

More Than a Songbird: Rewriting the Female Narrative and
Feminism in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*

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American novelist Willa Cather was not an open proponent of feminism; she was wholly dedicated to her art, and thus kept her personal life and political opinions private to avoid distracting her readers from the writing. Despite Cather's silence, much can be extrapolated from her own life as well as from her numerous novels regarding feminism. Born in 1873, Cather lived in an era when women were severely restricted by patriarchal society. Indeed, much of her lifetime took place before women had the right to vote. However, Cather broke away from the traditional feminine role of her time, choosing to put her own career first over traditional family life. Many of Cather's novels question and explore the expectations placed on women not only by society, but in particular, by men.

Cather's feminist ideas are most apparent in her 1915 novel, *The Song of the Lark*. The novel follows the development of Thea Kronborg, a musically talented child, from her humble beginnings in Colorado, to her eventual success as an international opera star. *The Song of the Lark* is also without a doubt Cather's most autobiographical work. While Cather herself made her career as a writer, she was inspired by her close friend, opera star Olive Fremstad, to make her protagonist's talent music, rather than writing. Thus, in Thea, Cather creates a character partially representative of herself and Fremstad, a woman who defies the provinciality of her birthplace, and works her way to the top where her talent can be recognized as that of a true artist. Even though Thea does pursue a distinctly female role as an opera diva, her status as a remarkable heroine is unmistakable. From the beginning of the novel, Thea's circumstances—born into a large family, without means or wealth, in a small provincial town—are limiting, despite her special talent. By dedicating herself solely to her art, and thereby relinquishing traditional feminine roles of wife and mother, Thea breaks boundaries within a male-dominated

society. Her ability to overcome her circumstances, and thwart every conflict and obstacle presented to her by patriarchal society, support a feminist reading of the novel.

Although Thea stands as an exemplary ideal of Cather's progressive thinking regarding women, not all critics view *The Song of the Lark* as an inspiring story. Critic Frances W. Kaye argues that a feminist reading is incorrect because the novel demonstrates that only remarkable and gifted artists can break free from the system and this excludes ordinary women. She states that "*The Song of the Lark* expresses a 'feminism' that respects only 'great souls'—which may be no feminism at all" (77). Kaye concludes that although Thea can serve as an inspiration for women to follow their dreams, the novel implies that most women do not have the ability to rise above their circumstances (94). However, Thea does not have to be ordinary to qualify as an inspiring heroine; many writers present male protagonists as extraordinary heroes, and rather than alienating readers, these characters stand as inspiring examples of what is possible. Cather carefully makes Thea's story relatable to readers. She spends a significant amount of time near the end of the novel noting Thea's weariness and exhaustion from singing and performing. Furthermore, Thea falls in love with Fred Ottenburg, a married man; this mistake demonstrates her flawed character which causes her story to resonate with readers as all people make mistakes in their lives. Thus, Thea stands as an inspiring example, her story transferable to everyday women.

Even though critics such as Kaye argue against a feminist reading of the novel, several critics note the progressive scope of Thea's story. Lisa B. Garvelink points out the significance of Thea's decision to choose art instead of marriage: "Thea [...] consciously interprets her career options and life [*sic*] choices differently from the majority of women who came of age in the Victorian era" (272). Critic Ronna Privitt agrees that Thea's success contrasts with the fact that

few female artists and professionals were paid serious attention during the Victorian era (189). Sharon O'Brien, in her biography of Cather, posits that *The Song of the Lark* illustrates "the alliance between womanhood and creativity," and that Cather would find her true literary voice through the narrative strength of women's stories (448). Furthermore, Cather expert Susan J. Rosowski argues that "Cather broke gender conventions to tell of Thea's growth into the diva, Kronborg. She gave to Thea qualities ordinarily reserved for men—fierce independence, ambition, discipline, and hard headedness" (63). In *Thea*, Cather builds a strong protagonist who challenges patriarchal norms by breaking away from the standard female role of the time.

Cather's feminist ideals are especially exemplified by her refusal to conform to the typical female-centric novel of the early 1900s. At the time *The Song of the Lark* was written, it was extraordinary for a story about a female protagonist to end as Thea's does, with triumphant achievement. As Rosowski states, Cather "granted to Thea public life and success in terms conventionally associated with male achievement" (63). The typical Victorian era novel would be resolved by either marrying or killing the heroine, such as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, respectively. Cather pushes the boundaries of this limited thinking throughout *The Song of the Lark*. She invokes common tropes such as the marriage plot and the victimized woman, but writes beyond the conclusions of Victorian novels. By refusing such narrative "resolutions," as comic marriage or tragic death, Cather demonstrates that it is possible to change the female narrative. In this paper, I focus on how helper characters' actions and decisions generate the plot's progression toward a feminist outcome for Thea. Each supporting character functions as a tool that Cather utilizes in order to push the boundaries of the typical female narrative. Each helper character poses a potential end to Thea's story; however, Cather turns the respective obstacles they represent to Thea's advantage. Through Thea's

mother, Cather acknowledges the potential obstacle of family obligations; however, instead of Mrs. Kronborg obstructing her daughter's success, she actively enables Thea's great talent. Upon recognizing her daughter's ability, Mrs. Kronborg strives to facilitate Thea's success. Likewise, the men in the novel present Thea with conflicts and obstacles that pose very possible endings to her story. Nevertheless, Thea's drive to be an artist is so unequivocal that, despite their initial intentions, they end up supporting her creative journey in different ways. Thus, the men push the plot through to an inspiring conclusion. Finally, Cather constructs a nonhuman, feminized helper character in nature itself: the environment of Panther Canyon. The canyon's ecosystem acts as a character who connects Thea to her lost female identity; however, while this connection causes Thea to find her true artistic self, it also poses a potential threat to her career. Thea's reclamation of her sexuality and her feelings for Fred Ottenburg put her in danger of becoming like her mother and nurturing the next generation instead of becoming a great artist. Thea thwarts this obstacle by transcending gender and thus making room for her art. In each case—with Mrs. Kronborg, the male characters, and Panther Canyon—Cather challenges patriarchal expectations by constructing a new paradigm through Thea's story.

