idea, the basic idea, pulsing behind every bar she sings. She simplifies a character down to the musical idea it’s built on, and makes everything conform to that” (SL 350). While Woodress may be correct that Cather has “not yet formulated” her artistic principles, it seems more likely that she has been formulating these principles all along and is refining them as she writes *The Song of the Lark*. It is almost as if in this long, dense novel, Cather is writing out her theory of art longhand so that she can comprehend the implications of her own theory fully. Once *The Song of the Lark* is finished, Cather seems more at home in applying her theory of simplified art in her very next novel *My Ántonia* (1918). Yet, an early essay, entitled “A Mighty Craft,” first published in the *Nebraska State Journal*, shows Cather working on similar principles of art as early as 1896. In it Cather writes,

Art is not thought or emotion, but expression, expression, always expression. To keep an idea living, intact, tinged with all its original feeling, its original mood, preserving in it all the ecstasy which attended its birth, to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper a living thing with color, odor, sound, life all in it, that is what art means, that is the greatest of all the gifts of the gods. And that is the voyage perilous. (qtd. in Slotte, 417)

Within *The Song of the Lark*, the concept of this “voyage perilous” is presented through Ray Kennedy, yet another storyteller. Cather describes Ray as having all of the “chief requisites in a good story-teller” (SL 46). Yet, when Ray turns from oral storytelling to

writing, his experience of “this treacherous business of recording impressions, in which the material you were so full of vanished mysteriously under your striving hand” earns his exasperated comment, “Escaping steam!” (*SL* 103). This early acknowledgment in the novel of a struggling artist’s desire for perfection and the resulting frustration when his art does not achieve the original vision sets the stage for readers to understand Thea’s frustrations with what she perceives as her own failings in the full realization of her art. This comment may also signal some of Cather’s own frustrations as she grapples with her vision for the novel.

Yet, while on her own “voyage perilous,” most Cather scholars agree that Cather comes into her own as a self-confident writer after — and, thus, as I argue, *through* her writing of *The Song of the Lark*. Just as Thea claims her own gifts at the end of *The Song of the Lark*, so does Cather. And Cather, like Thea, once she is in full possession of her gifts, releases them. Like all artists, she does not “own” her gifts but has “guardianship” of them, until they are ready to be shared, to be passed on.

In looking at *The Song of the Lark* in terms of its gifts, we can understand Cather’s idea that art is a gift that binds the artist to her communities — the community that is the source of her memories that are translated, recreated into art and the artistic community that, across distance and time, connects with her artistic gift, that receives and accepts her gift and extends the gift outward. Cather — similar to her fictional artist-heroine who takes her memories of her mother, of the prayer meeting, of her friends in Moonstone, of her grandmother’s stories, and creates art out of them — takes her own memories of Red Cloud to create Moonstone and then she passes this gift along to her reading audience. If we consider Hyde’s precept that “the gift that is not used is lost, while the one that is passed along remains abundant” in terms of the novel that Cather has just shared with us, we realize two essentials — that Cather’s gift “remains abundant” and that we are the next in line to pass the gift along.

Notes

¹ For other gift-giving scenes in Cather’s work, consider Alexander’s gifts of the earrings and flowers in *Alexander’s Bridge*, Emil’s gift of the turquoise in *O Pioneers!*, Tom Outland’s gift of turquoise and pottery in *The Professor’s House*,

Myra Driscoll Henshawe's mass for Helena Modjeska in *My Mortal Enemy*, Nils and Clara's monetary gift to pay for Eric's passage to Bergen in "The Bohemian Girl," Clark's gift of the Wagner matinee in "A Wagner Matinee," and the gift of his soul in "Eric Hermansson's Soul." This list is selective rather than comprehensive, but it shows the range, frequency, and significance with which Cather endows her gift-giving scenes.

