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**Willa Cather's refinement of art through progress and change: A study of "The Song of the Lark" and "My Mortal Enemy"**

Kevin A. Synnott

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Willa Cather's Refinement of Art  
Through Progress and Change

A Study of  
The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy

A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Department of English  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by  
Kevin A. Synnott

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
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Thesis Committee

Name	Department
<i>John Blackwell</i>	<i>Art</i>
<i>Phillip C. Smith</i>	<i>English</i>

*Clyde L. Baker*  
Chairman

*June 30, 1975*  
Date

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The Problem . . .

The reputation of Willa Cather is based, for the most part, on her novels of the frontier, particularly My Ántonia (1918) and Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927). Her childhood years in Nebraska exposed her to the pioneer experience in America, and the way of life she knew in a small, prairie town late in the nineteenth century was to become a major influence in her writing. Taking the advice of Sarah Orne Jewett, Miss Cather found her "quiet centre of life," and wrote about that which she knew best--the life she lived, the people who made that life interesting, and the fading days of the American West. As a result, Cather has frequently been considered both social historian and autobiographer. While there can be no denying that she was indeed both, it is perhaps more important to remember that Willa Cather was first an artist. Art was her way of life. She wanted more than anything else to capture "the shining, elusive element which is life itself--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Cather's novels were never purely historical or autobiographical. Rather, her works were, and are, a delicate web of fact and fiction, spun with the care of a scrupulous craftsman, reflecting the dignity of Cather's own "kingdom of Art."

In each of her twelve novels and in her numerous short stories, Cather attempted to capture and hoped to explain that "elusive element" in a variety of ways. My Ántonia (1918), A Lost Lady (1923), and Death Comes For The Archbishop (1927) are generally considered the "best of Willa Cather" because each is so well-balanced and complete--truly artistic in every sense. In her best works, Cather was able to bring image and idea together handsomely. These novels have received the careful, close, and exhaustive attention of critics for many years and, justifiably, continue to do so. However, to continue to dwell on the acknowledged triumphs of an author while other of his works are neglected may prove detrimental in assessing the complete achievement of the artist. Cather herself pointed out that "To note an artist's limitations is but to define his genius."<sup>2</sup> Although directed toward the work of Sarah Orne Jewett, this comment is equally germane to the study of Cather's writing. While one can easily see the brilliant artistry of Willa Cather in her widely acclaimed masterpieces, the less famous and, in some cases, less artistically complete works in her canon manifest the steady and persistent development of a dedicated and uncompromising artist.

Two of these less famous novels, The Song of the Lark (1915) and My Mortal Enemy (1926), provide particularly fine examples of both the limitation and scope of Willa Cather's

work, and thereby, can help "define" her "genius" as an artist. These novels do share some common aspects, although, in the larger sense, they are worlds apart. Each work is dominated by the young, aggressive female who has become somewhat of a Catherian trademark. Both novels develop a favorite Cather theme--the struggle of the individual--although the object of the struggle is quite different in each. Men in both works are subservient to the advancement of the heroine. Such similarities are, however, common in many of Cather's works, and the differences between the two novels are really much more significant, for they cut to the center of Cather's art.

The Song of the Lark is Cather's third novel and, with O Pioneers! (1913) and My Ántonia, form a trilogy which portrays the triumph of pioneer dedication to noble ideals in the rude American West. Cather's account of young Thea Kronborg's rise to operatic fame is largely glowing and often rapturous, yet it does not deny the sacrifice and suffering the artist must endure. An undercurrent of threatening and vulgar reality runs through the novel and helps balance Cather's often ecstatic recounting of the heroine's success. Having just achieved her first substantial success as a novelist with O Pioneers!, Cather may have over-extended her abilities in The Song of the Lark. Cather's London publisher, who was so enthusiastic over the very successful O Pioneers!, refused The Song of the Lark because of the "full-blooded method" in which



it was rendered.<sup>3</sup> Even after Cather edited the novel for re-issue in 1932, it remained, in the words of Dorothy Van Ghent, "ponderously bulky."<sup>4</sup> While the novel has some excellent passages, it is long and has many obvious flaws, a point to which Cather would admit in the preface to the later edition. Despite its generally poor execution, The Song of the Lark is Cather's most extensive statement on the world of the artist and, as such, is a significant work.

My Mortal Enemy is a short--perhaps, abrupt--work and is, without question, Cather's most bitter comment on life. Quite the opposite to The Song of the Lark, this work is so short that Cather feared it might never be accepted for publication as a novel.<sup>5</sup> The novel is the last in the series that began with One of Ours (1922), a series which tells of Cather's growing discontent with a rapidly changing America. Myra Henshawe, the novel's heroine, is essentially another "lost lady," but more vicious and vindictive than her predecessor, Marian Forrester of A Lost Lady. The intensity of Cather's invective is, however, counterbalanced by a rather innovative development in Cather's fiction, as Myra is reconciled by religion. Thus, the novel serves as both the catharsis of Cather's disillusionment and the transition to the so-called "Catholic novels," Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock (1931). Stylistically, My Mortal Enemy is a fine example of the tight, compact, suggestive style toward which Cather diligently worked.

In all, this novel seems to be much more of a key work in understanding Cather's development than it is often given credit for being.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy were published on either side of 1922, a pivotal year for Willa Cather. In 1922, she wrote the Pulitzer prize-winning One of Ours and came as close as she would ever come to delineating her theory of the novel in the brief essay, "The Novel Démeublé." Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, Cather later remembered 1922 as the time when the world "broke in two" for her. While Cather was at the high point of her literary career, many of her beliefs and principles of life were being challenged and undermined. Understanding some of the events of Cather's 1922 will, then, help focus what seems to be a rather startling transformation in her work, both stylistically and philosophically.

This assessment begins, therefore, with some consideration of the theoretical bases of Cather's art. An examination of the application of these theories, both individually and inclusively, in The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy provides evidence of Cather's ever-progressing artistry, for these novels clearly show the divergent stylistic and philosophical considerations which developed in her fiction. In short, Cather's genius is not found only in My Ántonia or Death Comes for the Archbishop, even though those books are responsible for her standing

in American letters. Cather's art is found throughout her literary canon--in the minor as well as the major works. The work of Willa Cather, sometimes successful and sometimes only mediocre, bears witness to her dedication to her "kingdom of Art."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Willia Cather, The Song of the Lark, 1915 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1963), p. 378. All subsequent references in this paper to this novel are to this edition, a reprint of the revised edition of The Song of the Lark, and have been indicated by SL and page number in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Willia Cather, Preface to The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, 1925; rpt. in Willia Cather On Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup>Willia Cather, "My First Novels [There Were Two]," 1931; rpt. Willia Cather On Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 96.

<sup>4</sup>Dorothy Van Ghent, Willia Cather (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup>E. K. Brown, Willia Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 248.

## . . . of Artistic Theory

Unlike several other writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Willa Cather never set down a completely developed "theory" of fiction or of art. It is relatively easy to see, however, throughout her earlier writing that even before she had reached her own artistic maturity, Cather had developed and established certain essential principles that would guide her art. Many of these bespeak the strong influence of Henry James, who in her opinion, was "the keenest mind of any American ever devoted to the art of fiction,"<sup>1</sup> and much of Cather's early work shows her desire to emulate not only James, but also Edith Wharton, who, with James, formed the vanguard of American letters. Although James's influence always remained very much a part of the theoretical basis of Cather's art, the Jamesian posture in her work gave way to Cather's own unique expression as she realized the significance of individuality in art. In O Pioneers!, her second "first" novel, Cather came into her artistic own, finally overcoming the impulse to imitate the "most interesting" novelists of the day.<sup>2</sup> A copy of O Pioneers! sent to Cary Miner Sherwood, a life-long Red Cloud friend, bears the inscription: "This was the first time I walked off on my own feet--everything was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture

and found that I was Yance Sorgeson and not Henry James."<sup>3</sup>

The announced principles of Cather's world of art are relatively few, particularly when compared with such well-defined theories as James's "The Art of Fiction" (1884) or Wharton's "The Writing of Fiction" (1925). Her basic ideas and beliefs about art and writing had pretty much fallen into place with O Pioneers!, although these would be further developed and refined throughout her literary career. Most of what Cather would say in terms of a theory, she said early in her career. As several studies have shown, the writings of Cather's college and journalism days are an invaluable source of the candid opinions of the evolving artist.<sup>4</sup> Interviews coincidental with the publication of O Pioneers! and The Song of the Lark contain the few major comments on art and writing to which Cather would return throughout her career. Critical comments beyond this point are infrequent, relatively brief and to-the-point, and generally only reiterations or extensions of the same essential comments. Cather's only conspicuous attempt to gather together her comments on the art of fiction was Not Under Forty, a small volume of essays collected in 1936. Now that all of these sources have been discovered and made available, taken together they provide clear evidence that Cather's art developed on several essential premises--the foundation of her "kingdom of Art." What is known, then, of Cather's "theory" (if we may take liberty with the precise definition of the word) can help in the evaluation of her fiction.

The purposes of this study are best served by a brief overview of the theoretical principles, for the discussion of the novels themselves will further clarify Cather's concept of art. It is wise also to remember that Cather's decision against a full elaboration of her artistic credo may well be equally suggestive. As Bernice Slote has recently commented, ". . . secrecy itself was a part of [Cather's] creativity."<sup>5</sup>

One of the initial problems Cather had to deal with was the material from which she would create her fiction. Several of her early stories, written and published at the University in Lincoln, draw from her childhood experiences among the pioneers, concentrating primarily on the misery and severity of prairie life. The Cather biography suggests that the decision to leave Red Cloud had been prompted in part by the restraint imposed by small town society, and although Cather would always decry the narrowness of life in places like Red Cloud, her bitterness in these early works may be, to some extent, reactionary. In The Troll Garden (1905), a collection of short stories and her first published volume of prose, Cather continued her denunciation of the prairie, with perhaps the strongest indictment of both people and place coming in "A Sculptor's Funeral." Several other stories in that collection, however, indicate Cather's increasing attraction toward the subjects and styles of both James and Wharton. "Flavia and Her Artists" serves as a particularly fine example of this new direction in Cather's work. Her first novel, Alexander's Bridge (1912),

shows Cather's complete immersion in the prevailing literary fashion of the day--a mistake she later admitted: "My first novel, Alexander's Bridge, was very like what painters call a studio picture. It was the result of meeting some interesting people in London. Like most young writers, I thought a book should be made out of 'interesting material,' and at that time I found the new more exciting than the familiar. The impressions I tried to communicate on paper were genuine, but they were very shallow."<sup>6</sup>

It was to the "familiar" that Cather did return in her next book, O Pioneers!, and she found the undertaking much more satisfying: "I found it a much more absorbing occupation than writing Alexander's Bridge; a different process altogether. Here there was no arranging or 'inventing'; everything was spontaneous and took its own place, right or wrong. This was like taking a ride through familiar country on a horse that knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding."<sup>7</sup> It was a very different process as well from the earlier Nebraska stories, for although the subject matter was essentially the same, in O Pioneers!, Cather "felt like riding" through that "familiar country." The intervening years had broadened Cather's perspectives and sharpened her perception. In her second "first" novel, Cather came to understand the advice Sarah Orne Jewett had offered her several years earlier:

I want you to be surer of your backgrounds,--you have your Nebraska life,--a child's Virginia, and



now an intimate knowledge of what we are pleased to call the "Bohemia" of newspaper and magazine-office life. These are uncommon equipment, but you don't see them yet quite enough from outside,-- you stand right in the middle of each of them when you write, without having the standpoint of the looker-on who takes them each in their relations to letters, to the world . . . you must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society, all Bohemia; the city, the country--in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up. Otherwise what might be strength in a writer is only crudeness, and what might be insight is only observation; sentiment falls to sentimentality--you can write about life, but never write life itself.<sup>8</sup>

The advice was probably the best Cather ever received, for it clearly helped her establish the domain of her own talent. The familiar did become the basis for all of Cather's best works. She realized that she could write "a story concerned with heavy farming people, with cornfields, and pasture lands and pig yards,--set in Nebraska of all places!"<sup>9</sup> Cather found her "quiet centre" amid the people and land she grew up with, and in the position of "looker-on" was able to see in the experience a broader perspective of life. Jewett had indeed been right: "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper--whether little or great, it belongs to Literature."<sup>10</sup>

Familiarity itself, however, was not the whole of it. For Cather, the artist had to not only know the subject matter of his art, but he had to know it truly and feel it strongly before he could communicate it fully to others. In a 1913 interview,

Cather asserted "that nothing was really worth while that did not cut pretty deep and that the main thing always was to be honest."<sup>11</sup> From her own childhood, she recalled the impact of the old immigrant women with whom she spent many hours: "I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women at her baking or butter making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said--as if I had actually got inside another person's skin."<sup>12</sup> The last phrase here is a key one, as James Woodress points out:

✓ "Willa Cather's creative imagination required total absorption in her fictional creations. . . . [W]hen she had finished writing novels that created strong central characters like Antonia Shimerda, Thea Kronborg of The Song of the Lark, Father Latour in Death Comes for the Archbishop, she always felt a sense of loss."<sup>13</sup> This complete immersion of the artist into the work was an essential component of Cather's world of art, as she suggests herself in the preface to The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett (1925):

It is a common fallacy that a writer, if he is talented enough, can achieve this poignant quality by improving upon his subject matter, using his "imagination" upon it and twisting it to suit his purpose. The truth is that by such a process (which is not imaginative at all!) he can at best produce only a brilliant sham, which, like a badly built and pretentious house, looks poor and shabby in a few years. 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; it is the fine thing in him that

alone can make his work fine. He fades away into the land and the people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again.<sup>14</sup>

The artist must become one with his material. Like Jim Burden in My Ántonia, he must "be dissolved into something complete and great."<sup>15</sup>

Cather's own "gift of sympathy" had developed among the pioneers on the Nebraska prairie, but in time, it grew to a broad understanding of people and the world in general. As Eudora Welty, an artist herself, notes: "She [Cather] did not come out of Virginia for nothing, any more than she grew up in Nebraska for nothing. History awed and stirred Willa Cather; and the absence of a history as far as she could see around her, in growing up, only made her look farther, gave her the chance to discover a deeper past. The scarcity of people, a sense of absence and emptiness, set to work in her mind ideas not of despair but of aspiration, the urgency to make out of whatever was there something--a thing of her own."<sup>16</sup> What developed from Cather's childhood experience was not, however, limited in time or place. Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) and Shadows on the Rock (1931), two of Cather's later works not set in the familiar Nebraska landscape, bear witness to the fact that her sensitivity extended to other places and ages. Nonetheless, the first step for Cather was the recognition of her own experience as the "stuff" of art. Out of the very "physical" world of her childhood, Cather began to shape her greater world of art.

Cather's reevaluation of her own early work and her experience in the publishing world helped her realize one of the mistakes that she, like so many aspiring young writers, had made--the attempt to imitate the style of successful authors. As managing editor of McClure's Magazine, Cather read innumerable manuscripts each month and more often than not found the writers trying to imitate "some former success." For that reason, she felt that "young writing never amount[ed] to much."<sup>17</sup> Cather would, no doubt, include her own early work in that statement, for in her later years, she was never very anxious to have her own apprentice work reprinted. The Troll Garden, and especially Alexander's Bridge, had both shown Cather's early penchant for imitation. She did, however, overcome this folly and discovered for herself "a cadence, a quality of voice" that was her own, "individual and unique." That personal and distinctive artistic voice--that "timbre, [which] cannot be defined or explained any more than the quality of a beautiful speaking voice can be"--was essential; for Cather, it was the mark of a "first-rate writer."<sup>18</sup> Just as the writer had to discover the material that would be his own, so also had he to discover the expression that was uniquely his own.

As early as 1896, Cather had realized the difficulty of the actual artistic process: "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 gift of the gods. And that is the voyage perilous. . ."<sup>19</sup> At many points throughout her literary career, Cather explained the "voyage perilous" as she saw it, and the explanation was always the same: "a process of simplifying all the time--of sacrificing many things that were in themselves interesting and pleasing, and all the time getting closer to the one thing--It."<sup>20</sup> Of all of Cather's beliefs regarding art, the belief that "the higher processes of art are all processes of simplification"<sup>21</sup> was cardinal.

Cather applied this principle to the novel, her most successful art form, in a brief essay, "The Novel D meubl ." This essay, written in 1922 when Cather was reaching the high point of her career, is perhaps the best known piece of criticism Cather produced and is essential in studying Cather's work, as it is the touchstone of her artistic technique. In the essay, Cather reacts against the "over-furnished" novel, which asserts its realism "in the cataloguing of a great number of material objects, in explaining mechanical processes, the methods of operating manufactories and trades, and in minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations."<sup>22</sup> Art, for Cather, took quite the opposite approach; the true artist needed the ability to know how to transfer his thought and emotion subtly and suggestively. If the artistic process were to simplify, it

should hardly set about to do so with complex multiplicity. Cather achieved simplicity by the use of suggestion, which she saw as a powerful technique: "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."<sup>23</sup> Thus would Cather attempt to "unfurnish" (the traditional translation of démeublé) or "disfurnish" (as Leon Edel has recently suggested as a preferable translation) the "over-furnished" novel.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the rudiments of Cather's world of art are brought together in her 1925 Preface to Jewett's Best Stories, which she included, with minor revision, in Not Under Forty:

The artist spends a lifetime in pursuing the things that haunt him, in having his mind "teased" by them, in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his subject to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is more or less happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and his genius.<sup>25</sup>

That is Willa Cather's world of art, in its simplest terms.