A Mother's Vision: Cather's Feminism as Portrayed Through Mrs. Kronborg

Mrs. Kronborg functions as a vital part of *The Song of the Lark*; not only is she mother to great talent, but also she brings Thea's story into existence by supporting her daughter to a degree that sets her apart from other women of the time. Within Thea's time period, the housewife archetype dictates that Mrs. Kronborg would stand in the way of her daughter's success. With six other siblings to care for and no wealth, one would suppose that Mrs. Kronborg would require Thea to put family first thus causing her music to suffer. Instead, Mrs. Kronborg makes every allowance possible for Thea's talent: granting Thea several hours a day to practice

while keeping the other children out of the way, providing Thea her own room in the attic, sending Thea to Chicago to further her studies, and dying alone, without her daughter there. Thus, Cather takes the expected hindering mother, and turns her into a feminist helper character. Mrs. Kronborg's status as a minor character, appearing sparsely within the lengthy novel, partially undermines her crucial role in Thea's development, and hence, scant critical discourse exists surrounding Mrs. Kronborg. Critics, such as Rosowski, only touch on her importance, or do not mention her at all, even when writing about the feminist quality of the novel. However, even though *The Song of the Lark* is focused on Thea's remarkable life, in her own way, Mrs. Kronborg is also remarkable. Due to her, Thea pursues an entirely different life than most daughters at that time. Even Kaye, who argues against a feminist reading of the novel, recognizes the significance of Thea's mother. She claims, "Mrs. Kronborg is one of Cather's most interesting characters, a wife and mother, a part of the small town, who still maintains her separate personality and her integrity" (75). Through her writing of Mrs. Kronborg, Cather creates the foundation of feminism on which the body of *The Song of the Lark* relies. Although Mrs. Kronborg does not articulate any feminist ideas, her actions make it clear that she possesses a feminist sensibility. Mrs. Kronborg functions as the essential link in the feminist web of the novel, because without her, Thea's story would not exist.

Mrs. Kronborg herself operates as an unusual woman of the time, and though she does not choose a dramatically different direction in life as does her daughter, she departs from societal expectations in other ways. While she does settle down and marry, her situation opposes that of a typical housewife; in the Kronborg household the power dynamic is shifted. Mrs. Kronborg earns the respect of both her husband and the doctor of the town who considers her to be "active, practical, unruffled; good-humored, but determined. Exactly the sort of woman to

take care of a flighty preacher” (302). Instead of controlling her, Mr. Kronborg relies on his wife to handle all the practical matters of the household. This demonstrates how Mrs. Kronborg has departed from the usual role of a submissive housewife; furthermore, she comes from a more affluent family than his and thus she, rather than her husband, brings property to the marriage. Mrs. Kronborg keeps the property in her name, which indicates her authority. Mr. Kronborg “believed, and he was right in believing, that the sovereign State of Colorado was much indebted to Mrs. Kronborg and women like her” which demonstrates that he has the ability to recognize his wife’s skill in running the household (303). At the time, it was normal for wives and mothers to be praised because women who conformed to these designated roles were following society’s expectations. However, it is striking that Mr. Kronborg acknowledges the public’s debt to his wife. Through his belief that the State of Colorado owes a debt to Mrs. Kronborg, he illustrates that her progressive reasoning extends beyond her traditional role of wife and mother; furthermore, this demonstrates that Mrs. Kronborg’s revisionist qualities are respected by people of the opposite gender. Thea’s mother shifts the paradigm of patriarchy from within the expected female role. Cather’s feminist writing becomes even stronger in Mrs. Kronborg’s support of her daughter.

Thea’s mother stands out from others because she truly understands that her daughter has talent, and she makes sure that Thea has a chance at a different life:

Mrs. Kronborg was a strange woman. That word “talent,” which no one else in Moonstone, not even Dr. Archie, would have understood, she comprehended perfectly. To any other woman there, it would have meant that a child must have her hair curled every day and must play in public. Mrs. Kronborg knew it meant that Thea must practice four hours a day. A child with talent must be kept at the piano. (314)

Clearly, Thea's mother stands out from the other people of the town. Mrs. Kronborg's capacity to not only know what Thea needs, but also make sure that her daughter gets it, undoubtedly demonstrates forward thinking. Critic David Stouck asserts, "Thea's mother, shrewd and practical in all matters, knows that her daughter is different in a special way, and when Professor Wunsch, Thea's music teacher, tells Mrs. Kronborg her daughter has 'talent' she instinctively realizes this means hard work, not recitals for the local ladies' groups" (Stouck). It is remarkable that Mrs. Kronborg makes Thea's musical passion a priority. The circumstances of their family life do not make it easy for Thea to go her own way. She is one of seven children who all keep Mrs. Kronborg constantly busy; furthermore, the Kronborg family is not well off financially. However, despite these difficult circumstances, Mrs. Kronborg instinctively recognizes Thea's gift and resolves to give her daughter an opportunity for a different way of life: "Mrs. Kronborg watched her daughter thoughtfully. She found her more interesting than her other children, and she took her more seriously, without thinking much about why she did so" (351). In her daughter, Mrs. Kronborg sees the potential for something great. Thus, through her characterization of Mrs. Kronborg, Cather constructs not only a strong, forward thinking, and supportive mother, but also a visionary.

