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Introduction to Signet Classic's *The Song of the Lark* by Willa Cather (2007)

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 1912, Willa Cather traveled to Winslow, Arizona, to visit her brother, Douglass, who worked for the railroad. The year before, she had begun a leave of absence from *McClure's Magazine*, where she had been an editor since 1906, so that she could focus her energies on writing fiction. Although she had been publishing short fiction regularly since 1892, her first novel—the cosmopolitan, somewhat derivative *Alexander's Bridge*—did not appear until 1912. Feeling tired and unwell, she, like many other Americans, sought renewal in the dry air and open spaces of the desert. After six years in the fast-paced, hothouse working and living environment of New York City, she enjoyed the company of the railroad men and of local Mexican residents. Particularly memorable for her was a trip with her brother to Walnut Canyon, near Flagstaff, the site of Indian cliff dwellers' ruins. On her way back east, she visited her family in Red Cloud, Nebraska, where she had spent seven years of her childhood, and watched the wheat harvest come in.

In a strange sort of creative alchemy, her time in the Southwestern desert crystallized in her mind a way to approach the Nebraska prairies and the experiences of immigrant farm women as a subject for fiction. Thus the Arizona desert produced the novel Cather later characterized as her real “first novel,” *O Pioneers!*, the story of Swedish immigrant Alexandra Bergson, who tames the prairies. The time she spent in the desert also fortified Cather's resolve to at least partially sever her ties to *McClure's*—she resigned as editor, although she continued to write for the magazine for three more years. As a result of her trip to the Southwest, she had, as she wrote in 1931, “recovered from the conventional editorial point of view” and was able to write about “a kind

of country [she] loved” rather than working up “interesting material” alien to her.¹ As she wrote in 1928 in a copy of *O Pioneers!* she sent to a childhood friend in Red Cloud, “This was the first time I walked off on my own feet—everything before was half read and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture.”

Critics immediately recognized *O Pioneers!* as powerful and original, but *The Song of the Lark* (1915) produced more mixed responses. On the one hand, the novel presents, like *O Pioneers!*, the inspiring and moving life story of a Swedish-American girl raised in the western United States. While Alexandra’s artistry is agricultural, Thea Kronborg, heroine of *The Song of the Lark*, becomes an international opera star. The daughter of a minister, she grows up in a crowded house in the small town of Moonstone, Colorado. With the support of her mother and adult male friends in the community, she pursues her dream of becoming an artist. She first trains as a pianist, but in Chicago, she discovers that voice is her true instrument. After an important trip to the desert Southwest, where she comes to a deeper understanding of herself and the nature of art, she spends a decade studying and singing in Germany before returning to New York City and to acclaim at the Metropolitan Opera. However, critics (later including Cather herself) found the novel too long and questioned Cather’s inclusion of the final section, which treats Thea as a mature artist rather than as a struggling young woman.

This sense that the novel consists of two unintegrated pieces stems, in part, from Cather’s complex merging of sources. Cather was a writer, not a musician, but her *künstlerroman*, her novel of artistic development, clearly had its origins in her own experiences. As countless critics have observed, Moonstone, Colorado, is Red Cloud, Nebraska. A map of Moonstone drawn from verbal descriptions in *The Song of the Lark* would serve as an accurate map of Red Cloud, and the Kronborg house

¹“My First Novels [There Were Two]” in *Willa Cather on Writing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 91–92.

filled with seven children and Thea's unheated attic bedroom with its rose wallpaper is Cather's childhood home and Cather's own room. Thea's frustrations with her musical study and work as an accompanist in Chicago owe something to Cather's disaffection with magazine work, and Cather transforms her own creative rebirth in Walnut Canyon into Thea's creative rebirth in Panther Canyon.

Cather's novel also derives, however, from her continuing ties to *McClure's* after 1912 as a staff writer. In 1913, she interviewed Olive Fremstad, a Swedish-American diva, for a *McClure's* article, and a friendship ensued. In Cather's article "Three American Singers," her preference for Fremstad over the two other singers, Geraldine Farrar and Louise Homer, is clear. American audiences may prefer Farrar and Homer, who (in Cather's rendering) achieved their success early and easily, but Cather praises the immigrant Fremstad as "the most interesting kind of American. As Roosevelt once said, Americanism is not a condition of birth, but a condition of spirit."² "Sheer power of will and character" define Fremstad's spirit for Cather: "Circumstances have never helped Mme. Fremstad. She grew up in a new, crude country where there was neither artistic stimulus nor discriminating taste. She was poor, and always had to earn her own living and pay for her music lessons out of her earnings. She fought her own way toward the intellectual centers of the world. She wrung from fortune the one profit which adversity sometimes leaves with strong natures—the power to conquer." The story of Fremstad's early life as described by Cather in "Three American Singers" resembles only slightly Thea's life in Moonstone and Chicago, but Thea's spirit resembles Fremstad's. Despite Cather's later denials that the novel had any relation to Fremstad's life and career, Fremstad's ascent as the greatest Wagnerian soprano of her