² Other scholars mention gifts in connection to Cather in passing, without fully exploring the significance of the connection. For example, in the introduction "For Use, for Pleasure, for Status: The Object World of Willa Cather" of *Willa Cather and Material Culture*, Janis P. Stout lists gifts of food to and from Cather in her longer list of meaningful material objects in Cather's life (7-8). Or, in the chapter on *The Song of the Lark* found within *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, Linda Huf has a relevant section in which she develops what Thea gives in return to four important men in her life who have given to her (97-99), but Huf does not extend this aspect of her argument. Also, within *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O'Brien notes Cather's own use of the word "gift" in relationship to art in her discussion of Sarah Orne Jewett's writing (347), a point that I return to in the final section of this essay; yet O'Brien's valuable but brief insights still leave room for more exploration of the connections between Cather and her concepts of art and the gift, between Cather and the theory of the gift.

³ The idea of an "insistence term" from discourse analysis indicates that the number of times an author uses a particular key word is suggestive of that word's power in serving the author's purposes. An analysis of an insistence term can therefore be used to help determine central themes being explored by the author. Within the 1915 edition of *The Song of the Lark*, Cather uses the adjective "gifted" two times, the noun forms of "gift" eleven times (with the frequency of occurrence increasing after Landy's declaration of Thea's gift as "a gift of the gods"), and the verb forms of "to give" 242 times, making a total of 255 gift-related references. A big thanks to Molly Johnson, a colleague in Technical Communication at Eastern Washington University for this information and for her help with the e-text version of Cather's novel available through the Gutenberg Project.

⁴ Because Derrida's idea of "pure" gift negates the possibility of the giver knowing he is giving a gift or the receiver knowing he is receiving a gift, in essence Derrida's idea negates Mauss's three original obligations by denying that there are "real" communities in which the gift cycle happens. While Derrida's idea offers intriguing philosophical quandaries, Mauss's original ideas have more validity when applying them within cultural contexts.

⁵ Even though Hyde does not include *agape* love in his distinctions, *agape* love, love of gods, sacred love, would also be equated with gifts as well *eros* love, secular love.

⁶ The three-person exchange is "better" than the two-person exchange since the latter faces the danger of leaving the realm of gift-giving and becoming a bartering system, which is an aspect of a market economy.

⁷ Thea gives in many ways even before she has completely achieved her artistic gift and can confidently share the gift of her voice with her audiences. Examples of Thea's material gifts include the new carpet for the family, the new rifle for her brothers, and the new outfit for Thor. Thea buys these gifts

for her family once she begins to receive money for giving piano lessons. Thea's generous spirit is similarly reinforced when she has the train attendant on her trip home to Moonstone deliver a pink rose and a cup of coffee to a sick girl about her own age. Thea also gives much less tangible gifts than these. For example, Cather shows how Thea has compassion for those around her, including this ill girl on the train. Thea does not judge Professor Wunsch harshly, nor does she judge the local Mexican culture based on her own culture's values as many of the other townspeople do.

⁸ The community's generosity includes the following gifts: Dr. Howard Archie gives Mrs. Kronborg an overcoat to give to Professor Wunsch and gives Thor a job as his chauffeur. Spanish Johnny gives Dr. Archie an opal that he brought up "from Chihuahua in his shoe" (*SL* 16). As a minister, Mr. Kronborg receives presents from his congregation, including the (perhaps not so appropriately chosen) book of Byron's poems given him by his Sunday school class. Mr. and Mrs. Kohler accept Professor Wunsch into their home, giving him the gift of a home. The Kohlers also give Wunsch gifts of clothing, including new silk handkerchiefs for Christmas and the two shirts and a pair of trousers for his going-away present. Mrs. Kronborg gives food to many people, including Ray Kennedy, his friend Giddy, and another train attendant. Mrs. Kronborg also gives money to the two tramps after she expresses her regret that she does not have enough food to share with them.

⁹ See David Stouck's "*The Song of the Lark: A Künstlerroman*" in *Willa Cather's Imagination*; Susan J. Rosowski, "*The Song of the Lark: The Growth of the Artist's Mind*" in *The Voyage Perilous*; Linda Pannill, "Willa Cather's Artist Heroines": Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Woman*; and Sherrill Harbison, Introduction to *The Song of the Lark*.