Thea's mother does not allow the other townspeople to stand in the way of Thea's pursuit of her passion, and she boldly goes against common opinions. Thea takes lessons from Herr A. Wunsch, a middle-aged piano teacher who has a drinking problem. The other women of the town do not allow their daughters to take lessons from him because he is "much too severe" (343). However, Mrs. Kronborg realizes that he is the only one who can help Thea to realize her talent—"It's good for us that he does drink. He'd never be in a place like this if he did n't have some weakness. These women that teach music around here don't know nothing. I wouldn't have

my child wasting time with them” (306). Again, Mrs. Kronborg stands out from the rest, and it is because of her that Thea has a chance at a musical career. As Rosowski states, “Repeatedly, Mrs. Kronborg ‘speaks up’ for Thea: when Thea’s voice quavers as she tries to defend her Moonstone music teacher against criticism, Mrs. Kronborg calls from the next room, saying ‘he’s a good teacher’” (65). Rosowski continues, “Throughout Mrs. Kronborg uses language in an exceptionally generous way, deflecting criticism and imparting understanding” (66). She also makes sure that Thea is able to practice at home. When Thea’s sister, Anna, expresses concern about Thea playing secular music on Sundays, Mrs. Kronborg responds: “‘If any of the church people come at you, you just send ’em to me. I ain’t afraid to speak out on occasion, and I wouldn’t mind one bit telling the Ladies’ Aid a few things about standard composers’” (413). Cather conveys her feminist ideals through her characterization of Mrs. Kronborg as a courageous, independent thinker. Because of her mother’s unflinching support, Thea receives the instruction and practice necessary in order for her to later become a successful opera star. And by Cather’s precise acknowledgement, such action, by the standards of the day, is “strange” and requires considerable determination.

Mrs. Kronborg’s support of her daughter requires sacrifice throughout the journey. In addition to ensuring that Thea’s piano practice is a priority regardless of what other people think of it, Mrs. Kronborg parts with her daughter when Thea is just seventeen and, much later on, dies without seeing her daughter one last time. At that age, Thea receives an opportunity to move to Chicago to continue her musical studies. Dr. Archie, who remains a close friend of Thea’s, feels strongly that she should pursue this opportunity and so he talks to Thea’s father about it. However, Mr. Kronborg responds, “‘Well, doctor, you had better talk it over with Mrs. Kronborg. I make it a point to defer to her wishes in such matters. She understands all her

children perfectly. I may say that she has all a mother's insight, and more'" (428-9). Here Cather again uses Mr. Kronborg to illustrate that his wife's sensibility extends beyond her role as wife and mother. Mrs. Kronborg reluctantly lets her daughter go, but she accepts that this painful step must be taken in Thea's unusual life. Mrs. Kronborg realizes that her daughter will be forever changed by this experience. She remarks to her husband: "'She won't come back a little girl'" as she sheds a tear watching Thea's car depart (433). At a time when most of the young women in Thea's town would marry and stay nearby, Mrs. Kronborg makes a significant sacrifice by deciding to send her daughter far away from home.

Many years later, Mrs. Kronborg makes an even greater sacrifice for her daughter. She falls ill shortly after the death of her husband, and more than anything, she wants to see Thea again before she dies. Here, Cather invokes the obstacle narrative of family obligations as Thea has just received the opportunity she has been waiting for, and she must choose to put her career before family or lose everything. Cather pushes through this potential end to Thea's story— both Thea and her mother make the sacrifice of never seeing each other again so that Thea may succeed as an artist. Dr. Archie visits Mrs. Kronborg and he finds that she has calmly accepted the situation: "'Well, we ought not to complain, doctor; she's given us a good deal to think about'" (636). This statement neatly articulates Mrs. Kronborg's, as well as Dr. Archie's, role of helper character to Thea; just thinking about her success gives them purpose and fulfillment. Moreover, Cather comments on male dominant society through Thea's mother. Thea's story is one not often told, because during this time, women's lives were not setup for typical female roles to lead to notable artistic success. Therefore, Mrs. Kronborg feels that her sacrifice amounts to a fair tradeoff for Thea's unlikely victory. Indeed, even though Mrs. Kronborg pushes the bounds of her role of wife and mother, she still does conform to the life that is expected of her.

Therefore, Mrs. Kronborg can only come close to experiencing her daughter's triumphant departure from accepted life by reveling in her daughter's success.

Although Mrs. Kronborg feels unhappy not to see her daughter, she admits that “‘It’s been quite a satisfaction to you and me, doctor, having her voice turn out so fine. The things you hope for don’t always turn out like that, by a long sight’” (635). As Kaye says, “Mrs. Kronborg is so serenely confident in her daughter’s talent and of the importance of her daughter’s artistic success that even as she lies dying, [...] hoping to see Thea before the end, she will neither call her daughter back from the girl’s first ‘break’ nor will herself to live until Thea is free to come home” (75). Although Mrs. Kronborg dies without seeing Thea again, her support and encouragement of her daughter have come to fruition; Thea has succeeded in breaking away from the role typically expected of a poor, small-town woman in patriarchal society. However, Thea’s achievement does not come without cost; like her mother, she must make sacrifices in order to succeed. Thea must forego marriage and family ties, including visiting her dying mother, and instead give everything to her art. Therefore, Cather clearly demonstrates the sacrifice female success requires.