Whether or not these comments, taken with the fuller considerations of the same points in Cather's other critical essays, may be called a "theory" remains an unsettled question. In re-

cent discussions at "The Art of Willa Cather: An International Seminar," the foremost critics of Cather's work could not agree on the appropriate name for Cather's literary criticism. Leon Edel, Cather's biographer, objects to the use of "theory," preferring to consider Cather's literary criticism as "a series of commentaries," and to describe her writing with a non-pejorative "intuitive." "It seems to me," says Mr. Edel, "that she had no theory of any kind. . . . She wanted to tell stories and she told them." James E. Miller, Jr. contends "that she had a theory and some of it got down on paper, but not all of it. She may well have taken a good deal of it unconsciously from her early readings of James and perhaps other writers. . . . But there's certainly not a body that can be fleshed out in fullness." While Virginia Faulker notes that Cather's theory "is not programmatic . . .," Warren French asserts that Cather "did not have a program."<sup>26</sup> The problem, it seems, is precisely the seeming paradox of Miss Faulkner's and Mr. French's comments. Cather simply did not systematize her artistic theory, yet the suggestion of such a theory is evident throughout her work. Ultimately, one must remember that Willa Cather was an artist, and her concern was that the work of art be able to speak for itself, without qualification, justification, or explanation on her part. Her "theory," therefore, is embodied in her own art, and one understands it best through a close and careful examination of her work.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Willia Cather, "Miss Jewett," Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>In the essay "My First Novels [There Were Two]," Miss Cather admits that her first novel, Alexander's Bridge (1912), was rather a false start. She felt that her career as a novelist really began with O Pioneers! (1913), her second novel. Hence, Cather had two "first" novels.

<sup>3</sup>Inscription recorded by Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Book, 1961), pp. 200-201.

<sup>4</sup>See Writings From Willa Cather's Campus Years, ed. James R. Shively (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950); The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966); The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902, ed. William M. Curtin, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970); and Willa Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

<sup>5</sup>Bernice Slote, "Willa Cather: The Secret Web," Five Essays on Willa Cather: The Merrimack Symposium, ed. John J. Murphy (North Andover, Massachusetts: Merrimack College, 1974), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>"My First Novels [There Were Two]," p. 91.

<sup>7</sup>"My First Novels [There Were Two]," pp. 92-93.

<sup>8</sup>Sarah Orne Jewett, Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), pp. 248-249.

<sup>9</sup>"My First Novels [There Were Two]," p. 94.

<sup>10</sup>Sarah Orne Jewett as quoted by Willa Cather, Preface to Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Anchor Book, 1956), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Willa Cather, "Willa Cather Talks of Work," Philadelphia Record, 9 August 1913; rpt. in The Kingdom of Art, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 447.



- 12 "Willa Cather Talks of Work," p. 449.
- 13 James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Her Art (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Book, 1975), p. 33.
- 14 Preface to The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, pp. 50-51.
- 15 Willa Cather, My Antonia, 1918 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1954), p. 18.
- 16 Eudora Welty, "The House of Willa Cather," The Art of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Book, 1974), p. 8.
- 17 Willa Cather as quoted by Ethel M. Hockett, "The Vision of a Successful Fiction Writer," Lincoln Daily Star, 24 October 1915; rpt. in The Kingdom of Art, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 451.
- 18 Willa Cather, "Katherine Mansfield," Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), pp. 134-135.
- 19 Willa Cather, "A Mighty Craft," Lincoln Journal, 1 March 1896, p. 9; rpt. in The Kingdom of Art, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 417.
- 20 "Willa Cather Talks of Work," p. 447.
- 21 Willa Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), pp. 48-49.
- 22 "The Novel Démeublé," p. 45.
- 23 "The Novel Démeublé," p. 50.
- 24 Leon Edel, "Homage to Willa Cather," The Art of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Book, 1974), p. 203.
- 25 Preface to The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, p. 51.
- 26 Discussion following James E. Miller, Jr., "Willa Cather and the Art of Fiction," The Art of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Book, 1974), pp. 150-151.

## . . . of Subtle Craftsmanship

In "The Novel D meubl ," Willa Cather used the unfurnished room as a metaphor to describe the good novel. Her aim was to "throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre. . . ." <sup>1</sup> The use of subtle, yet suggestive detail was Cather's preference; she thought it best to create "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named." <sup>2</sup> I would like to take Miss Cather at her word, so to speak, and examine the rooms she created in The Song of the Lark (1915) and My Mortal Enemy (1926). I do not mean to suggest that rooms have any vast significance in either of these novels, or for that matter, anywhere in the Cather canon. Yet Cather frequently used the room as a device to various ends throughout her work. In My  ntonia (1918), for example, Jim Burden's Spartan quarters in Lincoln may serve to suggest the narrowness of his academic point of view, but they are not an important element in understanding the novel. On the other hand, Godfrey St. Peter's attic study in The Professor's House (1925) is an essential element in the thematic development of that novel. As the use of the room device in The Song of the Lark is similar to that in My Mortal Enemy, investigation of the device and its execution will serve well as an illustration of Cather's acquired mastery

over her always evocative prose, and of her artistic achievement with the powerful *démeublé* technique.

✓ In The Song of the Lark, the rooms are physically overfurnished, thanks to great amounts of descriptive detail, and some rather heavy-handed suggestion. In creating rooms for Thea, Cather chooses to describe extensively in order to suggest similarities between the young artist and her environment. Furthermore, the scope of the novel is so broad (we watch Thea develop from childhood in Moonstone to stardom on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera, and follow her from Colorado to Chicago, Arizona, Mexico, Germany, and finally back to New York) that Cather found it necessary to create a new room at each location, and to use that room, in part, to intimate and underscore a particular stage of Thea's artistic development. In My Mortal Enemy, there is only one room of consequence, minimally described, yet providing as much insight into the essential nature of Myra Henshawe, as the carefully executed inventories of The Song of the Lark do for Thea. Furthermore, Myra's room is more organically related to the movement of the fiction than any of those in Thea's story, for it serves not only to suggest many things about Myra, but, since Cather literally moves the room with Myra, also to unify the novel. The room becomes an immediate setting for the human drama--that drama which is the core of both novels.

✓ From the very start of The Song of the Lark, Thea Kronborg is created as an individual apart from the general run of

life in the dusty, desert town where the first book of the novel is set. Just about everyone in Moonstone, Colorado, shares Dr. Howard Archie's belief "that there was something very different about her" (SL, p. 12). Within her own family, Thea is distinctly different; Mrs. Kronborg "found her more interesting than her other children, and she took her more seriously . . . . Thea, from the time she was a little thing, had her own routine. She kept out of everyone's way, and was hard to manage only when the other children interfered with her" (SL, p. 82). Thea is herself aware of "something about her that was different . . . . The something came and went, she never knew how. Sometimes she hunted for it and could not find it; again, she lifted her eyes from a book, or stepped out-of-doors, or wakened in the morning, and it was there--under her cheek, it usually seemed to be, or even over her breast--a kind of warm sureness" (SL, p. 100). One can easily detect the same sort of confident individualism which Alexandra Bergson experienced in O Pioneers! (1913), when "Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring."<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, as if the impressions of all of Moonstone, and Thea herself, were not enough or were not to be trusted, Cather reinforces the reader's recognition of Thea's unique personality and further suggests the emerging artistic identity by creating a tiny attic bedroom which is entirely Thea's own: "It was the end room of the wing, and not plastered, but was snugly lined with soft pine. The ceiling was so low that a grown person could reach it with the palm of his hand, and it

sloped down on either side" (SL, p. 71). Despite its size, the room is copiously furnished:

In October, while the days were still warm, Thea and Tillie papered the room, walls and ceiling in the same paper, small red and brown roses on a yellowish ground. Thea bought a brown cotton carpet, and her big brother, Gus, put it down for her one Sunday. She made white cheesecloth curtains and hung them on a tape. Her mother gave her an old walnut dresser with a broken mirror, and she had her own dumpy walnut single bed, and a blue washbowl and pitcher which she had drawn at a church-fair lottery. At the head of her bed she had a tall round wooden hat-crate from the clothing store. This, standing on end and draped with cretonne, made a fairly steady table for her lantern. She was not allowed to take a lamp upstairs, so Ray Kennedy gave her a railroad lantern by which she could read at night. (SL, p. 71)

Thea's individuality is clearly reflected in this description. She, like the room, is small, unfinished, and furnished with a variety of "pieces," some inherited and others acquired. All is somewhat primitive, like Thea's art. Thea is, of course, delighted with her new room; she enjoys the new-found privacy and freedom it affords. Her room is a haven, a place to "preserve a certain solitude, protect her feelings from the sentimental intrusions of her sister or from the elaborate familial doings which can blot out her identity."<sup>4</sup> It shares with the garret study of Godfrey St. Peter an all-important function: ". . . it was the one place in the house where he [St. Peter] could get isolation, insulation from the engaging drama of domestic life."<sup>5</sup> In her own room, Thea "had certain thoughts which were like companions, ideas which were like older and wiser friends. She left them there in the morning, when she finished

dressing in the cold, and at night, when she came up with her lantern and shut the door after a busy day, she found them awaiting her" (SL, p. 73). The implications are perhaps too obvious: "The acquisition of this room 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, p. 73). Thea's identity, self-awareness, and individuality, defined more specifically and vividly within the narrative in terms of her relationship with the town and its citizens, is here reaffirmed.

The little Moonstone bedroom serves another function in the novel, and it is here that Cather achieves some success with the room device. From the start, the room serves as a retreat for Thea--a place where she can get away from small town hypocrites, like Lily Fisher, her musical rival who "was willing to be just as big a fool as people wanted her to be," or even from her own family, especially her priggish sister, Anna (SL, p. 81). The room is security--one thing which Cather's aspiring artist will have to give up. In using the room as a recurring motif throughout the novel, Cather suggests both the loss of security, and the artist's longing for security.

After a grueling year in Chicago, Thea returns to Moonstone for the summer months, where again she has her little room. She notices that she can now reach the ceiling with the palm of her hand--a sure sign that she is growing up. She wonders "whether she would ever like a plastered room as well as this one lined with scantlings. It was snug and tight, like the cabin of a

little boat . . . . It was pleasant to waken up in that bed, in that room . . ." (SL, pp. 279-280). Thea enjoys the snugness; it is comforting and pleasant. These attitudes reflect the artist-child, who, despite the spiritual rebirth she has experienced in Chicago, is as yet unsure of the demands of her art. She learns her final lessons that summer in Moonstone, and leaves again--this time forever--severing all bonds to home, and making a complete dedication to art.

The security Thea felt in her little room can never be a reality in the stormy world of art, though she will often long for it. On the eve of her departure to Germany to study voice, Thea, frightened and uneasy, longing for "some familiar place to hide in," remembers Moonstone and her room: "Oh, how good it would be to lie down in that little bed, to cut the nerve that kept one struggling, that pulled one on and on: to sink into peace there, with all the family safe and happy downstairs" (SL, p. 466). Thea is, of course, finding out that "plastered walls" are not nearly as comforting as her unfinished bedroom. Some years later, the magnificent opera star confides to Dr. Archie that she nearly always dreams of Moonstone and her childhood haven: "'That's the house I rest in when I'm tired. All the old furniture and the worn spots in the carpet--it rests my mind to go over them'" (SL, p. 549). It is important that in these instances the room is not important in and of itself, and that Thea's view of Moonstone has altered considerably. No longer is it the hateful small town she knew as a child. Rather, the room, the house, and all of Moonstone become symbolic

of childhood, the most significant part of the artist's life. Thea explains the significance of childhood to Dr. Archie: "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 . . . .[W]hen I set out from Moonstone with you, I had had a rich romantic past. I had lived a long, eventful life, and an artist's life, every hour of it'" (SL, pp. 551-552). Thus, the room device "works" here because it functions as part of two more significant motifs--the security motif and the childhood motif--which bind it directly to the central theme--the emergence of the artist.

In other sections of the novel, Cather reverts to using the room as a static reaffirmation of Thea's plight--that plight which we watch develop actively in the incidents of Thea's life. Her room in Chicago is almost frightening, and clearly analogous to the whole Chicago experience:

Thea's room was large enough to admit a rented upright piano without crowding. It was, the widowed daughter said, 'a double room that had always before been occupied by two gentlemen'; the piano now took the place of the second occupant. There was an ingrain carpet on the floor, green ivy leaves on a red ground, and clumsy, old fashioned walnut furniture. The bed was very wide, and the mattress thin and hard. Over the fat pillows were 'shams' embroidered in Turkey red, each with a flowering scroll--one with 'Gute' Nacht,' the other with 'Guten Morgen.' The dresser was so huge that Thea wondered how it had ever been got into the house and up the narrow stairs. Besides an old horsehair armchair, there were two low plush 'spring-rockers,' against the massive pedestals of which one was always stumbling in the dark. Thea sat in the dark a good deal those first few weeks, and sometimes a painful bump against one of those brutally immovable pedestals roused her temper and pulled her out of a heavy hour. The wall-paper was brownish yellow, with blue flowers. When it was put on,



the carpet, certainly, had not been consulted. There was only one picture on the wall when Thea moved in: a large coloured print of a brightly lighted church in a snowstorm, on Christmas Eve, with greens hanging about the stone doorway and the arched windows . . . .  
(SL, pp. 213-214)

Like the room, the city seems dark and confusing; the people, puzzling, prodding, and watching young Thea stumble and collect herself as she pursues her art. Although the room's furnishings are similar to those of Thea's Moonstone haven, the atmosphere of the room is distinctly different. The furniture is still walnut, but it is now "clumsy and old fashioned." The wall-paper resembles that which Thea bought for her attic room, but it is out of harmony with the carpet. The several chairs are no added luxury over the Moonstone room; they serve only to clutter the room and injure the occupant. Perhaps the most significant addition is the upright piano, the symbol of Thea's art, which has now, quite literally, become her roommate. Our attention is focused on the new developments in Thea's pursuit of art, and the abundant details reflect the growing complexity of that pursuit. The scene lacks not suggestion, but subtlety, and one may feel that Thea will have more trouble conquering the overpowering presence of the room itself than any obstacles Chicago or her world of art may throw in her way.

In Book III, after a disappointing, yet enlightening summer in Moonstone, Thea returns to Chicago and has a great deal of trouble establishing residence. At first, she returns to her old room at Mrs. Lorch's boarding house, but as its loca-

tion is less than convenient, Thea begins a series of moves from one boarding house to another. "When she moved into a new place, her eyes challenged the beds, the carpets, the food, the mistress of the house. The boarding houses were wretchedly conducted, and Thea's complaints sometimes took an insulting form. She quarreled with one landlady after another and moved on. When she moved into a new room, she was almost sure to hate it on sight and to begin planning to hunt another place before she unpacked her trunk" (SL, p. 326). The situation becomes so bad that "sometimes at night, when she left Bower's studio and emerged into the street, she had to stop and think for a moment to remember where she was living now and what was the best way to get there" (SL, p. 326). This inability to cope or adjust to strange living quarters parallels the frustration Thea feels in her artistic world. The voice teacher she studies with and works for, Madison Bowers, is a sham who feels no pangs of conscience in "helping a very lame singer across, if her husband's cheque-book warranted it" (SL, p. 315). He uses his talent as a money-making enterprise, and Thea hates him for it. Such exploitation of art is odious to Thea, and she is discouraged. The atmosphere is wrong for her; she is not at all comfortable in it, just as she is never settled in a dwelling place. Her reality is shabby boarding houses and Madison Bowers, and it is all the very opposite of the world of art she is striving toward.

At this point, Cather rather abruptly introduces Fred Ottenburg, Thea's personal saviour, who, though not an artist himself, is aware of and sympathetic to the needs of the truly artistic.

He introduces Thea to the real world of art in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Nathanmeyer, dedicated and refined patrons of art. The room device is again employed. Thea sees a "great library" hung with paintings by Rousseau and Corot, and sees in the hallway "the most beautiful Manet in the world" (SL, p. 345). The music room is spacious and houses two Steinway pianos. The large, well-lighted, tastefully-appointed rooms are further enhanced by the understanding and appreciation for real art which the Nathanmeyers embody. They understand Thea's talent; Mrs. Nathanmeyer comments that "'That's the first real voice I have heard in Chicago'" (SL, p. 351). The people who understand and appreciate true art are very different from the people with whom Thea must work each day. The rooms again serve to re-emphasize that point; the difference between Thea's boarding house rooms and the Nathanmeyer home is precisely the difference between the daily life she must live and the world of art she wants.

Nonetheless, reality for the time being is Bowers and boarding houses. Thea becomes ill, and again her room is a torment: "Her rooms had all been as damp and mouldy as they were dark, with deep foundations of dirt under the carpets, and dirty walls. In her present room there was no running water and no clothes-closet, and she had to have the dresser moved out to make room for her piano . . . . The landlady tried to make the room look cheerful, because it was hard to let . . ." (SL, p. 335). Thea is clearly at the lowest point of her struggle.

Thea escapes from this wretched, dismal state of art in Chicago when, on Fred Ottenburg's advice, urging, and subsidy, she goes to Arizona for the summer. The room she finds there is reminiscent of the Moonstone bedroom, but is even more primitive, and provides a direct tie to the past for Thea. The room is simple and bare, cut out of rock in the wall of a cañon: "The room was not more than eight by ten feet, and she could touch the stone roof with her finger tips. This was her old idea: a nest in a high cliff, full of sun" (SL, p. 371). This would be "a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort"; here she could recover from the nightmarish Chicago experience (SL, p. 373). Thea becomes a part of an ancient civilization and tradition and is brought to a greater understanding of her own art. In the most elemental symbols--the stream and the broken pottery of an ancient civilization--Thea realizes the eternal verity of art. While the little room is a part of the elemental atmosphere of the cañon, the significant aspect of Thea's discovery comes through her contact with the land and people of a past age. Like the rooms which have preceded it, the Panther Cañon room is merely added detail within the narrative.

Renewed by her transcendent moment in the cañon, Thea is determined to pursue her art. Her progress is temporarily delayed, however, when in a moment of human frailty, she runs off to Mexico with Fred. Romance, of course, is out of the question for Cather's artists, and Thea finds out that Fred is already

married and cannot be divorced. With this final blow, Thea turns to art completely and makes plans to depart immediately to study voice in Germany.