²"Three American Singers: Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, Olive Fremstad," *McClure's Magazine*, December 1913, pp. 33–48. Accessible through the Willa Cather Archive <cather.unl.edu>.

age clearly inspired the latter sections of *The Song of the Lark*.

In 1931, Cather reflected on *The Song of the Lark* and critical responses to it. She recalled British publisher William Heinemann's refusal to publish an edition because "he thought . . . I had taken the wrong road, and that the full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody, was not natural to me and was not the one in which I would ever take satisfaction."³ Indeed, at nearly 150,000 words and 490 pages, the novel was nearly twice as long as *O Pioneers!* and twenty thousand words longer than her second-longest novel, *One of Ours* (1922). In 1915, an anonymous review in the *New Republic*, probably by Randolph Bourne, one of the most sensitive and sympathetic readers of Cather in the teens, similarly criticized the novel's excess, as well as its bifurcation. Contrasting the earlier sections of the novel with the latter, the critic intuited the autobiographical origins of Thea's youth and the external origins of her professional career: "Miss Cather would perhaps be shocked to know how sharp were the contrasts between those parts of her book which are built out of her own experience and those which are imagined. Her defects are almost wholly those of unassimilated experience. The musical life of this opera singer who has so fascinated her she has admired, but she has not made it imaginatively her own. She has contented herself with the fascination and has not grasped the difficulty of reading herself into this other life and making it so much her that the actual and the imagined are no longer separable."⁴ In 1932, in a new preface to the novel, Cather echoed (perhaps deliberately) the judgments of this review. "The chief fault of the book is that it describes a descending curve," she wrote; "the life of a successful artist in the full tide of achievement is not so interesting as the life of a talented young girl 'fighting her way.'" When she revised *The Song of the Lark* in 1937 for a

³"My First Novels [There Were Two]", p. 96.

⁴"Diminuendo," in *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 71.

collected edition of her novels, she cut nearly seven thousand words, most of them in the final two sections and the epilogue (this Signet Classics edition presents the longer 1915 text).

These judgments have become critical truisms, but they also evidence a discomfort with Thea's singing as a career, with art conducted aggressively as a business. For late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century critics, the most compelling section of the novel has been the Panther Canyon section. Although the section concludes with Fred Ottenberg enjoying the canyon with Thea, for months, she spends her days alone in the canyon, climbing its walls, bathing in its streams, and lying inside the cliff dwellers' houses in a state of semiconsciousness, activities that Cather describes in lush and sensuous language. Contemplating the pottery shards that testify to the artistic sensibility of the Indian women who lived in the canyon a thousand years before, Thea comes to see herself as part of a female artistic lineage in which creativity is located in the female body: "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. . . . 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." For many critics, Thea's epiphany is a powerful corrective to a masculinist aesthetic tradition, which aligns creativity with maleness and transcendence (a tradition which Cather herself, as a young journalist reviewing books and performances, loudly proclaimed). Others have pointed to the problematic nature of Thea's imaginative and physical appropriation of the artifacts of native culture, a dynamic that recurs in the story of Tom Outland in *The Professor's House* (1925)—Thea conveniently claims the absent cliff dwellers as her forebears while ignoring their living descendants nearby and the long history of conflict between European and Native Americans in the Southwest.

Both critical approaches to the novel trouble the notion that art and the artist are purely transcendent. On the one hand, Thea's art is grounded in the body, and

on the other hand, it depends upon Thea's appropriation of native culture and artifacts. However, such an intense focus on Thea in the canyon and on the supposedly more autobiographical portion of the novel has left Thea's professional career more often apologized for than analyzed. Cather expressed regret for making a great artist "somewhat dry and preoccupied. Her human life is made up of exacting engagements and dull business detail,"⁵ but this statement of explanation and apology is telling. Is the life of the artist a succession of epiphanies, of moments of transcendence, such as take place in Panther Canyon? Or is it a life of "engagements and dull business detail"? Can the two ultimately be separated, or is the artist who hopes to have an audience necessarily entangled in the messy, quotidian details of the market?