Minor Men: Pushing the Plot Through to a Feminist Outcome

While Mrs. Kronborg is a progressive freethinker who demonstrates a feminist sensibility, *The Song of the Lark*'s many minor male characters both hinder and support Thea on her journey to becoming an artist. These characters range from friends and teachers, to marriage prospects and lovers. Cather weaves feminism into these minor men by having them provide Thea with opposition, temptation, and support. Cather pushes the boundaries of the typical novel of this era featuring the life of a female heroine. She continually creates situations that would normally mark the end of the story for a woman like Thea, but she never lets it end as a result of

such circumstances. Instead, Thea keeps on growing and improving until Cather finally ends her story with triumphant achievement. Cather employs the men in the novel to present these obstacles and situations to Thea. While these male characters pose various levels of potential threat to Thea's career as an artist, they also support her on her journey to becoming one. They are won over because Thea's pull to become an artist is so strong. Thea is the central force in not only *The Song of the Lark*, but also in the lives of the male characters. Therefore, even though these characters are men, which would normally give them a lot of power in other novels of this era, they function more as strategic pawns for Cather to maneuver along Thea's journey, and in the end, they can do nothing but serve Thea. In this way, Cather reverses gender roles by making Thea the authoritative presence in the story, while the men are granted lesser, supporting roles. Their whole purpose is to aid Thea, and their lives revolve around her. At the end of the novel, all of the men attend Thea's breakthrough performance. By gathering them together, Cather makes a strong statement of female empowerment; they are the backdrop to Thea's performance as they are merely stepping stones along her journey. They are subsumed by Thea's glory because the story belongs solely to Thea, and no one else.

Other than her father and brothers, Dr. Archie, the town's physician, is the first male presence in Thea's life. When Thea is a young child, Dr. Archie has a strange infatuation with her. Although never explicitly stated, Cather's writing indicates that Dr. Archie poses a sexual threat to Thea. He has an unnatural obsession with her which first comes to the reader's attention when Thea is sick with pneumonia at the age of eleven. When left alone in the room with Thea, Dr. Archie appears glad: "The doctor thanked God that he had persuaded Peter Kronborg to keep out of the way. He could do better by the child if he had her to himself" (300). The scene becomes more ominous when Dr. Archie undresses her: "As he lifted and undressed Thea, he

thought to himself what a beautiful thing a little girl's body was,---like a flower. It was so neatly and delicately fashioned, so soft, and so milky white" (300-301). The passage becomes more disconcerting when Thea disconnects with her body while being treated: "When she was conscious at all, she seemed to be separated from her body; to be perched on top of the piano, or on the hanging lamp, watching the doctor sew her up" (300). Thea's separation from her body seems to indicate that she is distancing herself from a traumatic experience. As Critic J. Gabriel Scala in her article "At the Center of Her Mystery" asserts: "Not only is there a blatant sense of force being used against the child who is stripped, strapped, pinned, and eventually forced to succumb; there is also clear evidence of the dissociation commonly described in victims of childhood sexual abuse. The feeling of being separated from the body has long been associated with the mind's defense against abusive or violent situations" (139). Dr. Archie also has an obsession with Thea's head, which he believes must hold the answer to why Thea differs from other children. One day, when Thea is older, they are in the midst of a conversation when Dr. Archie starts patting her head and feeling her skull. He tells her, "'When you were little, Thea, I used always to be curious about the shape of your head'" (366). He then holds her chin while looking into her eyes—"Thea laughed and edged away from him" (367). Thea clearly feels uncomfortable with this close contact with the doctor and when he touches her a third time, she does not tolerate it: "He put his hand on her hair, but this time she shook him off" (367). A clear connection exists between this encounter and the scene when Thea is sick. Importantly, Thea does not enjoy Dr. Archie touching her as noted by Scala: "When Dr. Archie actually comes into physical contact with her, she brushes him off and removes herself from his presence" (141). While Thea's action of shaking him off seems to indicate foul play in the past, it can also be read symbolically. By brushing him off, Thea refuses to let the doctor negatively affect her.

In contrast to his infatuation with Thea, Dr. Archie becomes one of her greatest supporters, playing an important role in orchestrating Thea's journey to Chicago. When Ray Kennedy, Thea's first suitor, dies and leaves Thea six-hundred dollars for musical study, Dr. Archie takes up the matter with Thea's parents. He insists that Thea must go all the way to Chicago to study rather than somewhere local like Denver. Mr. Kronborg asks the doctor if he would still send Thea away at only seventeen if she were his daughter, and Mr. Archie responds: "I most certainly should [...] she's only wasting herself here. At her age she ought to be learning, not teaching. She'll never learn so quickly and easily as she will right now" (428). Mrs. Kronborg agrees with Dr. Archie that Chicago is a necessary step in Thea's development, and so the doctor accompanies Thea to the city and helps her to settle in and find lodging there. Although Dr. Archie does not see Thea again for a while, he is always ready to be at her beck and call; after she leaves Panther Canyon and finds out that Ottenburg is married, Thea sends Dr. Archie a telegram, asking for help. Dr. Archie immediately responds to her invitation, and joins her in New York where he lends Thea enough money to go to Germany so that she does not have to involve Fred Ottenburg in the next chapter of her musical career. Thus, Dr. Archie functions as one of the characters Cather places in Thea's story to help her develop from a small town girl, to an international star. One could argue that the doctor's support of Thea proves that she is actually dependent on men. As critic Mary Titus claims, "Admired by men, desired by men—even attired by men—Thea's talent is discovered, confirmed, developed, and financed by men" (32). Contrary to Titus' provocative claim, Dr. Archie serves as simply one of the set of characters Cather creates to prompt Thea's growth along her path to artistic awakening. Dr. Archie is not a particularly interesting or developed character, and his male status does not grant him much power in the novel. Instead, he functions in the story as an instrument to Thea's