In New York, on the eve of her departure, Thea stays at the Everett House, a decidedly old, and somewhat second-rate establishment. The room created here is more successful artistically because Cather has incorporated it into the narrative by using it as setting for a very emotional scene between Thea and Fred. There is, therefore, no lapse between the action and the suggestive possibilities of the room; they work together. Thea's room "was brown with time, dark in spite of two windows that opened on Union Square, with dull curtains and carpet, and heavy, respectable-looking furniture in sombre colours" (SL, p. 437). The room is appropriately sobering for Thea whose dedication to art has momentarily lapsed in Mexico with Fred. However, "the place was saved from utter dismalness by a coal fire under the black marble mantelpiece--brilliantly reflected in a long mirror that hung between the two windows" (SL, p. 437). The fire and its image in the mirror seem to suggest the two passions in Thea's life--her art and Fred. The real fire is the artistic passion--rekindled and blazing now, giving warmth and light to the gloomy, dusky room of Thea's own mind. The other flame is the passion for Fred, and human companionship--and it is a mere illusion. The ensuing scene between Fred and Thea is played in this setting, and it is one

that shows Fred's deep understanding of Thea's commitment. Fittingly, both take warmth from the flames of the fire. In this instance, Cather has made the room useful by subordinating it to, yet including it in, the more important play of human emotions.

In the last section of the novel, Cather shifts the task of narration partly onto Dr. Archie. In doing so, Cather can use Archie to inform from the non-artist's point of view, while she herself can provide insight into the artist's complete and uncompromised dedication. Thea's success, however, dominates this section of the novel, and so Archie's view is often made to seem narrow and uninformed. While he notices the obvious voids in Thea's life, his observations are overpowered by the glowing commentaries of her success at the Met. This situation is, of course, absolutely fitting and proper in terms of the novel's thematic development.

Through Archie's eyes, then, we glimpse into the last of Thea's rooms: "The rooms, Archie noticed, full of last night's flowers, were furnished in light colours, the hotel bleakness of them a little softened by the Steinway piano, white bookshelves full of books and scores, some drawings of ballet dancers, and the very deep sofa behind the piano" (SL, pp. 517-518). The "bleakness" of Thea's life is "softened" only by her art, symbolized as before by the piano. The artist, at the high point of her career, has no other life but art--it is all-consuming. Archie sees the change in Thea when he first

sees her in Lohengrin: "This woman he had never known; she had somehow devoured his little friend, as the wolf ate up Red Ridinghood. Beautiful, radiant, tender as she was, she chilled his old affection . . ." (SL, p. 500). This coldness is repeated in Archie's perception of the room. The attitude is furthered by Thea's own comments to him on the power of art, and he sees it in her relationships with those around her. She explains to Archie: "'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. It takes you up and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life. Not much else can happen to you'" (SL, p. 546). The room, as Archie describes it, helps confirm Thea's own words.

As David Daiches points out, one of the "elements" which makes The Song of the Lark "remarkable" is "the vigorous and vivid presentation of scene after scene and incident after incident which illustrate the development of the heroine's potentialities under the impact both of circumstances and the drive of her own character."<sup>6</sup> While most critics feel that there are too many of these incidents, it is important to note that the formative moments in the artist's life are rendered in vivid scenes. Thea's lessons with Herr Wunsch, her discussions with Dr. Archie, her dismal hours as Madison Bowers' accompanist, her transcendent moment amid the ruins of an ancient civilization, and her final glorious appearance on the stage of the Met--all of these show the development and success of the artist.

Furthermore, we really come to know and understand Thea through her contact with people who teach, encourage, and assist her in the long climb. The rooms Cather creates merely echo these moments; they are silent reiterations of the important steps in Thea's life. Although richly suggestive, the room motif serves a repetitious end. Furthermore, since Cather fails to integrate them naturally into the general movement of the novel, the rooms seem to be mere appendages (the one exception being the recurring use of the Moonstone room to evoke memories of childhood and security). The result is not wholly satisfying, for as Cather herself would later note, "Too much detail is apt, like any other form of extravagance, to become slightly vulgar; and it quite destroys in a book a very satisfying element analogous to what painters call 'composition.'"<sup>7</sup> For the greater part, the rooms serve as evocative, yet obtrusive backdrops for informing vignettes of Thea's struggle and triumph, and then pass from the scene. By the time one has finished with these descriptive passages, there can be no mistake as to the particular use of the chamber as a mirror of Thea's artistic climb. Cather is successful, but at the expense of conciseness. With an energetic hand and a strong desire for the reader to fully and clearly understand the anguish of the young, striving artist, Cather has simply "overfurnished."

The subtlety which the *démeublé* technique demands, and which the room motif here lacks, is to be found elsewhere in



The Song of the Lark. In his article, "Willa Cather's Southwest," Patrick J. Sullivan examines the symbolic role of Panther Cañon in Thea's artistic awakening, noting that the land as a fact in itself is insignificant. Rather, "the romantic aspirations of the artist's personality dominate the scene; the scene itself becomes a projection of her [Thea's] consciousness and character."<sup>8</sup> The room device is clearly working in the same way, but for the fact that the room does become a fact in itself. The heavy detail, and equally heavy suggestion tend to shift the focus from Thea and her problems to the room itself. And as the room is a redundant and perhaps too artificial parallel to the real incidents by which Thea learns, the usefulness of the device becomes more questionable. In all, the room device in The Song of the Lark is one element in Cather's "full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody," and this was precisely the type of element the master of the *démeublé* technique would later avoid.<sup>9</sup>

My Mortal Enemy (1926) is generally considered to be Willa Cather's most extreme example of the *démeublé* technique and therefore serves best as a contrast to The Song of the Lark. Myra Henshawe is already a legend as the story begins. Her dramatic elopement with Oswald Henshawe and subsequent disinheritance by a bigoted uncle provide the only excitement Parthia, Illinois, has ever known. While one must concede that the more limited scope of this story will allow for a more cohesive

telling, one cannot deny the more conspicuous craftsmanship which this novel evidences. Here, certainly, is Cather's novel démeublé.

To tell the story of Myra Henshawe, Cather employs a first person narrator, aptly named Nellie Birdseye, a simple and sensitive young girl who has grown up on the legend of Myra Henshawe. Cather creates Nellie as the personification of the démeublé technique, as Nellie herself unwittingly explains: "For many years I associated Mrs. Henshawe with that music [the Casta Diva aria from Bellini's Norma], thought of that aria as being mysteriously related to something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt; a compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name, but which was audible, visible in the air that night, as she sat crouching in the shadow."<sup>10</sup> Nellie herself feels the "inexplicable presence of the thing not named," which is the touchstone of the démeublé technique. As Theodore Adams points out, the result is that Nellie Birdseye "is frequently able to suggest more than she knows: a démeublé narrator, as it were, an aid to concision."<sup>11</sup> What Cather allows Nellie to report, she reports objectively, and given her limited vision, she appears trustworthy.

In the first half of the novel, Nellie's perception and naiveté become an additional cover for Cather's use of precise and selective detail which suggests more to the reader than to Nellie. The reader, therefore, is always more informed than the narrator. Nellie's reportage of Myra's elopement and

renunciation of her inheritance, of her return to Parthia, and of the dinner party at Aunt Lydia's is constrained only by the romantic aura which surrounds Nellie's vision of Myra. However, those very incidents show Myra to be an impulsive, aggressive, and extravagant woman, particularly the anecdote concerning Oswald Henshawe's six new shirts, which Myra has so blithely given to the janitor. The reader can pass judgment on Myra where Nellie cannot. Nellie will learn, but Cather's "power of observation" is already working in the particular details she filters through the narrator.

The "concision" Adams speaks of is readily evident in the room device, which is much more artistically successful in My Mortal Enemy than in The Song of the Lark. Cather has not thrown out all the furnishings but has been a more discerning decorator. As in The Song of the Lark, Cather uses the room--in this case, Myra Henshawe's New York sitting-room--to reflect the heroine, and we first see it through Nellie's eyes:

The Henshawe's apartment was the second floor of an old brownstone house on the north side of the Square. I loved it from the moment I entered it; such solidly built, high-ceiled rooms, with snug fire-places and wide doors and deep windows. The long, heavy velvet curtains and the velvet chairs were a wonderful plum-colour, like ripe purple fruit. The curtains were lined with that rich cream-colour that lies under the blue skin of ripe figs. (MME, pp. 26-27)

The room is striking to Nellie, just as Myra is striking. In terms of Nellie's simple background, she notices just those things which would capture a country girl--the extravagant furnishings--so there is no reason to suspect Cather of manipulation. But it is not merely the fact that Nellie notices

lavish furnishings which is significant. How she perceives them, or rather, how Cather makes her perceive them, is equally noteworthy. The regal purple and the plush velvet connote the opulence and richness that is essential to Myra Henshawe. The precise selection of color and texture, subtly rendered, become an additional suggestion of that character which is not specifically named. Cather regulates Nellie's perception to achieve a double effect. Detail is minimized, while suggestion is maximized. The result is the "higher and truer effect" which, to Cather, was the hallmark of fine art.

The usefulness of this room device does not stop at this point, as was the case with the device in The Song of the Lark (with the single exception of the Moonstone's room's integration as a security motif). As Harry Eichorn points out, Nellie has always been enchanted by the legendary Myra, but "her first meeting with the real Myra start[s] a process of disenchantment that deepen[s] with further acquaintance."<sup>12</sup> The destruction of Nellie's naive fascination is set in New York--indeed, in Myra's own apartment and the immediate vicinity of Madison Square. In that lavish sitting-room, Nellie would later hear talk of champagne to celebrate Christmas Eve and enjoy a splendid New Year's Eve gathering for New York's "stage people"; it would be only a short walk from that room to the florist's where Nellie would watch Myra buy the most extravagant holly tree to send to the grand Madame Modjeska for Christmas. Yet it would also be at the very door to Myra's fine apartment that

Nellie hears Myra complain of the loathsomeness of poverty, and it is in the living room that Nellie finds Myra and Oswald quarreling bitterly over a strange key which Myra has discovered on Oswald's key ring. Nellie's impressions have been steadily changing during her New York visit, and her bewilderment at the scene she has just witnessed is but another element in her growing disillusionment with the Myra myth. Nellie registers the change she feels in terms of the room: "This delightful room had seemed to me a place where light-heartedness and charming manners lived--housed there just as the purple curtains and the Kiva rugs and the gay water-colours were. And now everything was in ruins" (MME, p. 51). Nellie's vision has altered considerably, and she has, so to speak, caught up with the reader in understanding Myra's true nature. Cather indicates Nellie's growth by using the room and its suggestive characteristics again. The extravagance and lavishness of the furnishings now bespeak a contrast where before they suggested a parallel. Noticeable, of course, is the subtlety of the technique Cather uses; our awareness comes from no overt statement. Furthermore, the device has been naturally integrated into the plot development, for the room is at that moment serving as setting. The room, therefore, becomes functional, literally and metaphorically.

The second half of the novel is set on the West Coast, ten years later. The lives of all the characters have changed drastically, and it is indeed a pitiful reunion for Myra and

Nellie in a shabby hotel-apartment. Nellie explains her reasons for being there most tactfully: "Things had gone badly with my family and with me. I had come West in the middle of the year to take a position in a college--a college as experimental and unsubstantial as everything else in that place" (MME, pp. 57-58). Cather's restraint here is remarkable. Surely, had this been an earlier work, we would have been told all the details of Nellie's familial troubles. That, of course, is not pertinent to the story at hand, and Cather knows better than to digress. It is significant, however, that experience has changed Nellie's point of view, and she is, in general, more aware of the dismal side of life, and in particular, of her own wretched circumstances.

The decade has also taken its toll on the Henshawes, who have taken up residence in the same hotel. Oswald has lost his position in New York, and has at present "a humble position, poorly paid, with the city traction company" (MME, p. 69). Myra is crippled, confined to a wheelchair, but her ambitious nature is still intact, though thwarted by her miserable condition. Nellie comments: "She looked strong and broken, generous and tyrannical, a witty and rather wicked old woman, who hated life for its defeats, and loved it for its absurdities" (MME, p. 65).

Nellie also notices the room in which Myra must live out her days, and it is indeed familiar:

[Myra's] bed was in the alcove behind her. In the shadowy dimness of the room I recognised some of the rugs from their New York apartment, some of the old pictures, with frames peeling and glass cracked. Here was Myra's little inlaid tea-table, and the desk at which Oswald had been writing that day when I dropped in upon their quarrel. At the windows were the dear, plum-coloured curtains, their cream lining streaked and faded . . . . (MME, p. 63)

The furnishings of the beautiful New York room have been transposed to the West Coast along with the Henshawes, and while their tattered condition serves as a constant reminder of the Henshawes' reduced circumstances, their very presence is a haunting testimony to the more affluent days. The curtains are, as before, particularly striking to Nellie even in their tattered state, and she is happy to be reminded of pleasanter days for both the Henshawes and herself. Of course, it is noteworthy too that Nellie remembers the argument between Myra and Oswald which she and the curtains witnessed. For Myra, however, the room of the splendid days of Madison Square has degenerated along with her, and ultimately becomes, not a pleasant retreat to the better past, but the prison wherein she spends her most miserable hours. Myra's anguish is compounded by the people who live upstairs: "'They tramp up there all day long like cattle. The stalled ox would have trod softer. Their energy isn't worth anything, so they use it up gabbling and running about, beating my brains into a jelly'" (MME, p. 67). The West Coast room is at once a sad reminder of the glorious

past, and a continual reminder of an ugly present.

The room device then is used similarly in both The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy, but it is used more effectively in the later novel, primarily because it is better executed in that work. In The Song of the Lark, there is simply too much unnecessary detail, and though the room device is powerfully suggestive, it serves more to detract than to enhance the narrative. It is, after all, only "amplitude" of the more significant incidents in Thea Kronborg's story. The device becomes an obviously artificial means of reemphasizing the true artist's plight. The room device as it is used in My Mortal Enemy is no less suggestive, yet ever so much more controlled. Detail is minimal--a few words create the effect. Additionally, the device is naturally incorporated into the story; it never becomes obtrusive. Rather, it becomes a functional part of the intricate design of Myra Henshawe's life. To borrow a phrase from Wayne Booth, ". . . here economy is at least as important as precision."<sup>13</sup>

As a representative example of Cather's artistic development, the room motif serves well. The progressive subtlety of Cather's handling of the device throughout The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy is indicative of the progression of the entire Cather canon toward simplicity in form. Inherent in the contrasting implementation of the device in these novels



is Cather's own observation of 1922:

The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. The novelist must learn to write, and then he must unlearn it; just as the modern painter learns to draw, and then learns when utterly to disregard his accomplishment, when to subordinate it to a higher and truer effect. In this direction only, it seems to me, can the novel develop into anything more varied and perfect than all the many other novels that have gone before.<sup>14</sup>

This is precisely the course Cather's own art took; it is the novel *démeublé* which is the hallmark of Cather's craftsmanship. With this technique, Willa Cather would lead us to her "kingdom of Art."

## Notes

- 1 "The Novel *Démeublé*," pp. 42-43.
- 2 "The Novel *Démeublé*," p. 41.
- 3 Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 1913 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1962), p. 71.
- 4 Richard Giannone, *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 86.
- 5 Willa Cather, *The Professor's House*, 1925 (New York: Random House, Vintage Book, 1973), p. 26.
- 6 David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*, 1951 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1971), p. 29.
- 7 "My First Novels [There Were Two]," p. 97.
- 8 Patrick J. Sullivan, "Willa Cather's Southwest," *Western American Literature*, 8 (1972), p. 29.
- 9 "My First Novels [There Were Two]," p. 96.
- 10 Willa Cather, *My Mortal Enemy*, 1926 (New York: Random House, Vintage Book, 1961), p. 48. All subsequent references in this paper to this novel are to this edition and have been indicated by MME and page number in the text.
- 11 Theodore Adams, "Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*: The Concise Presentation of Scene, Character, and Theme," *Colby Library Quarterly*, 10 (1973), p. 41.
- 12 Harry B. Eichorn, "A Falling Out With Love: *My Mortal Enemy*," *Colby Library Quarterly*, 10 (1973), p. 122.
- 13 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 10.
- 14 "The Novel *Démeublé*," p. 47.

## . . . of Preserving Values

Whenever Willa Cather returned to Red Cloud, she was always happy to ride out on the Divide to the Czech, Norwegian, Swedish, and Bohemian farms and to visit with the old friends of her childhood. Cather always enjoyed the company of all these sturdy pioneers, but the women, she remembered best. When her artistic sensitivity found its way back to the Nebraska prairies, it lighted first on those women who had made such a deep impression on young Willa Cather. "I particularly liked the old women," she said in a 1913 interview, "they understood my homesickness and were kind to me. I had met 'traveled' people in Virginia and in Washington, but these old women on the farm were the first people who ever gave me the real feeling of an older world across the sea. Even when they spoke very little English, the old women somehow managed to tell me a great many stories about the old country."<sup>1</sup> Those women and their stories one finds time and again throughout the works of Cather. It is no secret that Antonia Shimerda, probably Cather's most famous character creation, was drawn from a Bohemian woman Cather was quite fond of, Annie Pavelka. E.K. Brown, Cather's biographer, suggests that, "It seemed to [Cather] that this woman's story ran very close to the central stream of life in Red Cloud and on the Divide, that she stood for the triumph of what was vigorous, sound, and beautiful in a region where these qualities

so often seemed to suffer repression or defeat."<sup>2</sup> Antonia is, of course, more than Annie Pavelka; she is a composite picture of all that Cather knew, felt, believed, and loved about the heroic pioneer women in the American West.