¹⁰ Hyde occasionally uses the Greek term *daemon* as well.

¹¹ Cather's other references to Thea's *genius* or "friendly spirit" all lead up to the Panther Canyon epiphany: When leaving for Chicago, Thea feels "everything that was essential seemed to be right there in the car with her.... She was all there, and something else was there, too — in her heart, was it, or under her cheek? Anyhow, it was about her somewhere, that warm sureness, that sturdy little companion with whom she shared a secret" (*SL* 136); when she feels that her *genius* has deserted her, Thea laments, "the thing that used to lie under her cheek, that sat so warmly over her heart... was far from her. She had come to Chicago to be with it, and it had deserted her, leaving in its place a painful longing, an unresigned despair" (*SL* 152); when Thea hears Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, she makes a passionate oath to herself to sacrifice all to her *genius*, saying "As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height" (*SL* 171-172); when Thea ponders, "Hitherto, she had felt but one obligation toward it — secrecy; to protect it even from herself.... She took it for granted that some day, when she was older, she would know a great deal more about it. It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere" (*SL* 184); when Thea realizes that "Her voice, more than any other part of her, had to do with that confidence, that sense of wholeness and inner well-being that she had felt at moments ever since she could remember" (*SL* 184); when in Panther Canyon, Thea realizes that "Now... it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her" (*SL* 251).

¹² This letter is in the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Papers, Special Collections, University of Vermont Library. Following Cather's instructions concerning her letters, it has not been published, nor can it be quoted from directly.

¹³ See Marion Fay's "Making Her Work Her Life: Music in Willa Cather's Fiction" for a comprehensive analysis of Cather's use of music in her writings.

¹⁴ Cather often interweaves two theories of art, overlapping the theory of singing with that of writing. For example, in her essay "Gertrude Hall's *The Wagnerian Romances*," Cather presents Hall as having the "rare gift of being able to reproduce the emotional effects of the Wagner operas upon the printed page" (61). Cather compliments Hall's abilities "to suggest the character of the music itself" (61). Cather further asserts that she "stole" this technique from Hall, applying it to her some of her own writing (65).

¹⁵ O'Brien defines these attributes as "force and potency," connecting them to masculine power (168).

¹⁶ Instead of exploring the significance of these insights more fully, O'Brien takes her argument in a different direction, writing, "By imagining women as the gift givers, both writers revise the traditional associations between 'woman' and 'gift' in patriarchal culture, in which women are the gifts that men give each other" (347).

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Abstract of Arguments

Meghan L. Burke's "Genius and the (Un)Dead Girls: Consumption, Artistry, and the Female Body in *The Song of the Lark*" offers a debate about current feminist readings of Willa Cather's 1915 novel as a model of female artistic empowerment. Through an analysis of the protagonist Thea's various associations with a series of characters identified as "(un)dead girls," the essay instead demonstrates how *The Song of the Lark* depicts true artistic genius as essentially antithetical to embodied femininity, thereby perpetuating a pessimistic account of female artistry and sacrifice.

By inscribing the protagonist Thea Kronborg in a medical discourse, **Cecilia Bjorken-Nyberg's "Anatomy Is All: The Pathology of Voice in *The Song of the Lark*"** queries the reading of Cather's novel as a *Künstlerroman*. A supplementary narrative, running parallel with the story of the successful opera singer, reduces Thea to a passive object of physiological examination. It is argued that the keen interest in the protagonist's throat and voice is comparable to the late nineteenth-century obsession with the documentation of the prostitute's body through speculum examinations.

Danielle Russell's "Immeasurable Yearnings: The Artistic Legacy of the Landscape in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" focuses on the ecocritical implications of Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915), ecocritical concerns that will not be addressed by critics, in any sustained way, for another sixty-three years. Thea Kronborg's encounters with nature are crucial to her development as an opera singer. Nature is an agent of change in the novel, not a static setting for the events. Cather challenges the nature/culture dichotomy; the novel highlights the invigorating interplay of these two elements.