growth, and observes her rise to glory. As Rosowski asserts, Cather gives the “supporting male characters roles ordinarily granted to women, of serving as instruments in the central character's advancement” (63). The men in the novel play the role of “helpmates” to Thea, in the way that women traditionally have done for men, willing to make sacrifices for her. Cather intentionally compiled a set of male characters to spur Thea's development as, logically, in a male-centric society, men present Thea with the challenges she faces. Furthermore, Cather makes an even more decisive statement of female empowerment by making these male characters observers to Thea's achievement.

Another notable male character that Cather creates is Ray Kennedy, a thirty-year-old freight train conductor in Moonstone. Although eighteen years older than Thea and rather poor, Ray's good character makes him a worthy future marriage prospect. Ray recognizes Thea's greatness; he remarks to Spanish Johnny, another of Thea's male friends, ““That girl is developing something fine”” (345). Although aware of Thea's talent, Ray does not share in it: “He rested Thea because he was so different [...] because he never misunderstood her, and because he never, by any chance, for a single instant, understood her! Yes, with Ray she was safe; by him she would never be discovered!” (391). Ray is not placed in the story to truly be a part of Thea's artistic journey. Instead, he is there as an observer to Thea's brilliance and to symbolize the life from which she escapes when she leaves Moonstone for Chicago. Similarly to Dr. Archie, Ray's life revolves around Thea. His only purpose centers on making Thea's life better, and because she works so hard at her music he brings her treats and tries to provide recreation for her, such as taking her to the sand hills. As Cather writes, “He was, of course, living for Thea. He had thought it all out carefully and had made up his mind just when he would speak to her. When she was seventeen, then he would tell her his plan and ask her to marry him”

(390). Even though Ray greatly supports Thea's artistic gift, his presence in the story poses a potential end to Thea's musical career. Thea and her parents have favorable regard for Ray, and if she were to go along with his plan of marriage, she would most likely live out her life in Moonstone, perhaps as a music teacher, but not as a big star. However, Cather does not let Thea's story end with her marrying the hometown boy and being confined to her small town. Greater achievements lie ahead for Thea; thus, Cather kills Ray off, thereby freeing Thea from the obstacle his presence creates and allowing her to continue on towards the progressive ending Cather has in mind.

Ray's death functions as another indication of Cather's role reversals. While other early 1900s novels found it necessary to marry off or kill female protagonists, Cather recognizes these tropes, and then resists the common marriage plot by instead killing the male character. Ray is fatally wounded in a railroad accident, and when the news arrives in Moonstone, Dr. Archie takes Thea to the wreck to say goodbye. As he lays dying, Ray realizes that Thea's path diverges from the traditional path—"Thea was never meant for any rough fellow like him—had n't he really known that all along, he asked himself? [...] Yes, she was bound for the big terminals of the world; no way stations for her" (424). Ray recognizes that Thea will succeed: "Yes, the gold mine, the oil well, the copper ledge, they'd all got away from him, as things will; but he'd backed a winner once in his life!" (425). Ray expresses his dying wish to Dr. Archie, "'Always look after that girl, doc. She's a queen!'" (426). This simple statement of Ray's neatly sums up both of their roles in the narrative. The story belongs to Thea, and although challenges do present themselves to her, Cather makes sure that nothing will stop Thea. Ray completely dedicates himself to Thea, even after death; his life was insured for six hundred dollars in Thea's favor which is enough for her to move to Chicago to further her musical studies. In Ray, Cather creates

a character solely present in Thea's story to stimulate her development; though he is a potential obstacle to her career, in the end, he is one more male character who supports her unequivocally.

Dr. Archie, Ray Kennedy, and, later, Fred Ottenburg, pose the biggest threats to Thea's career as an artist; however, there are several other male characters, who, despite their very minor roles, do contribute to Thea's growth. At an early age, Thea starts taking piano lessons from professor Wunsch. Although he is the most knowledgeable teacher in Thea's small town, his alcoholism forces her to start confronting adult problems at an early age. Soon after Thea's thirteenth birthday, Wunsch's drinking problem becomes so bad that he is unable to teach her: "Wunsch began to drink so hard that he was unable to appear when Thea went to take her mid-week lesson" (372). Thea does not give up, but sets out a few days later to try again. On her way, she comes across her friend, Mrs. Tellamantez, sitting with a passed out Wunsch. When Ray and Dr. Archie arrive, Ray tells Thea to "run along home" and she responds, "I won't. I want to know how bad he is. I'm not a baby!" she exclaimed indignantly, stamping her foot into the sand" (374). Dr. Archie convinces Thea to go home, but her emotional outburst displays the concern she possesses for her teacher, as well as the frustration she feels at being excluded from adult matters. After recovering in bed for ten days, Wunsch packs up his trunk and leaves Moonstone to make a fresh start somewhere else. Thus, at thirteen, Thea experiences the hardship of seeing her teacher very sick by his own volition, hearing him gossiped about by the townspeople, and then ultimately, losing him forever. Although Thea receives one postcard from Wunsch, she never sees him again. Stouck postulates, "Wunsch himself has failed, but when he leaves Moonstone and looks back at Thea's figure on the station platform he consoles himself with the thought that 'she will run a long way; they cannot stop her!' (121)" (Stouck). Again, Cather clearly demonstrates that despite the obstacles Thea encounters, she will ultimately

succeed. Furthermore, Cather contrasts Thea's success with the failures and shortcomings of the men in the novel, which makes Thea's story even more glorious. Despite the obstacles Wunsch brings to Thea, he is, like all the minor men in the novel, a steadfast supporter of her artistic talent. He sees something special in her voice even before she starts pursuing singing instead of playing piano—"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" (361). Not only is Wunsch aware of Thea's connection to nature, but Cather also foreshadows Thea's artistic awakening in Panther Canyon with the phrase "nature-voice."