Many of Cather's female characters are developed in similar fashion--a combination of a familiar face from Cather's past and certain values which make up, or in some cases, challenge her Weltanschauung. Throughout Cather's work, these women are, to a greater or lesser extent, the dominant influence in directing and even defining the lives of those around them. Jim Burden of My Antonia and Niel Herbert of A Lost Lady are perhaps the most extreme examples of lives lived under the female dominance, although a recent article by John J. Murphy suggests that the situation exists because of the male's faulty perception. Murphy examines the impact of Cather's representational females on the male characters throughout the canon, noting that in the Nebraska novels "the main conflict is between the ideal woman, the creature of male imagination, and the real woman, the object of male lust . . . ." <sup>3</sup> Once they are able to perceive the women realistically, the Cather males mature. This change in the males, which, according to Murphy, begins in The Professor's House, does indeed modify the intensity of the female influence in subsequent novels, but does not obliterate it completely. While few of the later Cather women ever affect men as intensely as Antonia affects Jim, their presence is still

clearly felt and they continue, to some extent, to establish norms for other characters. In Shadows on the Rock (1931), for example, Cécile Auclair, probably Cather's least imposing female character, gives direction and meaning to the lives she touches, in her own quiet way. Like her mother, Cécile maintains the order of the ménage, for she knows her "father's whole happiness depends on order and regularity . . . ." <sup>4</sup> She cares for the neglected Jacques Gaux as his natural mother, La Grenouille, a Québec prostitute, will not. By the novel's end, Cécile, married to Pierre Charron, becomes an essential force in the emergence of the Canadian nation by producing "four little sons, the Canadians of the future." <sup>5</sup> While she is certainly not of the stature of Antonia, earth-mother of the Nebraska prairie and prime influence in Jim Burden's life, Cécile is, nonetheless, a directive force in the lives of those around her.

Such is the function of female characters throughout Cather's work. Even when they are not the central figures, women often establish the norms by which the other characters are defined. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant notes that most novelists have a favorite character to whom they frequently return; "With Willa Cather it was usually a heroine. Willa loved her friends loyally--but her heroines! From now on [i.e., from 0 Pioneers! on] they were the very stuff and core of her being." <sup>6</sup> The women of Willa Cather's fiction most clearly serve as the embodiment of values, both good and bad, which make up Willa Cather's world.

The world of the Twenties was, however, as Cather admitted herself, a world of great change. She had emerged as an artist in a quick-paced age of transition. The pioneer age was over in America, Europe had been ravaged by war, and post-war America was entering a glittering age of materialism--all to the chagrin of Willa Cather. Regretably, Americans had somehow lost sight of their great, heroic pioneer ancestors and had entered a new age which, to Willa Cather, was the denial of everything those pioneers had struggled to establish. Beginning with One of Ours (1922), her so-called "war novel," Cather recognized that the noble ideals represented by people like Antonia Shimerda were no longer merely threatened by the crude force of people like Wick Cutter, the materialistic villain of My Antonia, but had actually been overpowered by it. The recognition for Cather was painful; its reconciliation, even more so. Everything good and worthwhile, it seemed, was being destroyed. It comes as no surprise to find that when Cather looked back over her career, she could see that for her, "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts . . . ."?

One of Ours, the novel Cather published in 1922, clearly marks that turning point, and the change Cather saw in American values is reflected in a new breed of women which emerged in that novel. One cannot help but notice that these females embody values which are quite unlike the positive, idealistic values suggested in earlier characters, as even a cursory comparison of Antonia Shimerda of 1918 and Marian Forrester of 1923 would attest. Symbolically, those two women are opposite

sides of the coin. Yet one must be careful not to oversimplify Cather's females. Despite the reputation projected by admiring males, Cather's women are complex and realistic characters. Antonia, no matter how wonderful she ultimately appears to Jim Burden, is still an "unwed mother," and regardless of how disappointed Niel Herbert is in Marian Forrester, she is still the most vivacious and engaging woman in all of Sweetwater. Furthermore, it is important to remember and account for the more fully human females of Cather's later works, such as Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) and Shadows on the Rock (1931), in whose characters both positive and negative virtues are quickly and clearly identified. In Death Comes for the Archbishop, for example, the vain Doña Isabella adamantly maintains that she is much younger than she truly is, until the lie poses a problem for her own well-being as well as that of the Church. In all, the entire procession of Cather women suggests the conflict and resolution of a value system. The women in Cather's fiction, very often her spokesmen, seem to indicate not only that Cather's world broke in two, but that after a fashion, she was able to pick up the pieces and go on.

The full scope and progression of Cather's values can be seen nicely in the development of two Cather heroines, Thea Kronborg of The Song of the Lark and Myra Henshawe of My Mortal Enemy. Each is, in her own way, the individualist, domineering female so often found in the Cather canon. Although they share common

traits, Thea and Myra direct their ambitions toward very different ends. In Thea's case, the noble yet demanding world of art is the goal, whereas for Myra, the world of wealth and status--the beau monde of an affluent era--is the object of unceasing aspirations. The contrast in these two characters is readily apparent; while Thea represents all the noble ideals of America's heroic age, Myra stands for shabby materialism. In a sense, Thea and Myra suggest the "before-and-after" of Cather's 1922. Not so apparent is the strong similarity between Thea and Myra. When viewed together, these two characters suggest a continuum of values that not only bridges the broken halves of 1922, but also leads into Cather's reaffirmation of noble and heroic tradition.

The Song of the Lark tells the story of young Thea Kronborg, Cather's most fully and completely developed artist-character. The character was conceived as a result of Cather's meeting Olive Fremstad, one of the great singers of opera's golden days in America. On an assignment for McClure's Magazine, Cather was to interview Madame Fremstad along with two other leading ladies of the Metropolitan Opera Company, Louise Homer and Geraldine Farrar. When the article finally appeared in 1913, it was quite clear that although Cather had been impressed by all of the ladies, she had been fully captivated by the wonderful Fremstad. After only a few meetings with the singer, Cather



was obsessed with Fremstad, as the author's close friends could attest. Of pioneer background herself, Olive Fremstad was to Cather everything Alexandra Bergson of O Pioneers! was, and had a voice as well. The combination of pioneer and artist no doubt pleased Cather immensely--it was just the right thing. As James Woodress notes, "Willa Cather believed that the pioneer women on the Divide possessed many of the traits of the artist, the drive, the perception, the energy, the creative force. They had created a new country out of an idea, just as Fremstad had created the roles of Elsa or Sieglinde or Brünnhilde out of her mind and personality."<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, privy to a great deal of Cather's Fremstad mania, noted that "Fremstad had somehow ignited Willa Cather's inner fires and projected her toward a story that would take a lot longer than O Pioneers! to write--a story about a great voice, and a woman impelled to discover and develop it, though her meagre home background sanctioned no such effort."<sup>9</sup> Cather was ready again to "get into another person's skin."

When The Song of the Lark was published in 1915, it was readily apparent that Thea Kronborg was indeed very much like Madame Olive Fremstad. Their childhoods were almost identical; both grew up in small, crude towns, had religious fathers, took piano lessons and gave piano lessons. Both left home at early ages, discovered their true talent in voice, struggled along in large, indifferent cities, studied in Germany, and eventually became world-famous for Wagnerian interpretation. It is no

surprise to hear Thea even speak the very words that Fremstad had spoken in Cather's 1913 article. Yet, there was clearly more to Thea's character than Olive Fremstad had provided. Cather was by no means writing a biography, although that may well be what Fremstad had expected. Mary Cushing, the diva's personal secretary and later, her Boswell, notes that although Cather's article had pleased Madame Fremstad, "she was less enthusiastic about The Song of the Lark, which was published a little later. 'My poor Willa,' she once said in my hearing, 'it wasn't really much like that. But after all, what can you know about me? Nothing!'"<sup>10</sup> Fremstad evidently got over her disappointment and came to understand that the novel was not hers alone. Cather's biographers all agree that when Fremstad met Cather after the publication of the novel, she "flung her arms about Willa Cather, exclaiming that she could not tell where Thea left off and she began."<sup>11</sup>

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant tells this same anecdote with a slight variation. In her version, Fremstad "did not know where Willa ended and she began!"<sup>12</sup> This statement is, of course, much more to the essential truth, for Thea Kronborg is as much (if not more) Willa Cather as she is Olive Fremstad. Cather's first and most powerful impression of Fremstad had come quickly, under most unusual circumstances. At her first interview, Cather had seen this woman come in exhausted and worn after an afternoon of motoring, and then, only a few hours later, saw her appear beautiful, radiant and in full voice as a second-act

substitution for an ailing soprano in Tales of Hoffman. Cather had been deeply moved after seeing Fremstad completely drained of emotion, spent after a performance of Kundry in Parsifal.<sup>13</sup> The woman was simply remarkable to Willa Cather; she was everything Cather projected into the supreme artist. "The qualities that Willa Cather found in Fremstad," E. K. Brown writes, "are qualities one might hope to find in a great artist who came from the frontier; in her singing were the force and originality of the pioneers, translated into the terms of disciplined art. In Fremstad she realized what she was soon to realize in her own art. In The Song of the Lark it was not difficult for her to combine what she felt about Fremstad with what she felt about herself: in Thea Kronborg both are projected."<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of the prototypical or autobiographical implications, The Song of the Lark is Cather's most fully developed comment on the emergence, growth, and triumph of the artist and on the world of art in general. In Thea Kronborg's rise from a small desert town to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera, Cather describes and portrays the creative growth of all artists and clearly delineates the great demands, pressures, and sacrifices to which the artist, if he is to be great, must submit himself. In 1896, young Willa Cather wrote, "In the kingdom of art there is no God, but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few men born of woman who are strong enough to take the vows. There is no paradise offered for a

reward to the faithful, no celestial bowers, no houris, no scented wines; only death and the truth."<sup>15</sup> The Song of the Lark is the story of that total, uncompromised dedication of the artist to his work. Thea Kronborg embodies Willa Cather's "kingdom of art."

Although The Song of the Lark is Willa Cather's most extensive statement about the world of art, the novel is generally considered her least artistic work. As discussion of the room motif has suggested, the work is overbearing and overwritten, too much cluttered with superfluous detail. There is another, perhaps greater flaw, however, which Cather herself suggests in the 1932 preface to the revised edition: "The story set out to tell of an artist's awakening and struggle; her floundering escape from a smug, domestic, self-satisfied provincial world of utter ignorance. It should have been content to do that. I should have disregarded conventional design and stopped where my first conception stopped, telling the latter part of the story by suggestion merely."<sup>16</sup> What Cather did, of course, was write two stories into one--the first, about the aspiring artist; the second, about the artist triumphant.

Cather hoped to suggest the first, and to her the most important, of the two stories in the title of the novel. The Song of the Lark "was named," she tells us, "for a rather second-rate French painting in the Chicago Art Institute; a picture in which a little peasant girl, on her way to work in the fields at early morning, stops and looks up to listen to a lark. The title was meant to suggest a young girl's awakening to something

beautiful."<sup>17</sup> Thea Kronborg's "awakening to something beautiful" is the novel's first story, and the nature of the entire process is focused by the comment of one of her piano teachers, offered by way of advice to his rather disconsolate pupil: "'Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and longer. Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play piano. That you must bring into the world yourself'" (SL, p. 221). The birth metaphor is fully appropriate, for the development of Cather's artist is an organic process marked by the impulse of nature, society and the self.

The first section of the novel is set in Moonstone, Colorado, the dusty desert town very much like Cather's own Red Cloud, where Thea Kronborg is growing up. This is by far the longest section of the book, as well it should be, for Cather strongly felt that childhood was the most important stage in the artist's development. Cather maintained that "the material used in her stories was all collected before she was twenty years old."<sup>18</sup> Thea reaffirms this Catherian precept when, at the height of her artistic success, reflecting on her Moonstone past, she recalls 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, p. 551). The child's response is spontaneous, fresh, and truthful; it is neither affected nor distorted by experience. In Cather's world, it is that sort of response which allows the artist to produce great art.

Despite the fact that Thea grows up in a town, she has a strong affinity for Nature and the land. She loves summer best of all seasons, when the wind blows through the house "with sweet, earthy smells of garden planting," and when "the cottonwood trees [are] a-flicker with sticky, yellow little leaves, and the feathery tamarisks [are] in pink bud," yet no season in Moonstone is totally disagreeable (SL, pp. 26-27). The sand hills beyond Moonstone--"the Turquoise Hills, the Mexicans called them"--tantalize Thea; "she loved them more than anything near Moonstone . . ." (SL, p. 58). On a windy ridge in Wyoming, Thea is deeply moved by the powerful and rugged landscape over which wagon-trains of early settlers had forced a trail:

The road they followed was a wild and beautiful one. It led up and up, by granite rocks and stunted pines, around deep ravines and echoing gorges. The top of the ridge, when they reached it, was a great flat plain, strewn with white boulders, with the wind howling over it. . . . To the west one could see range after range of blue mountains, and at last the snowy range, with its white, windy peaks, the clouds caught here and there on their spurs. Again and again Thea had to hide her face from the cold for a moment. The wind never slept on this plain, the old man said. Every little while eagles flew over . . . . The spirit of human courage seemed to live up there with the eagles. (SL, pp. 68-69)

As Richard Giannone suggests, Thea's "receptivity is grounded in nature"; it is the most elemental impulse on the emerging artist.<sup>19</sup>

The impulse of Nature Thea feels as a child is always a part of her, even when she is physically removed from the land. In Chicago, where she goes to continue and intensify her musical

studies, Thea becomes despondent in the seemingly hostile urban environment, where even Nature is ugly; there "spring came; windy, dusty, strident, shrill; a season almost more violent in Chicago than the winter from which it releases one, or the heat to which it eventually delivers one" (SL, p. 249). When she is almost ready to give up her studies completely she hears Dvorak's Symphony in E Minor, "From the New World," and the music carries her back to the "many coloured" hills around Moonstone and to that blustery afternoon on the Wyoming hill top:

The first theme had scarcely been given out when her mind became clear; instant composure fell upon her, and with it came the power of concentration. This was music she could understand, music from the New World indeed! Strange how, as the first movement went on, it brought back to her that high tableland above Laramie; the grass-grown wagon-trails, the far away peaks of the snowy range, the wind and the eagles . . . .

When the first movement ended, Thea's hands and feet were cold as ice. She was too much excited to know anything except that she wanted something desperately, and when the English horns gave out the theme of the Largo, she knew that what she wanted was exactly that. Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; 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; that had dreamed something despairing, something glorious, in the dark before it was born; a soul obsessed by what it did not know, under the cloud of a past it could not recall. (SL, p. 251)

Through the melody of the land, Thea is returned to that "first morning," to childhood when her response to everything was pure,

fresh, mysterious, and wonderful. The impulse here is, of course, double, for the music which carries Thea back to the land is itself inspired by the land. It is, however, that first impulse of the land, now joyously re-experienced through music, which quickens her own flagging dedication to art: "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, p. 254).

Thea's reaction to the yearning, luxuriant melodic line of the Largo--music which was later transformed into a pseudo-spiritual called "Goin' Home"--suggests another of the impulses which works on Cather's developing artist, the social impulse. The social context for the artist will prove to be both friendly and hostile, and will work on several levels. For Thea, the most immediate social framework is the large Kronborg family; she is the second of seven children. Her strongest ally is her mother, the "active, practical, unruffled; good-humoured, but determined" wife of the Reverend Peter Kronborg (SL, p. 14). Mrs. Kronborg knows that Thea has "'got the making of something in her,'" understands her daughter's singular will to pursue art, and encourages Thea all along (SL, p. 128). Thea's father is also cognizant of his daughter's talent, but approaches it from a practical point of view, suggesting that Thea be allowed to drop out of school to teach music. After all, "' . . . the sooner she gets at it in a business-like way, the better'" (SL p. 128). Of the children, only Thea's older sister, Anna, has any complaint against her artist-sister, and that stems from



Anna's misguided evangelical fervour, in which Thea refuses to share. Like her preacher father, Anna is worried about "keeping up appearances" and is thoroughly put out by Thea's unwillingness to be more active in her father's church. Anna is even more shocked by the company her sister keeps, which ranges from drunken Mexicans of questionable morals to Dr. Archie, on whom Anna "had a whole dossier of evidence about his behaviour in his hours of relaxation in Denver" (SL, p. 168). But for Anna's parochial view, Thea's familial situation is quite tolerable and generally conducive to the development of her talent.

Anna's concerns, misdirected as they are, do suggest the larger social context in which Thea, the emerging artist, must also do battle. E. K. Brown points out that "there was an excellent reason for placing Thea in a town rather than on the Divide, the same reason for making her a minister's daughter. She must have the maximum of exposure to the Philistines; she must suffer 'the fear of the tongue, that terror of little towns.'"<sup>20</sup> As if Anna's and the Reverend Kronborg's socio-religious consciences were not enough to contend with, Thea must also struggle against the small minds of a small town, where it seemed "that people were stupider than they need be . . . ." (SL, p. 6). The townspeople are more concerned about the daughter of a preacher taking lessons from Herr Wunsch, a known drunkard, than they are about the talent Thea exhibits even as a child. Thea quickly realizes that people like Mrs. Livery Johnson, "a

big, florid, powdered woman, a fierce W.C.T.U. worker," and Lily Fisher, "the angel-child of the Baptists," are her "natural enemies," who neither understand nor appreciate true art and artists. For them, as indeed for most people in Moonstone, art means a little talent and a lot of show. At the Christmas Eve concert, Thea's "Ballade" earns only the weak applause of a "good-natured" audience, while Lily Fisher's tawdry recitation, laced with several verses of "Rock of Ages" to show her vocal abilities, wins an encore. Thea realizes the narrowness and pettiness of the small town, but refuses to compromise to it: "Lily Fisher was pretty, and she was willing to be just as big a fool as people wanted her to be. Very well; Thea Kronborg wasn't" (SL, p. 81).