Annette R. Dolph's "Place, Inspiration, and the Railroad in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" argues that, while it remains important to recognize Cather's careful construction and description of western and southwestern landscapes, the central presence of the railroad in *The Song of the Lark* suggests an alternative to thinking

about “place” in Cather’s work—one which transcends the specifics of location. The train itself in the novel is mobile, lacking a permanent geographic “place” and making it possible to visit, experience, and alter the various locations it connects. Yet, the train also retains the same sort of properties as a geographically fixed town or city including the stable qualities of a domestic interior space and the ability to inspire and shape personal and intellectual growth.

Thus, the central inclusion of the railroad in *The Song of the Lark* complicates a simplistic place-based view of Cather’s regionalism.

Erica D. Galioto’s “*Künstlerroman* Revised: Doubleness and Catharsis in Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*” offers a psychoanalytic analysis of the artistic births, second selves, and unconscious identities of both Thea and Cather. Their similar acknowledgment of internal, unconscious doubleness, as opposed to external, public doubleness, allows both to function as therapists, providing powerful catharsis for those moved by their art. This essay goes on to argue that *The Song of the Lark* represents a revised *Künstlerroman* because the experience of rebirth extends to Thea’s opera listeners and Cather’s fiction readers.

Tony R. Magagna’s “A Place Apart: Transcending Social Topographies in *The Song of the Lark*” examines how Willa Cather utilizes *The Song of the Lark* to explore the underside of the kind of projects to define a place in the West that she celebrates in many of her other Western novels. While revealing the social and moral geographies that are imposed within the fictional town of Moonstone, Cather illustrates that, for all of the triumphs inherent to cultivating a rooted sense of Western place, definitions of place can also manifest as exclusionary, exploitative, and reactionary. Amid strict social distinctions and stark ethnic divisions within the town, Cather’s main character Thea is encouraged to stick to *her place* within the community. Furthermore, within the larger scope of the novel, as Thea is pulled ever eastward in search of artistic credibility and success, Cather reveals that the West itself is treated as a hinterland within a kind of cultural topography. Yet, just as Thea’s childhood is defined by the ways in which she transgresses the strict social boundaries of Moonstone, her happiness and successes as an adult are shaped by the ways in which she comes to negotiate and transcend the cultural hierarchies of East and West, Old World and New.

Richard Pressman's "The Inevitable Hardness of Human Life': *The Song of the Lark* as Naturalism" suggests that while Cather is generally viewed as a late romantic, defying the tendencies of her time, it is possible to see her, in her production of *Lark*, as fitting in with the naturalistic world so widely described in her time. *Lark* was produced in the latter part of naturalism's high period, with Naturalism being the dominant influence in American Literature from the 1890s to the First World War. While Cather was preparing to become a full-time novelist, she worked as an editor for *McClure's*, which had adopted much of the subject matter and rhetoric of the Naturalist movement. Cather's own words in the novel, "the inevitable hardness of life," reflect that view. By examining *Lark* as a novel with a Naturalistic bent, the work can be seen not as an exception to its times but as a product of them.

Eric Aronoff's "The Kingdom of Culture: Culture, Ethnology and the "Feeling of Empire" in *The Song of the Lark*" analyzes Willa Cather's complex construction of "culture" in *The Song of the Lark*. Specifically, this essay considers the intertwined ways in which Cather imagines personal "cultivation," objects of high Culture, artifacts of "primitive culture," and the creation of "national culture." Setting Cather's argument in the context of late-nineteenth and early twentieth century interdisciplinary debates over "culture" which circulated among ethnologists, archaeologists, artist and social critics, this study argues that Cather's "culture" complexly combines a teleology of "progress" characteristic of the theories of ethnologists like E.B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, with romantic anti-modernism drawn from Matthew Arnold's theory of culture. At each level, Cather constructs the project of "culture" as an imperial project of taking "possession," analogous to the pioneer's possession of the landscape.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather initially offers a seemingly positive portrayal of Spanish Johnny and Moonstone's Mexican community. Cather's depiction of Mexican culture reflects her appreciation of cultural diversity and her dislike of conformist attitudes that would homogenize the United States. Nevertheless, she touches on the ethnic prejudice directed at the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Moonstone only obliquely, obscuring the tension of American racism historically as well as textually by deemphasizing

the Mexicans' indigenous background and historic connections to the North American continent, connections far more longstanding than those of Thea Kronborg's Scandinavian family. **Sarah Clere's "Locating Mexicans in *The Song of the Lark*"** examines Cather's portrayal of the novel's Mexicans as simply another immigrant community within the United States ignores this ethnic group's deep and legitimate investment in the territory that is the current Southwestern United States.