The last section of the novel takes place ten years after Thea leaves for Germany. It is set in New York where: "Thea has become one of the leading sopranos at the Met" (Woodress 270). At the last minute Thea is asked to replace a singer who is ill. She sings the part of *Sieglinde*, a part she had spent two years preparing for. Except for Wunsch, Cather conveniently gathers all of the male characters together for Thea's breakthrough performance. Dr. Archie, Fred Ottenburg, Harsanyi, her music teacher from Chicago, and Spanish Johnny, her friend from Moonstone, are all there. Thea's performance is breathtaking, and afterwards, Harsanyi says to his wife: "'At last,' he sighed, 'somebody with *enough!* Enough voice and talent and beauty, enough physical power. And such a noble, noble style!'" (696). By placing the male characters at the scene of Thea's exultant victory, Cather demonstrates their role of instruments to Thea's development. Throughout *The Song of the Lark*, Cather utilizes the male characters to push the plot beyond the expected, and then at the end, she makes them awestruck witnesses to Thea's achievement, thus demonstrating her complete role reversals. While singing *Sieglinde*, Thea comes into full possession of the artist contained within her for so long—"While she was on the stage she was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was

absolutely the instrument of her idea. Not for nothing had she kept it so severely, kept it filled with such energy and fire. [...] She felt like a tree bursting into bloom” (698). Thea first discovers her inner artist ten years earlier in the natural environment of Panther Canyon, and she manages to hold onto her artistic blossom until the right opportunity presents itself to her. While singing *Sieglinde*, every little detail finally falls into place for Thea, and she realizes her full artistic potential.

A False Lover and a Sexualized Canyon: An Ecofeminist Take on Thea’s Artistic Birth

Thea’s artistic turning point takes place during the summer she spends in the natural world of Panther Canyon. Although she spends years taking singing lessons and toiling away at her voice in Chicago, Thea’s transformation as an artist occurs in the stillness of the canyon, when she is hardly singing at all. The importance and influence of Panther Canyon directs many critics to examine this section of the novel through an ecocritical lens that focuses on the relationship between the natural setting and Thea’s character growth. Critics Joseph W. Meeker, Ann Moseley, and Matthew Sivils, take varying approaches to this important segment of Thea’s development, including: how the land functions as a character itself, the ties between the pottery remains found in the canyon and Thea’s artistic birth, and how the sensual setting helps to transform Thea’s sexuality.

Thea’s hiatus in Arizona is arranged by her friend from Chicago, Fred Ottenburg. Like Dr. Archie and Ray, Fred is one of Cather’s male helper characters who is both obstacle and supporter to Thea. Ottenburg represents the oppression of a male dominant force in a patriarchal society. Fred takes advantage of Thea by expecting that she will want to be his lover even though he is married to someone else. However, Thea does not comply with Fred’s expectations. Instead, she makes the patriarchy work for her; Thea accepts Fred’s offer to spend the summer in

the canyon, and then she turns it to her advantage by learning to transcend sexuality and thus make room for her art. The canyon serves as another helper character to Thea, as Cather weaves together nature, art, and femininity to create an environment in which Thea can grow and thrive. Thea's transformation in the canyon allows her to successfully thwart the oppression that she encounters through Ottenburg.

Despite the fact that the months Thea spends in the canyon are a time of artistic growth removed from patriarchal society, she experiences oppression at the end of her respite in the form of Fred Ottenburg. After Thea enjoys two months alone in the canyon, Fred arrives to spend time with her. While in Chicago, Thea and Fred were friends, in Panther Canyon their relationship transforms into much more than that. They spend hours each day hiking, exploring, and playing games together, and for the first time in her life, Thea falls in love: "Thea had never felt this pleasant excitement about any man before, and she found herself trying very hard to please young Ottenburg. She was never tired, never dull" (568). Unbeknownst to Thea, Fred has been married for years, and even though his marriage is a very unhappy one, his wife will not grant him a divorce. Although in no position to be with Thea, Ottenburg continues to lead her on and acts as if she is the one who might treat him unfairly. He says to her, "You've got me going pretty hard, I suppose you know. I've had a lot of sweethearts, but I've never been so much—engrossed before. What are you going to do about it? [...] Are you going to play fair, or is it my cue to cut away?" (570). Thea does play fair, but, of course, Fred does not. When she expresses that she does want to marry him, he seems surprised: "With Thea Kronborg he had allowed himself more liberty than he usually did in his friendships or gallantries with young artists, because she seemed to him distinctly not the marrying kind. She impressed him as equipped to be an artist, and to be nothing else" (582). Fred uses his perception of Thea's character to justify

his behavior instead of taking responsibility for his own actions. By thinking that only one suitable path exists for Thea, Ottenburg tries to place the blame on her, and consequently, he severely limits her. Although Thea does possess a natural artistic talent, and although she does choose to be an artist, that does not mean that she automatically should not want to marry. Ottenburg's dismissive thoughts on the matter are indicative of a male-privileged society in which women could either choose to marry or have a career, but not both.