In Chicago, however, Thea encounters even more intense social hostility and artistic "selling out." When she steps out on to the street, renewed after hearing "From the New World," she realizes more than ever that "there was some power abroad in the world bent upon taking away from her that feeling with which she had come out of the concert hall . . . . All 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. They might trample her to death, but they should never have it" (SL, p. 254). In her more immediate society, Thea discovers the deplorable artistic pandering to vulgar tastes of Madison Bowers, her voice teacher. To him, art has become

an investment on which he plans to realize a handsome financial return. "'When you come to marketing your wares in the world,'" he advises Thea, "'a little smoothness goes farther than a great deal of talent sometimes. If you happen to be cursed with a real talent, then you've got to be very smooth, indeed, or you'll never get your money back'" (SL, pp. 317-318). The cheapness and smallness of Moonstone is only magnified in a big city. Cather's artist must still struggle against the values of an ignorant and/or materialistic society and maintain, without compromise, her dedication to the noble ideals of true art.

The impulse of society is not, however, altogether negative. Thea does have, in addition to the support of her family, the assistance of a small segment of society who appreciate her quest. These are the friends of her childhood and developmental years--Dr. Archie, Herr Wunsch, Spanish Johnny and others who will be more fully considered in Chapter Five. With the help and direction of these men, her teachers, benefactors, and friends, Thea is finally brought to the moment of her birth as an artist.

From the early pages of the novel, Thea herself is aware of "something about her that was different . . . . The something came and went, she never knew how. Sometimes she hunted for it and could not find it; again, she lifted her eyes from a book, or stepped out-of-doors, or wakened in the morning, and it was there--under her cheek, it usually seemed to be, or over

her breast--a kind of warm sureness" (SL, p. 100). That mysterious something, "that sturdy little companion with whom she shared a secret," gives her confidence as she leaves Moonstone and childhood behind, and it is that same impulse which she feels after the Dvorak Symphony (SL, p. 199). Though she does not understand what this inner force is, she is compelled by it--compelled to develop the talent she knows she has. Of course, she can see for herself that talent alone is not enough; Lily Fisher and Madison Bowers both have talent. That "something" which Thea feels within herself, yet cannot identify, is that which makes her different from all the Lily Fishers in the world, and it is that which will finally give meaning and direction to her talent. When she comes to understand what "it" is, Thea is able to use her talent to create art. Her moment of recognition is the birth of the artist.

All of the impulses play again on Thea as she, an individual, reaches that transcendental moment. After an arduous winter in Chicago, Thea spends her summer on an Arizona ranch, close to some ancient cliff dwellings--"a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort" (SL, p. 373). Removed from the pressures of city life and its ugly society, Thea's sensitivity returns amid the ruins of an ancient civilization. In her primitive playground, Thea again feels that familiar "something," only this time it makes sense. Alone, Thea comes to understand the essential nature of art:

One morning, as she was standing upright in the pool, splashing water between her shoulder-blades with a big sponge, something flashed through her mind that made her draw herself up and stand still until the water had quite dried upon her flushed skin. 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 lose? 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, p. 378)

All the confusion and trouble of her early years of struggle vanish, and everything becomes simple again for Thea, as in childhood. She clears out the "ragbag" of her mind and understands the reason for art, the universality of art, and the timelessness of art--all of which make art so very different from talent. The eagle, earlier the symbol of human endeavor, now, in its power, beauty, and enduring strength, represents "Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! . . . It had come all the way; when men lived in caves, it was there" (SL, p. 399). The potsherds of the Cliff-Dwellers, "the bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desire," are Thea's direct contact to the society of all mankind (SL, p. 399). The experience in Panther Cañon has "lengthened her past," and now, more than ever, she is aware of "older and higher obligations." Thea is completely revitalized--born again with the clear vision of her own art and its importance. Thea Kronborg has finally awakened to something beautiful.

The Song of the Lark could and probably should have ended at this point, for Cather had told the story she wanted to tell--"the life of a talented young girl 'fighting her way' . . ." (SL, v). In Thea's struggle, Cather had shown the difficulty of the true artist trying to get on in a world generally indifferent to and unappreciative of fine art. Thea, like Alexandra Bergson before her, is unflinchingly dedicated to her quest and is willing to suffer for her conviction. She has talent, and she has the greatest of pioneer virtues--endurance; with both, she succeeds. The novel continues, however, to tell of that success, Thea's triumph as an opera singer. The second story of The Song of the Lark describes the life of the artist triumphant, the life of one who is fully dedicated to the "kingdom of art."

Thea Kronborg is the supreme artist. She is beautiful in appearance, superb as an actress, and exquisite in voice. She not only sings her roles well, but she interprets and gives new life to each character she plays. She becomes the character she sings by seeking out the very essence of that character: "'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 . . . . Instead of inventing a lot of business and expedients to suggest character, she knows the thing at the root, and lets the musical pattern take care of her'" (SL, p. 511). The Fricka she creates is "clear and sunny, so nobly conceived;" her Elizabeth, simply

"wonderful." On only an hour's notice, she substitutes as Sieglinde and still produces a brilliant character. It is, however, when she is cast for that same role that Thea turns in her most stunning performance of any character, for she is everything the part requires: "'Enough voice and talent and beauty, enough physical power. And such a noble, noble style!'" (SL, p. 569). One of her former teachers, one who really understands the world of art, knows her key to success: "'Her secret? It is every artist's secret'--he waved his hand--'passion. That is all. It is an open secret, and perfectly safe. Like heroism, it is inimitable in cheap materials'" (SL, pp. 570-571). Thea's art is organic; the passion, the impulse rises from within. As she sings the Sieglinde, she feels "like a tree bursting into bloom," with "everything in her at its best and everything working together" (SL, pp. 571-572). All that she has ever learned or discovered or worked for surfaces in her flawless performance: "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. Her inhibitions chanced to be fewer than usual, and, within herself, she entered into the inheritance that she herself had laid up, into the fullness of the faith she had kept before she knew its name or its meaning" (SL, p. 571). Every aspect of Thea Kronborg's being is fully given to art and in art, all her passion is spent. She is Cather's artist par excellence.

The price of Thea's success is, however, very great, for in giving all she is and has to art, Thea has, in a sense, robbed herself of herself. When Dr. Archie, her life-long friend, comes to New York to hear Thea sing, he is rather startled to find only a cold, abrupt "Kronborg" in the cast listing of the morning newspaper and notices that Thea's apartment building is "as impersonal as the Waldorf, and quite as large" (SL, p. 497). When he sees Thea singing Elsa von Brabant in Lohengrin, his worst fears are realized; the woman on stage is a "woman he had never known" (SL, p. 500). Thea's life of art has changed her a great deal; she is no longer just the talented little girl with a lot of ambition whom Archie had watch grow up in Moonstone. Art has become her life--her only life; only in the excitement of her work is she "entirely illuminated, or wholly present" (SL, p. 533). Dr. Archie, a layman, so to speak, in the world of art, cannot understand the complete sacrifice that Thea makes to her art. Once she has taken her vows, Thea denies herself any kind of personal life. Dr. Archie is surprised and disappointed at her refusal to return from Germany to her ailing mother, who wishes to hear her daughter's beautiful voice once more. But Thea has "an unhopedor opportunity to go on in a big part" in Dresden and will not risk that chance to "break in" for anyone or anything (SL, p. 491). Thea marries only after her preeminent position in the opera world is established, and that marriage, to Fred Ottenburg, her loyal friend and supporter, merits only a passing reference in the novel's Epilogue. Marriage for an artist is



clearly of secondary importance. When she is off the stage, Thea seems almost incredibly insensitive to those around her. She cannot understand why Landry, her accompanist, becomes so upset when she carelessly breaks a leg off his prized lemon amber elephant. Such trifles mean nothing to her, and she cannot understand how they can mean anything to anyone. Thea has, it seems, paid for her art with her humanity.

The vitality and warmth of Thea's life is all channeled into her Elsas, Frickas, and Sieglindes; there is little left for her when she must be Thea Kronborg. She has dedicated herself to the "kingdom of art" as she came to know it in Panther Cañon and knows that her dedication must be complete, for there are no shortcuts to greatness. After dinner one evening, Thea, almost a symbol of the world of art herself, in a white dress trimmed with crystals and a dark velvet rose, explains to Archie the life of the true artist: "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. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life" (SL, p. 546). Art is all, and the true artist gives it all. That is Thea's life. To soar with the beauty and dignity of the "golden bird" at Panther Cañon, Thea must fly alone, in a higher, purer atmosphere, removed from man and Nature. The great, yet cold and unfeeling Kronborg of the last section of the novel is the product of full artistic dedication. That is the price

one must willingly pay to serve in Cather's "kingdom of art."

From an artistic point of view, The Song of the Lark is probably Willa Cather's greatest faux pas. She had always maintained that art should simplify and frequently prescribed Millet's method of composition to aspiring artists in any medium: "'Millet did hundreds of sketches of peasants sowing grain, some of them very complicated, but when he came to paint 'The Sower,' the composition is so simple that it seems inevitable. It was probably the hundred sketches that went before that made the picture what it became . . . It.'"<sup>21</sup> There is perhaps a sad irony in Cather's saying that in 1913, two years before she published The Song of the Lark. It seems, however, from the comments of Cather's close friends, that enthusiasm for the way her life was going simply carried Willa Cather away while she worked on the novel. Edith Lewis notes:

She was working under happier conditions than ever before--her life and her work were perhaps for the first time in harmony. She felt settled and secure at 5 Bank Street--liked her surroundings, and found it a good place to write. Her time was all her own, and she had got over her first nervousness at not earning a salary. And all the outside elements of life, particularly the atmosphere of music in which she was living then, and her two journeys West (she made a second trip in 1914) were intensely stimulating to her imagination.<sup>22</sup>

As Lewis's comments indicate, Willa Cather was psychologically "up" while she was writing The Song of the Lark, and the novel itself seems to bear that out. In Thea, Cather brought together the two kinds of people she admired most--the artist and the pioneer. In her struggle, Thea fights with the same kind of courage, determination, and endurance that first broke the

Nebraska prairie. As an artist, Thea gives herself fully in the service of her kingdom of art, just as the early settlers had given everything to tame the wild land. In short, Thea represents all that is good in Cather's world. As a result, The Song of the Lark, despite its artistic limitations, is, in its fullness and comprehensiveness, a significant record of Cather's early ideas and ideals.

By 1918 and My Antonia, it was clear that Cather's world was changing; with Jim Burden and the hired girls, Willa Cather watched the sun go down on the heroic pioneer age in America. No doubt her trips back to Webster County, Nebraska, had made that point all too clear. During the same years, Europe, and particularly her beloved France with all its rich tradition and heritage, had been wasted by war. On the homefront, however, America was witnessing a phenomenal economic boom. That, of course, made little difference to Willa Cather. As it was, everything good in Cather's world was passing, or being replaced by cheap substitutes. By 1922, she could no longer contain her disillusionment. In One of Ours, published in that year, she wrote of a new generation of Nebraskans who had inherited the rich lands of their pioneer forebears yet somehow missed out on the pioneer virtues. They were prosperous farmers, but "with prosperity came a kind of callousness; everybody wanted to destroy the old things they used to take pride in."<sup>23</sup> Many

would be able to write the new age off as progress, but Willa Cather could not. For her, it was a time of crisis.

Cather's "1922 or thereabouts" was indeed a strange, paradoxical period, yet one of major importance to her career. In April of that year, she published her most important single piece of literary criticism, "The Novel D meubl ," a brief essay in which she posits her theory of the novel as an art form. Although none of her works up to this point had been formed in the "unfurnished" tradition, Cather's next novel, A Lost Lady (1923), on which she was already working in the spring of 1922, clearly indicates that stylistically, Cather was heading in a new direction. In September, One of Ours, Cather's first novel with Alfred A. Knopf, was published, and although the critical reception of the novel was not good, it was later awarded the Pulitzer Prize as "the America novel which best presents the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood."<sup>24</sup> One of Ours was the first Cather novel to really enjoy popular success. Careerwise in 1922, Cather was doing fine.

Cather's personal life was another matter. James Woodress notes that Cather was ill off and on throughout the year and that "she definitely was feeling alienated from the world of the twenties . . . ."<sup>25</sup> E. K. Brown points out that "her friends noticed the pessimism that was so strangely unlike the exuberance of her youth and her first years in New York."<sup>26</sup> It is quite evident that the changing world had shaken Cather

badly. For Cather, faith had always come with difficulty; "Faith is a gift," she had told her childhood friend, Carrie Sherwood.<sup>27</sup> In 1922, as she watched the dissolution of so many cherished beliefs and ideals, faith was probably a gift Willa Cather was very unsure of. Nevertheless, on 27 December 1922, she and her parents were confirmed in the Episcopal Church in Red Cloud, and as long as she lived, Cather remained an active member. Whether or not it was religion per se that eventually eased Cather's mind is perhaps a moot point. It is clear, however, that her association with a church rich in tradition and ritual provided her with the orthodox framework she needed to piece her world back together.

The complete recovery of order would take time, and in the interim, Cather dwelt on her bitter disappointment. The harsh indictment of American, post-pioneer morality begun in One of Ours would continue and intensify in Cather's next novels, A Lost Lady (1923) and The Professor's House (1925), before reaching its final and most vitriolic terms in My Mortal Enemy (1926). That short novel, one of the finest examples of the novel *démeublé*, is generally considered the most bitter piece of fiction Cather ever produced. The ethical malaise which Cather had first centralized in the Nebraska of One of Ours had spread itself from coast to coast by her novel of 1926. Myra Henshawe, the central character of the novel, would be the representative of the new generation who had sold out to crass materialism. Hers would be a false god, and she would waste

herself in his service. With My Mortal Enemy, Cather's disillusionment with the values of post-World War I America reached its lowest point and was finally purged by the rancorous characterization of Myra Henshawe. Cather's bitterness, however, does not become vindictiveness, and as Myra is Cather's catharsis, she is also the genesis of Cather's reconstruction of a whole world. Myra is brought low for her debased quest for materialism, but she is spiritually saved by a reaffirmation and acceptance of true values. Ultimately, there is hope for restored order.

Very little is known about the background and genesis of My Mortal Enemy, and most critics feel that, as this work represents Cather's dark night of the soul, the experience of writing it had been so painful and emotionally draining that she simply could say no more about it. However, Cather's publisher, advisor, and close friend, Alfred A. Knopf, has recently indicated that "Miss Cather regarded this story as exceptional. It meant a great deal to her . . . ." <sup>28</sup> Few of Cather's friends had very much to say about the book. Edith Lewis, Cather's closest friend, was evidently one of the many people distressed by the novel's tone, for she dismisses it in one terse sentence in her memoir. The prototype for this intense psychological study is identified by E. K. Brown only as "a woman, older by a full generation, whom Willa Cather had known well through connections in Lincoln, and who had died before the First World War." <sup>29</sup> Beyond that, the reader must rely on Nellie Birdseye.

Nellie is the novel's first person narrator, a young, impressionable girl, who is quite taken with Myra Henshawe's mystique. Many critics feel that Nellie is inadequate as a narrator because of her naïveté. While Nellie's vision is decidedly limited and romantically tinged, her highly selective perception is important in terms of the *démeublé* technique.<sup>30</sup> The particular aspects of Myra which impress Nellie are the very elements which best describe the essential nature of Myra. Through Nellie, Cather filters those characteristics which will make a quick and lasting impression. Nellie's simple view is a result of the simplification process of Cather's art.

Like The Song of the Lark, My Mortal Enemy is really two stories in one. The first of these shows Myra Henshawe struggling to ensure her place in New York society, and all that the reader need know of Myra's past is supplied in one flashback chapter. Myra, an orphan, was raised by her wealthy Irish uncle, John Driscoll, in the little community of Parthia, Illinois. She had clearly been accustomed to a rather fine way of living; she always "had everything: dresses and jewels, a fine riding horse, a Steinway piano" (MME, p. 12). She fell in love with Oswald Henshawe, the son of an Ulster Protestant whom her uncle detests, and old Driscoll threatened to disinherit Myra if she married him. Little will deter Myra, however, and for the sake of love, she tossed away all she had and dramatically eloped with Oswald. Her uncle "was as good as his

word," and the impetuous Myra was left with only her seemingly intense and devoted love for Oswald.

Part of Myra's problem as she bustles around New York stems from the strong impulse of affection she has always had. She has already made a rather grand and noble sacrifice in choosing love over financial security. In New York, her emotions are no less intense and she is always compassionate toward her friends. She is quite concerned over her poet friend, Ann Aylward, who is "dying of tuberculosis in her early twenties" (MME, p. 42). Nellie, who visits the young woman with Myra, notices how strongly Myra reacts: "As we were walking home she tried to tell me more about Miss Aylward, but tenderness for her friend and bitter rebellion at her fate choked her voice. She suffered physical anguish for that poor girl" (MME, pp. 42-43). On Christmas Eve, Myra insists on looking for "a green bush to send to Madame Modjeska. 'She's spending the holidays in town, and it will be dismal at her hotel'" (MME, p. 30). Myra is quite hurt by the loss of a friend, one who "could have stood by Oswald in a difficulty--and he didn't" (MME, p. 44). Such compromise to friendship demoralizes Myra: "'It's all very well to tell us to forgive our enemies; our enemies can never hurt us very much. But oh, what about forgiving our friends?'--she beat on her fur collar with her two gloved hands--'that's where the rub comes'" (MME, p. 44-45). To Nellie, Myra's ". . . chief extravagance was in caring for so many people and in caring for them so much" (MME, p. 43). This, certainly one of Nellie's most perceptive comments, indicates



the compassionate dimension of Myra's personality. Myra does indeed have a genuine concern for others, which manifests itself in the many kindnesses she lavishes upon her close friends, most of whom, Nellie notices, are artists. In this sense, Myra is certainly an admirable and perhaps noble character.