Although reading (regardless of content) is now almost universally praised as a positive activity, previous centuries did not always regard it in this light. In her 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*, Edith Wharton suggested through her heroine, Undine Spragg, that a steady diet of the society sections of newspapers and cheap romance novels might be a negative rather than a positive influence. Initially newspapers help Undine increase her understanding of the society into which she is trying to climb, but they fail to provide the nuances she needs to get to the top of the social ladder. Similarly, her consumption of romance novels imbues her with misleading ideas about men, women, and the relationships between them. Undine's refusal to exercise her intellect may indicate the limit of her social success. **Julie Olin-Ammentorp's "You Are What You Read': Wharton's Undine Spragg and Cather's Thea Kronborg"** suggests that in contrast, Cather's 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark* suggests that the consumption of more substantial material may be a more positive influence on one's character and abilities. Thea Kronborg's reading of the Romantic poets, particularly Byron, eventually helps her take the risks she must take to succeed in her career; it also helps her perceive herself (in contrast to Undine) as an active rather than a passive person. Ultimately, however, Thea must go beyond words in order to conceptualize art and herself as an artist. Wharton and Cather, both lifelong readers, describe both the limitations and the importance of reading.

Debra L. Cumberland's "A Tale of Two Sisters: the Influence of 'Goblin Market' on Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" contends that although Cather does not quote from Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," directly, readers can clearly see in *The Song of the Lark* how the tale of Rossetti's sisters, Laura and Lizzie, weaves its way through Cather's novel. On the one hand, we have two sisters in *The Song of*

the Lark who take different paths in regard to their central life choices: one acts out of desire, and the other acts out of conformity which is possibly fueled by fear of social condemnation. Both the poem and the novel also feature a sense of the ambivalence about home. Another common feature which this paper explores is the central concept of women's power to work with myth-making and the sacred, and to do so in discerning ways, which becomes the impetus for creating a life fueled by desire. Both "Goblin Market" and *The Song of the Lark*, therefore, may have more in common than one might expect. The fundamental question of the relationship of Thea and her sister Anna, at its root, explores the relationship of women and women artists to the concept of home and homemaking, as well as women's powers of myth-making and connection to the sacred.

Written during the period in Willa Cather's life when she was transitioning from her editorship at *McClure's Magazine* to the career of a full-time fiction writer, Ann Moseley's "**Willa Cather's Transitional Novel: *The Song of the Lark* as a Romantic-Naturalistic Novel with a "Modernist Center"**" argues that *Song of the Lark* (1915) reflects the transition from romanticism to naturalism that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century and foreshadows the modernism that Cather and many writers of her generation would later embrace. Part I of the novel reflects the romanticism, particularly American Transcendentalism, that had been at the core of her previous novel *O Pioneers!* (1913), and Parts II and III, the Chicago sections, exhibit the naturalistic influence of Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser. However, in Part IV, "The Ancient People," Cather draws on the ideas of Henri Bergson and on other techniques such as juxtaposition, the quest structure, and other mythic archetypes to create a truly modernist center in the novel before returning to romanticism, specifically the German romanticism of Richard Wagner, for Part VI, "Kronborg."

Beth E. Torgerson's "Gift Giving and Community in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" focuses on how *The Song of the Lark* is structured upon the concept of the gift. Using Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift and Lewis Hyde's application of this anthropological theory to literature, she develops the layered significance of Cather's use of gifts in her *Künstlerroman* to explore two interrelated ideas: the

relationship between gifts and art and how gifts— including artistic gifts—relate to human connection and community.

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