Ottenburg soothes his conscience by reassuring himself that his actions are not truly hurting Thea and that he is the best person for her to fall in love with: “was he really going to do her any harm? The Lord knew he would marry her if he could! [...] ‘Damn it, if she’s going to fall in love with somebody, it had better be me than any of the others’” (584). Of course, his actions are hurtful to her because Thea truly loves him and Fred has led her on and deceived her. However, Thea’s story does not end with his betrayal. Instead of collapsing or even weakening under his deception, Thea remains unscathed because her transformation in the canyon has liberated her. Even Ottenburg realizes this during their time together there. He tells her, ““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’” (562). Here Fred displays his one moment of true insight into Thea; he demonstrates an awareness of his role as helper character in her journey. Thea expresses her newly acquired artistic transformation as ““waking 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, and there’s no sag in you’” (564). Therefore, when Thea learns that Fred is married and they cannot have the life she desired, she continues to be “all there” and instead of succumbing to a broken heart, she forges ahead on her journey. Thea leaves Ottenburg behind and goes to Germany for ten years where she continues to

work on her voice. Through her connection to the nature in Panther Canyon, Thea draws the strength necessary to thwart oppression. Although Ottenburg treats her with disrespect and dishonesty, Cather does not write the victim story. Instead, she writes the story of female fortitude as Thea pushes through another likely ending to her tale.

Thea's strong connection to nature sparks her artistic rebirth and liberates her from the opposition Fred presents. The natural environment of Panther Canyon acts as a source of renewal for Thea's worn down being; there, in the stillness and solitude, she begins to find her true self. As Meeker postulates, "amid forested mountains and canyons, she discovers her vocation" (Meeker). Before Thea travels to the southwest, she finds herself at a difficult point in her journey: she has not yet had her big break as an artist and the hours and hours of relentless practice along with the cold and dreary weather of Chicago have made her bored and weary. However, as soon as she leaves the city and travels to the canyon, she begins to feel better: "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 [...] she felt completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world" (545). Through this gendered statement, Cather comments on the oppressing feeling of trying to make it as a female artist in male-dominated society. By going to Panther Canyon, Thea takes care of herself and listens to what she needs. This action itself diverges from typical life; by putting herself first and living for two months alone in a canyon on a nature retreat, Thea defies what the patriarchy expects of her. Furthermore, her total removal from that oppressing society gives Thea the freedom to find her creative self, and later, the strength to return to that society to attain her vocation.

Thea's connection to nature stretches back to her childhood roots. As a child, she always loved to visit the sand hills outside of Moonstone where she could find stones and precious gems. During her time in the canyon, Thea reforges her lost connection to nature by reveling in the sound of the cicadas and the flight of the swallows. She makes a home for herself in one of the caves and this simple abode acts as a protective space for her creativity to start blossoming—"This was her old idea: a nest in a high cliff, full of sun" (547). As an adolescent, Thea had her own room up in the cold attic of the Kronborg house—a safe space where she retreated from the distractions of her siblings and the bustle of the household to let her young mind wander and develop in peace. Thea's cave in the cliff is even more instrumental to her growth because it provides the solitude she needs, while also immersing her in nature. In the warmth of the sun she is able to bask in sensations: "She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, [...] or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas" (548). This experience begins to free Thea from the drudgery of her last few years, and opens the way for her creative mind to explore. Critic Guy Reynolds hypothesizes that a dual state exists in Cather's nature writing in which her protagonists are both shaped by the environment and in mastery of it. He states that the Southwestern landscapes "produce, above all, states of consciousness that balance the drive to master the environment and the desire to drift through the natural world" (Reynolds). Indeed, the natural environment of the canyon does shape Thea, and through this transformation, she begins to appreciate her femininity and master her art.

Cather's portrayal of the landscape of Panther Canyon is notably sexual, as well as personified, and this sensual environment allows Thea to nurture her body and mind. The language Cather employs to depict the canyon brings it to life as a character. Meeker contends that the Nebraska setting in Cather's prairie novels plays an important role in the lives of the

characters; the land is a character itself and it “is often referred to as if it were a person” (Meeker). *The Song of the Lark* strikingly demonstrates the truth of this statement. In 1963, critic Ellen Moers contended that the canyon section of the novel contains “the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature” (258). Many critics, including Sharon O’Brien and Susan J. Rosowski among others, have since referenced her bold claim when discussing Panther Canyon. The phrases Cather uses to depict Thea’s new home include: “V-shaped inner gorge,” “hollow (like a great fold in the rock),” and “deep groove” (546). These depictions are clearly feminine, thus the canyon could be viewed as a second mother figure to Thea. While Mrs. Kronborg provides the crucial force that drives the beginning of Thea’s story, the canyon also acts as a nurturing feminine influence in Thea’s life. The canyon shelters Thea from male-centric society and provides her with the safety and peace she needs to truly flourish. It is necessary for Thea to go to the canyon to find herself—both as an artist and as a sexual being—because she is unable to do so in patriarchal society. Thea takes pleasure in the water and the sun, and each morning she takes a bath and then relaxes in her cave—“By the time she got there, the wooly red-and-gray blankets were saturated with sunlight, and she sometimes fell asleep as soon as she stretched her body on their warm surfaces” (548). Through Thea’s enjoyment of nature, and its sensations, her experience of art shifts from one of struggle and anxiety, to that of unhurried contentment. She has the ability to appreciate music solely for the enjoyable feeling it provides: “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 infinitely prolonged” (548). In the male-dominated society of Chicago, Thea knew her music only as something to constantly struggle with, but the female landscape of the canyon liberates her from oppression. Through her new

connection to her female identity, and her freedom to enjoy her art at her own pace, Thea truly discovers her creative voice.