Unfortunately, Myra's life is also directed by another, more compelling impulse--the compulsive desire for affluence and status. Extravagance comes almost naturally to Myra; it is her uncle's only legacy to her. The Henshawe apartment, as has already been noted, connotes the opulence of Myra's life style. The plant Myra selects for Madame Modjeska is "a glistening holly-tree, full of red berries and pointed like a spire, easily the queen of its companions," prompting Oswald to note that "'It's naturally the most extravagant'" (MME, p. 30). Nellie, who would rather dismiss Myra's prodigality as an outgrowth of her overwhelming compassion for others, finally witnesses for herself the disagreeable, avaricious side of Myra's personality. While Nellie and Myra ride home in a hansom after an afternoon's outing in Central Park, they pass one of Myra's acquaintances riding home in her own carriage and Myra is quite put out: "'There, Nellie,' she exclaimed, 'that's the last woman I'd care to have splashing past me, and me in a hansom cab'" (MME, p. 41). Even the romantic Nellie comes to see Myra as she really is:

I glimpsed what seemed to me insane ambition. My aunt was always thanking God that the Henshawes got along as well as they did, and worrying because she felt sure Oswald wasn't saving anything. And here Mrs. Myra was wishing for a carriage--with stables and a house and servants, and all that went with a carriage! All the way home she kept her scornful expression, holding her head high and sniffing the purple air from side to side as we drove down Fifth Avenue. When we alighted before her door she paid the driver, and gave him such a large fee that he snatched off his hat and said twice: "Thank you, thank you, my lady!" She dismissed him with a smile and a nod. "All the same," she whispered to me as she fitted her latchkey, "it's very nasty, being poor!" (MME, p. 41)

Myra's life style is rich, very rich, and poverty, the only threat to that life style, she fears more than anything else. Years before, on "that winter night when Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to Fate," Myra turned her back on the fortune that would have made her very happy, because she loved Oswald Henshawe (MME, p. 17). But for Myra, love is no longer enough. She wants carriages and all that goes with them--things that will represent affluence and provide status. And to get them, she is willing to "cultivate" the friendship of "moneyed" people--"she seemed to like the word," Nellie adds parenthetically--in the hope of at least assuring, if not advancing, Oswald's professional well-being (MME, p. 39). When Myra Henshawe wants something, the cost makes little difference.

The ultimate price of Myra's ignoble, materialistic quest is great, as Nellie learns ten years later when she meets the Henshawes in a shabby residential hotel on the West Coast. Their circumstances have changed a great deal since the days of their

Madison Square splendor. Oswald has given up his job in New York when, in a reorganization of the company, he was offered only a small position which "his wife wouldn't let him think of accepting . . ." (MME, p. 61). Now he has "a humble position, poorly paid, with the city traction company" (MME, p. 69). Myra, however, is in an even worse situation--almost completely bedridden with an incurable illness. All of her "insane ambition" has been rewarded by the poverty she so hated and feared, and by sickness.

Myra is happy to see Nellie, however, and Nellie does what she can to alleviate Myra's misery. One of Myra's greatest joys is an outing to the bare headland on the Pacific which she has named Gloucester's cliff, as the site strikes her as being so very like that in King Lear. There is neither storm nor fury, however, on Myra's cliff--only the tranquility of the sea and the setting sun. Myra finds peace there; her afflictions are temporarily eclipsed by the beauty of nature and solitude, as she tells Nellie: "'I've had such a beautiful hour, dear; or has it been longer? Light and silence; they heal all one's wounds--all but one, and that is healed by dark and silence'" (MME, p. 73). It is at this spot that Myra hopes one day to see the dawn: "'That is always such a forgiving time. When that first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution'" (MME, p. 73). The religious tone in Myra's speech may seem surprising, but Nellie

soon discovers that in her illness, Myra has returned to "the faith of her childhood." And it is through religion that Myra is able to accept death peacefully.

Her sickness is long and painful, however, and it almost seems as if Myra's physical anguish is enough to expiate her sin. Although Myra will several times lash out at Oswald and hold him responsible for her plight, she knows that she is really her own undoing, and confesses it: "'We've destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed . . . . I am a greedy, selfish, worldly woman; I wanted success and a place in the world'" (MME, p. 75). But there is another dimension to Myra's dilemma which she cannot understand so easily. Myra realizes that she was greedy, but she also knows that she was kind and generous to many people--that she cared for people, and somehow, her final agonies do not make sense. "'I could bear to suffer . . . so many have suffered. But why must it be like this? I have not deserved it. I have been true in friendship; I have faithfully nursed others in sickness . . . . Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?'" (MME, p. 95). Myra's "mortal" enemy is herself--more specifically, the avaricious part of her nature, the worldly Myra Henshawe. In this sense, she is the agent of her own destruction. But Myra has a spiritual side as well, even though she has ostensibly rejected the Catholicism of her childhood by eloping with Oswald. She has often been moved by true compassion for her friends, and it is her as yet unrewarded works of charity which Myra wonders about in her pitiful lament.

In her final misery, Myra feels like Lear himself: ". . . a man/ More sinned against than sinning."<sup>31</sup> For Myra, this is the final wound that can only be healed by darkness and silence. What Myra wants is a reason--an answer--justice; she can have none of them until death.

In her religious renewal, Myra at last finds order for her fragmented life. She has suffered physically and mentally for her avarice; by it she has come to understand what her ebony crucifix really means. She takes delight now in spending her hoarded coins on masses for the dead, even as the Henshawe's finances are at their most critical stage. Myra's world begins to make sense again when she realizes that "'Religion is different from everything else; because in religion seeking is finding'" (MME, p. 94). To find the answer she wants, Myra "seeks"--on her own terms, alone, on Gloucester's cliff, where, "there was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn" (MME, p. 101).

Thea Kronborg and Myra Henshawe represent the entire spectrum of Cather's world of value, from the early days of pioneer heroism and artistic idealism, through the gray days of bitter disappointment in a new and crude, materialistic age, and on to the days when the tranquility of civilizations past, founded on tradition and orthodoxy, would suggest a life style better than that of the Twenties and Thirties. Cather confronted the changes in her world through art. The vitality

and idealism which Thea Kronborg shared with Alexandra Bergson and Antonia Shimerda gave way to the disappointing materialism of Marian Forrester and Myra Henshawe. But what is left unsaid about Myra bears the hope for a new order, for as Nellie points out, there is every reason to believe that Myra had lived to see the forgiving light of dawn. Cather's next two novels, Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) and Shadows on the Rock (1931) would manifest the new order of Cather's world, founded on a solid basis of religious tradition and respect for the past. Cather's values had undergone a severe test in the span from 1915 to 1926. But as Thea Kronborg and Myra Henshawe clearly indicate that Cather's world had broken in two, they also indicate that Cather could confront that broken world and put it back together again..

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>"Willa Cather Talks of Work," pp. 448-449.
- <sup>2</sup>Brown, p. 199.
- <sup>3</sup>John J. Murphy, "Willa Cather: The Widening Gyre," Five Essays on Willa Cather: The Merrimack Symposium, ed. John J. Murphy (North Andover, Mass.: Merrimack College, 1974), p. 51.
- <sup>4</sup>Willa Cather, Shadows on the Rock, 1931 (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1971), p. 24.
- <sup>5</sup>Shadows on the Rock, p. 278.
- <sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), pp. 118-119.
- <sup>7</sup>Willa Cather, Prefatory Note to Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), v.
- <sup>8</sup>Woodress, p. 164.
- <sup>9</sup>Sergeant, p. 118.
- <sup>10</sup>Mary Cushing, The Rainbow Bridge (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1954), p. 244.
- <sup>11</sup>Brown, p. 188.
- <sup>12</sup>Sergeant, p. 132.
- <sup>13</sup>Woodress, pp. 163-164.
- <sup>14</sup>Brown, p. 187.
- <sup>15</sup>"A Mighty Craft," p. 417.
- <sup>16</sup>Willa Cather, Preface to The Song of the Lark, 1932 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1963), vi.
- <sup>17</sup>Preface to The Song of the Lark, v.
- <sup>18</sup>Ethel M. Hockett, "The Vision of a Successful Fiction Writer," Lincoln Daily Star, 24 October 1915; rpt. in The Kingdom of Art, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 451.

- <sup>19</sup>Giannone, p. 86.
- <sup>20</sup>Brown, pp. 190-191. Quotes The Song of the Lark, p. 159.
- <sup>21</sup>"Willa Cather Talks of Work," p. 447.
- <sup>22</sup>Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 93.
- <sup>23</sup>Willa Cather, One of Ours, 1922 (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1971), pp. 88-89.
- <sup>24</sup>"New Winners of the Pulitzer Prize," Current Opinion, 75 (1923), p. 49.
- <sup>25</sup>Woodress, p. 197.
- <sup>26</sup>Brown, p. 227.
- <sup>27</sup>Bennett, p. 137.
- <sup>28</sup>Alfred A. Knopf, "Miss Cather," The Art of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Book, 1974), p. 209.
- <sup>29</sup>Brown, p. 248.
- <sup>30</sup>See earlier discussion in Chapter 3, p. 37.
- <sup>31</sup>King Lear, III. ii. 59-60.



## . . . of Creating Art

In both The Song of the Lark and "The Novel Démeublé," Willa Cather draws attention to an artistic precept of Alexandre Dumas, who maintained, ". . . that to make a drama a man needed one passion, and four walls."<sup>1</sup> Quite obviously, Cather borrowed this maxim as her own artistic credo and, as has been suggested earlier, directed her own artistic attempts toward the creation of a simple stage for the play of human emotions. Her adoption of the Dumas tenet with almost uncanny literalness is evident from the earlier discussion of the room motif, although the development of Cather's style, on the whole, shows the same evocative tendencies. Similarly, women, with their influential position in so many Cather novels, suggest the direction of values, Cather's "passions," throughout the canon. Art, however, as the Dumas comment suggests, is a passion contained within four walls, or more simply, the shaping of the idea in an appropriate image--the combination of the essentials of art, content and form. Therefore, while nothing can fully compensate for a complete involvement with the work of art, it is helpful to examine in this chapter at least one additional aspect of Cather's fiction which shows how she brought image and idea together and indicates also how in time she was able to do so with much more grace and artistry.

Perhaps the most consistently criticized aspect of Cather's fiction has been her creation and use of male characters. As

early as 1908, four years before Cather even published her first novel, Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather's first and best literary advisor, warned the young writer of the "masquerade" involved "when a woman writes in the man's character."<sup>2</sup> Jewett's advice fell to deaf ears, however, for Cather continued to employ a male narrator in some of her most important and successful works. Those males have since caused a great deal of critical controversy, with Jim Burden of My Ántonia clearly receiving the most attention. Although critics have examined the complex Cather males from almost every critical vantage point, Cather's persistence in using a male narrator, coupled with some of the author's decidedly masculine idiosyncrasies, has often led to a strongly biographical analysis of her works. Nevertheless, the Cather male is an intriguing fellow, whether he narrates or is merely an extra. And just what the Cather male is, and how he came to be so, has become a favorite topic among Cather scholars.

A recent article by John Murphy suggests a great deal about the Cather male and his development throughout the canon. Noting that in Cather's early works, there is a conflict between idealist and realist males, and a projection by the idealist of his own idealism onto the heroine, Murphy suggests that Cather's men only begin to mature when "the search for an ideal is combined with contact with the world of reality."<sup>3</sup> Beginning with The Professor's House, Cather males adjust, accepting an existence that minimizes the ideal, and, more importantly, face

reality. The hesitant, weak males, like Jim Burden and Niel Herbert, who founder on their own delusions of the past, are replaced by the aggressive priests of the Southwest and the sturdy new Canadians in Québec, who overcome their self-illusion, suffer the consequences of a harsh present, and look to the future. Even in Cather's last works, where once again a forceful woman dominates the scene, men certainly seem to be more individualistic, aware of the influential, headstrong female, but not taken under by her. Henry Colbert of Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), is a good example, for although he might well be called passive, his passivity comes from a clear understanding of his imperious wife as well as some measure of his own Southern-ness, and is always of his own volition. Henry is never deluded by his wife, nor does he cower before her domineering arrogance. In all, the later Cather men are far more vigorous, full-blooded, and realistic individuals than their predecessors.

Although Murphy does not discuss either The Song of the Lark or My Mortal Enemy, both novels seem to fall within the scope of his study. The earlier work actually shows not one, but several male characters fully enthralled by the splendor of Thea Kronborg and possessed of a ruinous romantic vision. Cather develops these characters quite fully and accounts carefully for their histories and personalities, but they appear to be rather one-dimensional characters, generally more hindrance than help within the narrative structure. In My Mortal Enemy, on the other hand, Cather introduces only one central male who

is aware of and ready to act on both the romantic and realistic impulses in his life, and who can, to some measure, achieve a stability between the two. The result is more satisfying than that of The Song of the Lark, and Oswald Henshawe is, in most respects, every bit as interesting and complex a character as his wife. In the male characters of these two novels, then, one finds a fine example of the change and progress which marks the complete art of Willa Cather.

Like so many other elements of The Song of the Lark, the male characters in that novel have been done to excess. There are about a dozen males characterized in the work, and of those, no less than six have direct and significant influence on Thea Kronborg's awakening to art. All of these characters are important to the novel's progress, for each has a share in the development of the young artist, especially during her early, struggling years. These men provide part of the positive social impulses necessary for the birth of the artist, in the concern and assistance they provide for the little girl they all know has something very different about her. However, the characters are so designed that each can offer assistance in only one way; each has a singular function in Thea's artistic awakening. The several influences must, therefore, be represented by several males. In terms of the artistic simplicity and economy Cather had already advocated, it seems that such a legion of necessary males would certainly defeat her purposes. The proliferation

of male characters in The Song of the Lark hardly points to the "novel démeublé."

The problem is compounded by Cather's use of some of these men as representatives of certain values not immediately related to the narrative, nor even very necessary to the story of an artist. For example, the struggle of the artist in a small house crowded with children is further complicated by her father's being a Methodist minister. This situation not only imposes certain behavioral limitations on Thea, but also provides Cather with an opportunity to comment on clerics and religion in general. The Reverend Mr. Larsen of Thea's Chicago experience is used similarly, and is even more tenuously connected to the narrative. Although he does direct Thea to a suitable lodging house and gives her her first position in Chicago, Mr. Larsen is also pretty much, and perhaps more importantly, a Catherian caricature of all clergymen:

Larsen liked all the softer things of life-- in so far as he knew about them. He slept late in the morning, was fussy about his food, and read a great many novels, preferring sentimental ones. He did not smoke, but he ate a great deal of candy 'for his throat,' and always kept a box of chocolate drops in the upper right-hand drawer of his desk. He always bought season tickets for the symphony concerts, and he played his violin for women's culture clubs. He did not wear cuffs, except on Sunday, because he believed that a free wrist facilitated his violin practice. When he drilled his choir, he always held his hand with the little and index fingers curved higher than the other two, like a noted German conductor he had heard. On the whole, the Reverend Larsen was not an insincere man; he merely spent his life resting and playing, to make up for the time his forebears had wasted grubbing in the earth. He

was simple-hearted and kind; he enjoyed his candy and his children and his sacred cantatas. He would work energetically at almost any form of play. (SL, pp. 209-210)

While all of this says a great deal about clergymen, the passage has little to do with either Thea Kronborg or her pursuit of art. At best, one might call the Reverend Mr. Larsen, who appears in only one chapter, a digression.

Moreover, like most of the male characters in The Song of the Lark, Larsen's personality is quite fully explored (the passage above being only a part of what is said of him) even though he makes only a single appearance. Cather conscientiously delineates each character, enumerating qualities both good and bad, explaining problems and idiosyncrasies, exploring histories and so on. The effect, however, is more detrimental than helpful in the novel, for it diverts attention from the work's central concern--the story of the development and triumph of the artist. In short, these detailed characterizations seem somewhat excessive and, in some cases, superfluous, in a work already weighty by the nature of its ambition.

Nevertheless, there are six men in The Song of the Lark who, by dint of their close and important relationships to Thea, must be considered major figures. These are Thea's closest friends, who help and encourage her along the hard road to the Metropolitan stage; indeed, without their support, physical and psychological, Thea's journey would be nigh on impossible, despite her own determination. In general, these

men have a personal, romantic vision of life, which is frequently refuted before them in reality, but to which they prefer to cling, as it seems safe, sure, and desirable. Their lives have special meaning because of Thea and her success. These characters seem somewhat incomplete, impeded by a weakness which they either cannot or will not overcome. In the extreme, their romanticized reality can render them as complacent as Jim Burden, who can say to *Ántonia*, "'I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister--anything that a woman can be to a man,'" without ever realizing the pathos of his words, or doing anything about his pitiful situation.<sup>4</sup> Of Thea's friends, Richard Gianonne notes, "Each has a different personality, but all share in a common friendliness toward one another, a love for Thea, a personal integrity; and each lives in the paradox of being a failure in the public view and a valued person to Thea."<sup>5</sup> It is, of course, dangerous to generalize too broadly about the men in Thea's story, for despite their several similarities, they remain strikingly individual. Like Larsen's, their stories are told completely and exhaustively, though these recountings are a great deal less digressional than those of the minor male characters. Cather has, it appears, used these men to several ends, but they are ends which can generally be related in some way to Thea's quest. However, the best way to assess the merit of this fraternity is to examine each member, with an eye to how and why each character is created.

One important friend of Thea's Moonstone days is Spanish Johnny, the first Mexican to settle in the town, and in whom Thea first comes to understand "the elemental impulse of the earth as it is echoed in man."<sup>6</sup> The music in the Mexican settlement is primitive, and as a child, Thea is captivated by it, even though she cannot understand any of the words. The music itself is enough; the primal rhythms communicate that which is blocked by language, and eventually, Thea comes to appreciate this "really musical people" a great deal. Spanish Johnny is by trade a painter and decorator, but he is also a musician, known for his tenor voice and frenzied mandolin playing. An uncontrollable passion for lively, earthy music is Johnny's weakness and ruin. When he goes off on one of his binges, the result is always predictable and almost fatal:

Nobody knew exactly what was the matter with Johnny, and everybody liked him. His popularity would have been unusual for a white man; for a Mexican it was unprecedented. His talents were his undoing. He had a high, uncertain tenor voice, and he played the mandolin with exceptional skill. Periodically he went crazy. There was no other way to explain his behaviour. He was a clever workman, and, when he worked, as regular and faithful as a burro. Then some night he would fall in with a crowd at the saloon and begin to sing. He would go on until he had no voice left, until he wheezed and rasped. Then he would play his mandolin furiously, and drink until his eyes sank back into his head. At last, when he was put out of the saloon at closing time, and could get nobody to listen to him, he would run away--along the railroad track, straight across the desert. He always managed to get aboard a freight somewhere. Once beyond Denver, he played his way southward from saloon to saloon until he got across the border. He never wrote to his wife; but she would soon begin to get newspapers from La Junta, Albuquerque, Chihuahua, with marked paragraphs announcing that Juan Tellamantez and his wonderful mandolin could be heard at the Jack Rabbit Grill or the Pearl of



Cadiz Saloon. Mrs. Tellamantez waited and wept and combed her hair. When he was completely wrung out and burned up--all but destroyed--her Juan always came back to her to be taken care of--once with an ugly knife wound in the neck, once with a finger missing from his right hand--but he played just as well with three fingers as he had with four. (SL, pp. 54-55)

Music literally carries Spanish Johnny away, and his unrestrained passion for its brutal, elemental force spells destruction.

Johnny is the most primitive sort of artist, and even his dissipation cannot destroy the artistic impulse within him. In Thea, he recognizes the early rumblings of artistic sensitivity, encourages its development, and watches the artist emerge in Thea--with his characteristic zest and gusto. When Thea visits the Mexican settlement as a child, he knows "'she's gotta some music in her, that child'" (SL, p. 286). Later, when Thea returns to Moonstone after her more intense studies in Chicago, she sings with these Mexican friends and feels, for the first time, "the response that such people can give" (SL, p. 292). It is from these uneducated, natural artists, particularly the volatile Johnny, that Thea "first learns music's primitive energy."<sup>7</sup>

Johnny and the Mexicans serve another end in Thea's education, however, and this becomes particularly unpleasant for her. In the very prim and narrow-minded world of Moonstone, these foreigners are social outcasts, with whom respectable people do not associate. Thea's friendliness and association with the Mexicans calls down the curse of the small-minded

small town, even within the Kronborg family circle. After a delightful evening of song and dance in the Mexican settlement, Thea is met with a barrage of comments and queries about her questionable friends and about the effect that her indiscrete behavior will have on the Reverend Kronborg's ministry in particular, and on the Kronborg social status in general. Anna, Thea's older, very provincial sister, is, as might be expected, quick to pass judgment: "'Everybody at Sunday-School was talking about you going over there and singing with the Mexicans all night, when you won't sing for the church. Somebody heard you, and told it all over town. Of course, we all get the blame for it'" (SL, p. 298). Although the racial prejudices voiced at the Kronborg's Sunday dinner table upset Thea, they are nonetheless quite representative of the intolerance prevalent in the smug, snobbish community. Spanish Johnny already knows that "a Mexican learns to dive below insults or soar above them, after he crosses the border" and accepts his lot (SL, p. 61). But for Thea, bigotry and class consciousness, especially in her own family, are new, ugly problems, which serve to remind her that her childhood home is provincial and narrow. Thus, Johnny and the Mexicans not only serve to advance Thea's artistry, but also create the social circumstance which illuminates the questionable mores of the frontier town.

Ray Kennedy, another of Thea's friends, is "an aggressive idealist, a free thinker, and, like most railroad men, deeply

sentimental" (SL, pp. 57-58). A man of rather simple pleasures, Ray is "artlessly fond of music, especially of Mexican music" and even more fond of Thea Kronborg (SL, pp. 58-59). Without really understanding Thea's capabilities, he appreciates her voice and knows that she should go to Chicago for lessons. "'Then you come back, and wear a long feather and high heels and put on a few airs,'" he tells Thea, "'and that will fix 'em. That is what they like'" (SL, p. 136). Ray's view of the triumph of Thea's art is pedestrian, to be sure, and that may also be the best word to describe this thirty-year old railroad man. Ray Kennedy need never fear that his reach will exceed his grasp, for though he builds great castles in the air, his life is never much more than the routine of freight trains that are always being side-tracked to allow the more important passenger trains to pass by. Simple and steady, the affable Ray is able to win the approval of the hard-to-please Anna Kronborg, though even she regrets "that he was not a passenger conductor with brass buttons on his coat" (SL, p. 168).

Ray maintains, however, that railroading is but a temporary expedient; he's waiting to hit into something big, as he is sure he will. Ray spends his time "thinking of the future, dreaming the large Western dream of easy money, of a fortune kicked up somewhere in the hills--an oil well, a gold mine, a ledge of copper" (SL, p. 67). When Ray strikes it rich, he plans to give up railroading and hopes to marry Thea. In his mind, his entire

life is neatly planned out, or perhaps more accurately, dreamed up. All his plans are cut short, however, in a railroad accident that takes his life.

Although Ray can never get his own life off the ground, he is responsible for a major impetus in Thea's career. Before his death, Ray has named Thea the beneficiary of his \$600 insurance policy and requests in his will that the money be used to finance lessons for Thea in Chicago. While the legacy is small, it is enough to allow Thea to escape from Moonstone and provides for her introduction to the world of serious art. Furthermore, Ray indirectly serves another important function, in that he first tells Thea of the ancient Cliff-Dwellers. He likes these "'old aborigines'" because "'they got all their ideas from nature'" (SL, p. 147). Thea must do the same. She is never aware of the essence of art until, in a glorious moment of revelation in Panther Cañon, she realizes for herself just what art is. Ray, therefore, provides not only the money that is a necessary first step for Thea's development as an artist, but also establishes a first tie to the past which ultimately is the key to pure art for Thea.

Despite the obviously positive effect Ray Kennedy has on Thea's life, he seems to be one of the most dissatisfying and superfluous characters in the novel, primarily because his entire presence in the work is so patently contrived. For all that he provides for Thea, Ray also poses a threat; he dreams of marrying Thea. Marriage for Cather's artist becomes an obstacle, for

a human, romantic relationship would make demands on the passion that must be fully spent on art, and presumably, this is why Ray must be "done away with." However, in arranging this little tragedy which gains for Thea the wherewithal to continue her studies and eliminates the threat of romance, Cather has, to some measure, tripped herself up. Consistently, all of Ray's plans are nothing more than dreams, with little prospect of ever becoming reality. He plans to marry Thea only after he has found his wealth, when he would "be able to keep her like a queen," and the closest he ever comes to that fortune is in a mine, ironically called the "Bridal Chamber," which he sells out of two months before "a big pocket in the rock, full of virgin silver" is struck (SL, pp. 67-68). Time and again, the futility of Ray's quests is underscored; he seems to pose very little threat to anyone. Yet, to be absolutely sure, Ray is eliminated, and again, Cather takes great care to insure a plausible scene. Long before Ray's train is struck from behind and he is killed, the novelist has foreshadowed the event by explaining the hazards of railroading on a single-track road and has prepared for Joe Giddy's lackadaisical attitude about setting out warning flags, the omission of which causes the accident. In all, the entire business of Ray Kennedy and all that goes with him appears painfully labored and excessively artificial, and is, in the end, artistically destructive.

Even when Ray is gone, his memory lingers, and the influence he had on Thea is extended in Fred Ottenburg, a young beer baron and patron of the arts, whom Thea meets in Chicago. She is immediately taken by the charming young fellow; "he had a way of floating people out of dull or awkward situations, out of their own torpor or constraint or discouragement" (SL, p. 336). He is precisely what the disconsolate Thea needs. He takes care of her financially, introduces her to the "right" people, gets her singing engagements, and generally, is a friend to a lonely and confused girl. Furthermore, as Kennedy's dreams gave Thea a tie to the past, Fred makes those dreams a reality. He arranges a summer in Arizona for Thea, which puts her in direct contact with the ancient cliff-dwellings of Ray's stories, where her greatest realization comes.

Ostensibly a glamorous man-about-town, Fred is really one of the few sincere, sympathetic, and sensitive people whom Thea meets at Madison Bowers's studio in Chicago. He knows more of art than Ray did and can recognize Thea's ability for its real merit. Like Ray, Fred also becomes enamored of the young artist, and in several ways, Fred poses a more substantial threat to Thea's career than did Ray. To begin with, he has the wealth that Ray only dreamed of. Additionally, Thea likes Fred immediately and finds him rather captivating company.

As strong as their friendship seems from the start, however, any more intimate relationship seems ill-fated for Thea and

Fred from their very first encounter. Fred wants to hear Thea sing, but first asks her to translate a Norwegian song, Tak for dit Råd (Thanks for your Advice). Thea's rough translation sounds, at best, inauspicious:

"Thanks for your advice! But I prefer to steer my boat into the din of roaring breakers. Even if the journey is my last, I may find what I have never found before. Onward must I 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, p. 338).

It looks as though Miss Kronborg has every intention of going it alone on the stormy voyage of art.

The Grieg lyrics are soon forgotten, however, and the inevitable impulse of romance is only temporarily forestalled. After a winter with Fred--a winter of dining out, of meeting kind and interesting people, of "the first hothouse flowers she ever had"--Thea's attitude is considerably altered:

Fred knew where all the pleasant things in the world were, she reflected, and knew the road to them. He had keys to all the nice places in his pocket, and seemed to jingle them from time to time. And then, he was young; and her friends had always been old. Her mind went back over them. They had all been teachers; wonderfully kind, but still teachers. Ray Kennedy, she knew, had wanted to marry her, but he was the most protecting and teacher-like of them all . . . . 'I don't want him for a teacher,' she thought, frowning petulantly out of the window. 'I've had such a string of them. I want him for a sweetheart.' (SL, p. 358)

As H. L. Mencken suggests, another Cinderella has once more found her Prince Charming.<sup>8</sup> The romance intensifies in Arizona, where Fred joins Thea amid the ruins of the cliff-city. The

strong desire for a human relationship overpowers Thea and she agrees to run away and marry Fred, for she knows that "'Things have closed behind me. I can't go back, so I am going on--to Mexico'" (SL, p. 424).

Thea's digression from her more important and noble artistic pilgrimage is only temporary. Cather saves her with what David Daiches sees as a "shoddy" device; Fred is unfortunately and unhappily married, and cannot divorce his wife, though he loathes her.<sup>9</sup> While Fred's Waterloo is not nearly as theatrical as Ray's death, the device does smack of the same sort of strained contrivance. Cather does, of course, catalogue all the details of Fred's rash marriage to Miss Edith Beers, the wife, whom, in less than two years, the generally congenial Fred has learned to detest. With this embellishment, an already complex narrative line is made all the more complexing. In the meantime, this curious turn of events shocks Thea, who then turns all her energies to the pursuit of art and leaves for Germany and the great voice teachers of Europe.

Fred has been of great service to Thea, nonetheless, for he has taken care of her immediate creature comforts in Chicago, and has given her those vital days in Panther Cañon. Moreover, he has inadvertently strengthened her resolve to be great as an artist, though he does so at somewhat of a disservice to himself. Years later, after Thea's career is established and secure, and Fred's wife has died, Thea and Fred marry. The



entire relationship, from start to finish, is a most bewildering, perhaps incredible one.

Together, Ray and Fred represent important aspects of Cather's world of art. Significantly, they provide financial support for the struggling artist, and as Cather had learned in her own life, it was most difficult for an artist to maintain a job and woo the Muse at the same time. From 1896 to 1913, Cather worked as both an editor and a teacher, first in Pittsburgh and later in New York, always with an eye to the day when she could "retire," so to speak, and devote her time to writing. The success of O Pioneers! hastened that day, and The Song of the Lark was the first novel to which she could devote all her effort, having resigned her position on the editorial staff at McClure's Magazine. Save the few months that Thea plays accompaniment for Madison Bowers, Cather's artist-heroine is free from the drudgery of having to support her art until the day that it will support her, thanks to the benevolence of Ray and Fred. The important historical perspective which both men help to awaken in Thea is equally significant. Yet all the while, Cather embellishes the basic importance of these characters with an abundance of details regarding all manner of information about their pasts, their families, their dreams, and so on. Furthermore, there is plain redundancy; Fred and Ray are essentially the same character, with one being more wealthy and charming than the other. While all the elements Cather includes about her characters are inter-related

in the vast network of ideas developed throughout The Song of the Lark, the profusion of detail tends to overshadow and crowd out the central threads of development in the narrative.

By far the most pervasive male influence in Thea's life is that of Dr. Howard Archie, Moonstone's handsome, young physician. From the very first scene of the novel, Archie develops as a father figure, showing more concern over a very sick little girl than does the Reverend Kronborg, who, in the excitement over the birth of his seventh child, has quite forgotten about Thea and her "croupy cough." Archie knows Thea is different from all the other Kronborgs, and indeed, different from most people in Moonstone. Childless himself, Archie appreciates the friendship of the artist-child and is grateful for her companionship in the smug little desert town. Throughout her Moonstone days and beyond, Thea confides her secret ambitions to Archie, relies on his advice, and ultimately borrows money from him to subsidize her European studies. Although he is not an artist himself, Archie always takes an active interest in Thea's artistic career--he makes the arrangements for her first trip to Chicago, he encourages her to fight for all the "impossible things" she wants, and he even journeys from Denver to New York just because Thea calls for his help. In almost every way, Dr. Archie is Thea's benevolent protector.

Archie can easily afford to devote so much of his time and energy to Thea, for besides her, he really has very little. Like Fred, he is the victim of a wretched marriage; his wife is

"one queer woman," who is "almost as much afraid of having dust in the house as she had once been of having children in it" (SL, p. 42). Her unaccountable stinginess is legendary around Moonstone; everyone knew that "the little, lopsided cake at the church supper, the cheapest pincushion, the skimpiest apron at the bazaar were always Mrs. Archie's contribution" (SL, p. 107). The meager fare she provides for the Archie table is a constant source of irritation to her husband, who frequently escapes to Denver simply because he is hungry. The timid Dr. Archie puts up with all of this public and private humiliation because he refuses to jeopardize respectability and his sense of what is proper and fitting. Divorce is out of the question; "If wiving went badly with a man--and it did oftener than not--then he must do the best he could to keep up appearances and help the tradition of domestic happiness along" (SL, p. 109). The Archie marriage does end violently, however, when Mrs. Archie, cleaning her furniture with gasoline, quite literally blows herself and the house into kingdom come. This final act, perhaps the most charitable of Mrs. Archie's entire life, liberates Dr. Archie from the misery he is too afraid to do anything about.

Rather than face up to the problems created by his stale marriage, Archie prefers to avoid that ugly reality by escaping. In the literal sense, he frequently travels to Denver to get away not only from his penurious wife, but also from provincial Moonstone and its narrow minds. In Moonstone, he remains away

from his home as much as possible, wandering late at night about the town, "restless and discontent, wishing there were something to do," or reading in his office. In his literary preferences, one readily sees the basis of Dr. Archie's dilemma:

Though he read Balzac all the year through, he still enjoyed the Waverley Novels as much as when he had first come upon them, in thick leather-bound volumes, in his grandfather's library. He nearly always read Scott on Christmas and holidays, because it brought back the pleasures of his boyhood so vividly. He liked Scott's women. Constance de Beverley and the minstrel girl in 'The Fair Maid of Perth,' not the Duchesse de Langeais, were his heroines. But better than anything that ever got from the heart of a man into printer's ink, he loved the poetry of Robert Burns. 'Death and Doctor Hornbook' and 'The Jolly Beggars,' Burns's 'Reply to his Tailor,' he often read aloud to himself in his office, late at night, after a glass of hot toddy. (SL, pp. 110-111)

Though he is faced each day with the ugliest of realities, Dr. Archie is a completely incurable romantic.

It is no surprise that the only promising young person in Moonstone becomes so much a part of Archie's unromantic life. Thea is young, gifted and determined--she has a bright future opening before her. Archie helps Thea realize her dream, helps guide her in her pursuits. He helps Thea succeed where he failed. Success comes for Dr. Archie only as it comes to Thea. She is the most important element in his life, and always has been. Life passed Archie by, except during the moments he shared with Thea.

Now, as he looked back at those years, the other interests were faded and inanimate. The thought

of them was heavy. But wherever his life had touched Thea Kronborg's, there was still a little warmth left, a little sparkle. Their friendship seemed to run over those discontented years like a leafy pattern, still bright and fresh when the other patterns had faded into the dull background. Their walks and drives and confidences, the night they watched the rabbit in the moonlight--why were these things stirring to remember? Whenever he thought of them, they were distinctly different from the other memories of his life; always seemed humorous, gay, with a little thrill of anticipation and mystery about them. They came nearer to being tender secrets than any others he possessed. Nearer than anything else they corresponded to what he had hoped to find in the world, and had not found.  
(SL, p. 488)

Thea is everything to Archie, and he cherishes the memories of her, the only moments of happiness he has ever known.

Dr. Archie's romantic vision has a debilitating effect and places him in the ranks of other Cather notables, such as Jim Burden and Niel Herbert, who find happiness in the remembrance of ideals and days gone by. The "incommunicable past" which Jim shares with his Antonia and in which he finds delight is no different than the fond memories of a youthful and vibrant Thea which Archie treasures all his life. The effect is crippling, however, because the past becomes all that Archie has. Not even the present is important for him. The woman he sees on the stage of the Met has no relation in his mind to his young friend with the thick yellow braids. For him, Thea is always a child growing up--a reminder of days when hopes were fresh. The carefully selected ideals that a hopeful young doctor made his own a lifetime ago are gone and there

have been no replacements. Now there are but a few hand-picked memories. For Archie, as for Jim, Niel and other of Cather's idealists, there is no future, only the past, a potential unfulfilled.