Cather adds to Thea's awakening by weaving art and culture into the natural setting of Panther Canyon. As critic Ann Moseley states, "Cather's creative voice in *The Song of the Lark*, like that of Thea's, draws on both cultural and natural sources in Walnut Canyon to express artistic Ideas in inviolable living forms" (Moseley). During her time in Panther Canyon, Thea discovers many fragments of pottery left behind by the ancient people who inhabited the canyon. These remnants of art function as a connection between Thea and the women who created such art so long ago. Moseley claims that the fragments portray various styles of art which suggests that the pottery represents numerous cultures. Moseley posits that a parallel exists between the "union of cultures" that the Ancient Peoples' pottery represents, and Thea's voice which "will be influenced by artists from various cultures" (Moseley). Furthermore, a union begins to take place between Thea and the cliff-dwellers lasting presence: "On the first day that Thea climbed the water trail she began to have intuitions about the women who had worn the path [...] She 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" (550). Cather's sensuous language depicts Thea's newfound connection to her female identity. The pottery inspires Thea artistically, and bequeaths her with a newfound feeling of empowerment. Even though the ancient women's world was one of survival and ordinary tasks, such as carrying water and raising children, they still felt desire and managed to bring beauty into their lives. Thea's tie to these ancient women contributes to the artistic awakening she experiences in the canyon—"These potsherds were like fetters that bound one to a long chain of human endeavor [...] Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She

felt united and strong” (553-4). Thea’s artistic striving becomes infused with inspiration and strength. She no longer works to produce art for herself or even for those around her; instead, her voice carries the dream of human desire.

Although Thea’s time in the canyon forges a new bridge between her and her feminine self, and this connection leads her to truly discover her art, she must cast away her female identity in order to succeed in a world that privileges male achievement. Critic Matthew Sivils argues that it is necessary for Thea to part with her old self because, in order to become an artist, “she must dispense with her socially constructed female identity” (11). Thea’s renewed connection to her female sexuality poses a potential threat to her career as an artist, as demonstrated through the arrival of Ottenburg two months after Thea’s solitary retreat in the canyon. Fred’s presence illustrates the danger of Thea’s reclamation of her female identity; if she were to become his wife, or even his mistress, she would likely not become a great artist because at this time male-centric society made it extremely difficult for women to have a career, as well as a personal life. With Ottenberg's arrival, Thea begins to thwart the obstacle he represents by shedding her feminine self and taking on a more masculine identity. Although they are falling in love, Cather portrays their interactions as those of two comrades rather than lovers. Henry Biltmore, the caretaker of the ranch observes them throwing stones into the canyon: “There on the promontory, against the cream-colored cliff, were two figures nimbly moving in the light, both slender and agile, entirely absorbed in their game. They looked like two boys. Both were hatless and both wore white shirts” (556). Even though Thea briefly takes on a male identity, she does not hold onto this new self either; the solution is not for her to conform to a patriarchal world, but rather to rise above it. Thea’s complete artistic transformation occurs when she sheds all gender constructs and opens the way solely for her art. She has an epiphany and realizes—

“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?” (552). By transcending gender, Thea becomes the vessel in which she can carry her art. Sivils even posits that once Thea sheds her gendered identity, she becomes part of the canyon itself, and her identity takes on the form of an ecosystem, “making her simultaneously empty and receptive to the stream of life” (15). Thea’s necessary transcendence of gender constructs demonstrates the crucial need for society to change. By casting off society’s assumptions of gender, Thea’s music is liberated, thus allowing her to prosper from her talent regardless of a gendered society.

The Song of the Lark endures as an important novel because it challenges patriarchal narratives of the time. During this era, most writers either crafted stories about male heroes, or women protagonists who were confined to limited outcomes and tropes. Cather forged an alternate path by creating a new paradigm for her female heroine. However, instead of focusing on the new narrative Cather constructs through Thea’s story, many critics have chosen to focus on the autobiographical nature of the novel. Because Cather was an immensely private person, *The Song of the Lark* provides valuable insight into the artist’s perspective on her own life. For example, Privitt observes that Cather drew heavily on her own experiences in creating Thea’s childhood. She asserts, “Thea’s home in Moonstone is almost identical to the Cather home” and points out that both Cather and Thea come from large families (188). The autobiographical elements of the novel are significant because Thea’s unusual choices are reflected in Cather’s life. Cather herself broke away from the traditional female role at this time. She was a very successful author and she never married, choosing instead a long term relationship with Edith

Lewis. Artists like Cather and Fremstad were trailblazers for women in our society today and the greater equality we now have. At the time *The Song of the Lark* was written, it stood as an inspiring example that it is possible for women to pursue other paths in life than just settling down and marrying. Thea's success is made more glorious by the fact that she overcomes the obstacles facing women at the time. As Privett posits: "Thea Kronborg grows up in a society in which women are expected to marry and raise a family—certainly not to have talent and ambition. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather explores the way that women artists can uncover these hidden talents and escape from the role demanded by society" (189). Cather ends the novel with Thea's outstanding success: "Here we must leave Thea Kronborg. From this time on the story of her life is the story of her achievement" (699). In *The Song of the Lark* Cather did the remarkable: she broke through the conventions of the time to bring readers an inspiring, yet relatable, heroine who overcomes all obstacles to share her talent with the world.

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