The full, detailed biography of Dr. Archie works in much the same way that those of Johnny, Ray, and Fred do, and perhaps in a greater and more complex fashion. On the one hand, his close and loyal devotion to Thea pervades the entire novel, and thereby establishes him as a key figure at all stages of her development. He is part of her experience in Moonstone, Chicago, and New York--almost the entire geographical scope of the novel. He, more than any of the other men, has been a part of the complete making of the artist. On the other hand, he is Dr. Howard Archie, by dint of his profession, an important member of his community, which, it just so happens, he despises for its smallness and smug provincialism, yet where he remains quite unhappily married. Even without his relationship to Thea, Archie would make an intriguing case study. And Cather is somewhat unwilling to let the opportunity pass; Archie's life offers so many valuable perspectives -- small-town sterility, stale marriage, and so on. What results, unfortunately, is a swollen narrative, alive with characters wrought in the "full-blooded" method which Cather's London publisher decried, and because of which he refused the manuscript of The Song of the Lark.

However, not all the men in the novel are handled in this fashion. Two others, curiously enough those most directly related to art, are drawn with the skill and precision that would mark Cather's later achievements. The first of these, Herr Wunsch, is Thea's Moonstone piano teacher, the first person from whom she learns that the artist must have desire. He realizes that she has more than just talent and he works her more strenuously than he does any of his other pupils. From Wunsch, Thea learns not only the fundamentals of piano, but also the basic element of true artistry--"the secret--what make the rose to red, the sky to blue, the man to love--in der Brust, in der Brust it is, und ohne diese giebt es keine Kunst, giebt es keine Kunst!" (SL, p. 99). True art comes from within.

Wunsch is himself a pathetic figure, for he has lost his beautiful "Euridice," his art, as Cather's fine allusions to Gluck's "Orpheus" suggest. For Wunsch, this is "the most beautiful opera ever made," and he carries the score around with him, though he knows the music by heart (SL, p. 89). He plays it often, yet he always returns to the same passage, over and over again, the Orpheus Lament:

'Ach, ich habe sie verloren,

. . . . .

Euridice, Euridice!' (SL, p. 93)

Wunsch's loss has been great, and he becomes a wanderer, moving from one small town to the next, never satisfied, never fulfilled.

His breaking point comes in Moonstone, where he goes crazy, loses all his pupils, and finally realizes that all is over for him. Before he leaves, he makes a present of the tattered, old Gluck score to Thea, symbolically bestowing on her the search for art and passing on the legacy of great art to its heir apparent.

Cather's control in creating Wunsch is quite fine, for she does not encumber the character with a lengthy history. The precise nature of Herr Wunsch's loss is not spelled out, for as the old man has explained to Thea, the secret of art is in der Brust, it is the secret of the individual. Therefore, the circumstances of his loss are immaterial; it is enough to know that this artist has lost his Euridice, and to see his consequent misery. Yet the suffering is not told; it is effected by allusion to the myth. We know Wunsch largely by the power of suggestion. Economy and clarity in execution make Wunsch's character one of the most satisfying in the entire novel.

Andor Harsanyi, Thea's piano teacher in Chicago, takes up where Wunsch breaks off, and provides Thea with the discipline and direction needed in art--that order which the distraught and unstable Wunsch could not provide. The artistic dictum which Wunsch, in his agitation could barely pronounce, is echoed and clarified in Harsanyi's advice that the artist must make himself born again, must seek art for himself and bring it forth, must be moved by strong desire. Like all the others, Harsanyi is captivated by Thea's talent, but he discovers her



real success will come not from the piano, but from her voice. He explains to Thea, "'You have brains enough and talent enough. But to do what you will want to do, it takes more than these--it takes vocation. Now, I think you have vocation, but for the voice, not for the piano,'" and he prys from her the secret that singing has always been her first desire and ambition (SL, p. 263). He gives up his industrious pupil with regret, arranging for her to study with Chicago's most eminent voice teacher, Madison Bowers. Harsanyi does what he can to encourage Thea and foster her true talent. He has every confidence in her: "'I believe in her. She will do nothing common. She is uncommon, in a common, common world'" (SL, p. 268).

When Thea returns from a summer in Moonstone and starts her lessons with Bowers, she discovers that the Harsanyis, summering in the Adirondacks, will not be returning to Chicago. "An old teacher and friend of Harsanyi's, one of the best-known piano-teachers in New York, was about to retire because of failing health and had arranged to turn his pupils over to Harsanyi. Andor was to give two recitals in New York in November, to devote himself to his new students until spring, and then to go on a short concert tour. The Harsanyis had taken a furnished apartment in New York, as they would not attempt to settle a place of their own until Andor's recitals were over" (SL, p. 321). Harsanyi, like Wunsch, has been a necessary part of Thea's development. When their usefulness is played out, Cather removes the characters with relative ease and relative artistic grace.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the male characterization in The Song of the Lark, other than to say that it is frightfully uneven. And it is even more difficult to account for that unevenness. Almost any reason one might offer could be quickly refuted by another equally convincing fact. To say, for example, that Cather simply lost control can be countered by the fact that a character such as Wunsch could hardly be more carefully and skillfully created. Contradictions seem to abound, particularly in the way Cather has created and used the men. The problem seems to arise from the dual functions the male serves in the novel. He must first be an influence in Thea's life, a part of the machinery which makes her a superstar. But the male must also be a representative of behavioral norms, affording Cather the opportunity to pass value judgments on a wide variety of topics. Both are important and complicated tasks.

There is no question but that The Song of the Lark is primarily concerned with Thea Kronborg's artistic growth, development, and triumph, and it is clear that Cather is directing all elements of her narrative toward that end, particularly the males who have so influenced Thea. In the novel's final scene, the great Kronborg appears on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera, as all of her friends gather to share in her triumph. Archie sits with Fred. Harsanyi is there with his wife. And, "up in the top gallery a grey-haired little Mexican, withered and bright as a string of peppers beside an adobe door, kept

praying and cursing under his breath, beating on the brass railing and shouting 'Brava! Brava!' until he was repressed by his neighbours" (SL, p. 572). All of them--even the volatile Spanish Johnny--have returned to see the glory of which they have been a part. The stage is all Thea's, however, and it is hers alone. She is able to create a magnificent Sieglinde not because of her friends, but because of what she is herself, and Cather makes that quite clear: "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" (SL, p. 571). As the scene suggests, the influence of the men in Thea's life is subordinate to what she does for herself, and what she is. In that scene, the central theme of the novel is consummated--Thea Kronborg has become the artist par excellence.

At the same time, along the road to the Met, so to speak, Cather has been delineating a value system within the same characters who advance Thea's art--namely, the men. To do so, Cather must and does create strikingly individual males whose peculiar personalities will suggest certain norms, thereby affording Cather the opportunity to comment. Of needs, the novelist must be complete and thorough, and so, characterizations of people like Ray, Fred, and Archie become lengthy. By itself, this developmental strain in the novel offers a fine view of Cather's early priorities. In Archie alone, one sees comment on marriage, small-town mores, destructive idealism,

and to some extent, even the same sort of sexual psychosis that Blanche Gelfant attributes to Jim Burden in her controversial article.<sup>10</sup> The complexity that is The Song of the Lark results when Cather must make the system of general values, manifest in the males, fit into and relate to the more important, specific "artistic" value system designed by Thea's story. Altogether, the result is not completely satisfying.

There is, however, always the exception, and here, the exception helps clarify the problem. Actually, there are three exceptions--Wunsch, Harsanyi, and Madison Bowers--the male/artist characters. These are the most satisfying characters in the novel in terms of development, for they are clear and natural personalities, devoid of the "busy-ness" and artificiality of so many other male characters in the novel. In these men, Cather is able to bridge the gap between the world of art relevant to Thea's development and the world of general values made known through the men; because the two worlds are the same for them, they can serve equally in both. Simply, with the male artists, the distance between image and idea has been diminished. For Ray, Fred, Archie, and others, where the two are not so closely related Cather must resort to contrivance, coincidence, multiplicity, and digression to effect both ends. The massive scope of The Song of the Lark is in part to blame for the novel's clumsiness. Cather's ambition was great, and there are any number of reasons why she might attempt such a vast and complex work. But ours is not to judge what Cather did, only how she

did it. And while one can find a great deal to praise about The Song of the Lark, in the final analysis, one is also forced to admit that the novel is probably the least artistic piece Cather produced.

Over the next few years, Cather's work underwent an astounding transformation. Simplicity became the key word in Cather's artistic process, and the "novel démeublé," her trademark. Suggestion became her most powerful device; what was unsaid, but intimated, was every bit as important as the word on the page. Yet, clear diction and uncomplicated prose made no compromise to profound and intense feelings. Indeed, as Cather's style became less complex, the ideas she formed with it became more difficult to voice, for they were undermined by the times. Ironically, in the midst of distressing change, Cather's artistry flourished.

There is perhaps no better example of the metamorphosis in Cather's fiction than My Mortal Enemy. "Démeublé" to the point of being abrupt, the novel indicates the conflict of Cather's own values with prevailing morality, and suggests to some measure the direction of her resolution to accept life on the terms she felt to be noble and true. The hero is Oswald Henshawe, a marvel of craftsmanship as a character and a vivid representation of truths both old and new in Willa Cather's world. The simplicity of his creation belies the complexity

of his conception. With My Mortal Enemy, Cather proves that the story simply told need not be simple, and in the novel's hero, she shows her remarkable artistry.

Oswald Henshawe emerges from the pages of My Mortal Enemy more by suggestion than by description. He embodies many of the personality traits of the men in The Song of the Lark, and shares the same sorts of functions. Cather tightens up the story artistically by "tossing out" the large male cast, and by consolidation, creates a solid, central male.

A self-made man, Oswald is at once both realist and romantic. Denied Myra Driscoll's hand in marriage, he works methodically to establish a respectable business position in New York, but then, for the sake of love, agrees to the dramatic elopement which cuts his wife off from a sizeable inheritance. Like Fred Ottenburg and Dr. Archie, Oswald has a wretched marriage. Though he and Myra are happy at first, poverty changes everything. In her last days, Myra vents her anger and frustration on Oswald, blaming him for all their misfortune. Indeed, Myra's last utterance-- "'Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy'"--is, at once, a two-edged blade, which cuts into both Oswald and herself (MME, p. 95). Yet, despite his wife's increasing hatred and condemnation, Oswald does not become bitter, but rather, appears kind and gentle throughout the ordeal. After her death, he wants only to remember Myra as she was in New York--as a girl. "'She was a wild, lovely creature, Nellie. I wish you could have seen her then'" (MME, p. 104).

In much the same way that Archie watches over Thea, Oswald is Myra's protector in all situations, even the most wretched. As Ray, Fred, and Archie all finance Thea's artistic ambitions, so does Oswald support Myra's extravagance, both in wealth and poverty. The "glistening holly-tree" which Myra insists on sending to Madame Modjeska bears witness to his understanding, as does his calm reaction to Myra's having given away his six new shirts, because she cannot stand to see him in ill-fitting clothes. Even when the Henshawe's days of fine living have passed, he continues to care for Myra's basic needs as best he can:

He rose at five in the morning, put on an old duck suit . . . went to his wife's room and gave her her bath, made her bed, arranged her things, and then got their breakfast . . . . As a special favour from his company he was allowed to take two hours at noon, on account of his sick wife. He came home, brought her her lunch from below, then hurried back to his office. (MME, pp. 69-70)

It is almost as if Nellie Birdseye's first impression of Oswald was the absolute proper and true one: "There was something about him that suggested personal bravery, magnanimity, and a fine, generous way of doing things" (MME, p. 8).

Nellie is right for the most part, but Cather has made Oswald more human than perfect. He is not made of the same stuff as Dr. Archie, and Oswald prefers life over memories. While we are never told outright that Oswald is unfaithful to Myra, the intimation seems clear. The yellow topaz cuff-

buttons, given to him by "a young woman . . . from a breezy Western city, where a rich girl can give a present whenever she wants to and nobody questions it," arouse the suspicions of Lydia, Nellie's aunt (MME, p. 33). Nellie herself witnesses a quarrel between Myra and Oswald over a key which Myra discovers on his key ring and is suspicious of. Oswald's protestations that the key is to a safe-deposit box at the bank are not terribly convincing, and Myra knows it. A half-written note, left by Oswald in his hasty departure, seems to provide enough evidence to allow Myra to piece the story together, and when next we see her, she is leaving New York and Oswald, giving him a chance "to think it over" (MME, p. 53). Yet, as Harry Eichorn points out, "Oswald is still wearing the sleeve-buttons ten years after the quarrel with Myra, and it is significant that Nellie notices them in a scene describing Oswald's friendship with a girl who works on a newspaper . . . ." <sup>11</sup> The nature of Oswald's relationships is never disclosed--that is not terribly important. Suggestion is more effective, and the reader is left with Lydia's impression: "'A man never is justified, but if ever a man was . . .'" (MME, p. 54).

Oswald is, then, a somewhat more complete single character than any of the individual males in The Song of the Lark. Like Archie, he is kind and protecting, yet not so meek and timid as to wait until his wife kills herself in order to begin to really live. Like Fred, he enjoys female companionship outside



a less than great marriage, although never comes to detest his wife as Ottenburg does. He has, it seems, the vitality of Spanish Johnny, and perhaps a touch of Wunsch's passion, but both are kept more properly in perspective. Ultimately, Oswald emerges painlessly as a more realistic, well-adjusted and well-rounded character, who faces, basically, the same situations Thea's men face, yet copes with them and overcomes them to a degree, and lives a more complete life. He is the result of a more subtle art, and a more realistic point of view.

The contrast in the male characters in The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy is startling. Stylistically, Cather had made a complete turn around. What took several characters to effect in the earlier work is capably dispatched by one in the later novel. The carefully detailed, lengthy characterization became subtle, yet no less effective innuendo. Everything that Cather sacrificed of bulk came back a hundredfold in impact. Less marked, but no less important, is the philosophical difference. Values and truths do not change, but the perception of them does. Cather is like Thea, who in the final scene on the Metropolitan stage takes possession of the past which literally surrounds her in the presence of her friends, and combines that with the immediate creative powers within her, to produce perfect art. In Cather's later works, new perceptions of her own world and the world beyond, work with the creative craftsmanship of the *démeublé* technique to produce more balanced works

of art. The world of art for Willa Cather underwent a tremendous evolution of both image and idea in the relatively brief span of 1915 to 1926. As the male characters in The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy will attest, progress and change, the two fears of Cather's life, are striking aspects of her artistry.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"The Novel Démeublé," p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Jewett, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup>Murphy, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup>My Ántonia, p. 321.

<sup>5</sup>Giannone, pp. 86-87.

<sup>6</sup>Giannone, p. 87.

<sup>7</sup>Giannone, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup>See H. L. Mencken's review of The Song of the Lark, reprinted in James Schroeter, ed., Willa Cather and Her Critics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup>Daiches contends that "the element of 'composition' in the novel is not altogether satisfactory, and in order to shake the book down into some order and pattern a number of shoddy devices had to be used." Fred and Ray are both considered dei ex machina brought in to save Thea at the right moment. For full information see David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, 1951 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971), pp. 29-42.

<sup>10</sup>See Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in My Ántonia," American Literature, 43 (1971), 60-82.

<sup>11</sup>Eichorn, p. 126.

The eleven years between the publication of The Song of the Lark and the appearance of My Mortal Enemy reflect the steady and determined refinement of Willa Cather's artistry. Quite early in her career, Cather had come to a clear perception of the nobility of the world of art, and without hesitation or qualification, she dedicated her life to the art of fiction. For the most part, The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy have provided a study in contrast, manifesting most readily the advancement of a conscientious craftsman. Having realized the awkwardness of a cluttered, overcrowded novel, Cather studied the impact of the individual word, the power of nuance, the virtue of "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named." With care and precision, Cather became a master of the "novel démeublé." Yet, the simplicity of style makes no compromise to the solid values Cather espoused in her work--values which she saw challenged in a new age in America. For Cather, the virtues of the pioneers--strength, determination, endurance--would not be obsolete in any age. Both The Song of the Lark and My Mortal Enemy are evidence of Cather's strong convictions, for the integrity the novelist exalts in Thea Kronborg is ultimately the salvation of Myra Henshawe. Thus, while there is stark contrast between the two novels, there is also a great deal of similarity. In all, the evolution of Cather's art bears witness to the delightful yet difficult paradox of being at once simple and complex. As Bernice Slote comments,

". . . complexity is determined by simplification."<sup>1</sup> And the secret of Cather's success? Quite simply the same as Thea Kronborg's--a "passion" for art and all that it meant in her life, and knowing that anything of art was "inimitable in cheap materials."

Art was ever and always Willa Cather's way of life. A tribute from Katherine Anne Porter, herself a writer of no small repute, speaks eloquently of both the artist and her artistry:

Miss Cather held firmly to what she had found for herself, did her own work in her own way as all the others were doing each in his unique way, and did help greatly to save and reassert and illustrate the validity of certain great and dangerously threatened principles of art . . . . She is a curiously immovable shape, monumental, virtue itself in her art and a symbol of virtue--like certain churches, in fact or exemplary women, revered and neglected. Yet like these again, she has her faithful friends and true believers, even so to speak her lovers, and they last a lifetime, and after: the only kind of bond she would recognize or require or respect.<sup>2</sup>

As a stylist, Cather was an advocate of simplicity and an experimenter in form. As a philosopher, she held steadfastly to the integrity of art and simple, honest virtues. And as an artist, Willa Cather shared her world, in its brightest days and darkest nights, with ever-increasing finesse.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Slote, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Delacourt Press, 1970), pp. 38-39.

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