Business and finance are never entirely absent from the novel or the life of its heroine. Thea's parents have limited means to support their large brood of children, and Thea begins earning her own way at age fourteen by teaching piano. In Chicago, she first supports herself as a church vocal soloist, and after she starts training as a singer, she works as her teacher's piano accompanist. Despite this grounding in economic realities, Cather oddly detaches Thea's early life from larger economic forces by placing Moonstone in the midst of desert sand hills. Although the town of Moonstone resembles the town of Red Cloud, Moonstone lacks Red Cloud's economic reason for being. Red Cloud, a town of nearly two thousand people during Cather's childhood, existed to serve the great agricultural enterprise taking root as the prairies were plowed up. In her other fictional representations of Red Cloud, this bottom line is always visible. At the beginning of *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson has come in from the farm for provisions in Hanover, and we first see her as she is struggling down the street in a winter storm. In *My Antonia* (1918), when Jim Burden's family moves from their farm into Black Hawk, their country neighbors use their barn when they come in to town to shop or to bring their crops to market. In

⁵*The Song of the Lark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), p. viii.

One of Ours, we first meet Claude Wheeler as he is anticipating going into Frankfort to see the circus, and his older brother, Bayliss, has established himself as a farm-implements dealer in town. Moonstone, however, is surrounded by "gleaming" white sand hills that blow with the wind and change color with the changing light of the sun and the moon. When Dr. Archie, Thea's friend and the town physician, asks her, "Why are we in Moonstone?", the question resonates far beyond the conversation. Why are hundreds of people living in a town in the midst of gleaming white sand hills with no agriculture or other economic enterprise visible?

The answer would seem to be that it suited Cather's artistic purposes to have her budding artist living in a strange and magically isolated community—despite the railroad that connects them to other towns, cities, and states, they might as well be living on the moon. Cather's child of the moon is ultimately, however, a woman of the world, where art is conducted as a business. In the sections entitled "Doctor Archie's Venture" and "Kronborg," we observe Thea primarily through the eyes of her male patrons or, as they call themselves, her "backers." The language of finance and investment permeates the thoughts and speech of both Dr. Archie and Fred Ottenberg (the son of a wealthy beer baron who befriended Thea in Chicago). Called to New York to lend Thea money so she can leave for Germany, Dr. Archie, whose mining stocks have made him a wealthy man, thinks that Thea's prospects are "more interesting than mines and making your daily bread." However, his next thought turns Thea into an investment prospect, just like his mines: "It's worth paying out to be in on it,—for a fellow like me. And when it's Thea—Oh, I back her!" Fred includes himself in Thea's company of investors, even if she will not accept a loan from him. He recites the names of Thea's other male friends and teachers from Moonstone and Chicago: "'Wunsch and Dr. Archie, and Ray, and I,—he told them on his fingers,—'your whistling posts! You haven't done so badly. We've backed you as we could.'" Contemplating Thea's increased self-possession and physical allure in the wake

of her affair with him, he thinks of this change as "his 'created value.'" Indeed, even Thea's nonproductive months alone in Panther Canyon are entangled in Fred's finances. The canyon is part of a ranch owned by his father, so proceeds from the family beer empire underwrite her artistic awakening.

Ten years later, Dr. Archie tells Fred that Thea's letters to him are "about her engagements and contracts," and although he claims to know "so little about [the music] business," he is one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Colorado, and it makes perfect sense that Thea would report to her business-minded "investor" about the business of the arts. Although much of "Kronborg" consists of men talking *about* her, when Thea talks, she talks contracts. "I'm holding out for a big contract: forty performances," she tells Archie and Ottenberg. Looking forward to the imminent decline of an older diva, she explains, "It's going to be one of those between seasons; the old singers are too old, and the new ones are too new. They might as well risk me as anybody. So I want good terms. The next five or six years are going to be my best." Thea will have to live as a diva for the rest of her life on the proceeds of her best years, so she is out for as much as she can get. In the epilogue, told from the perspective of Thea's aged aunt Tillie back in Moonstone, Thea has not quite yet declined from her artistic peak. Tillie glories in repeating to Thea's old friends and enemies her rate of pay, "a thousand dollars a night." This is one aspect of her novel that Cather highlighted to Houghton Mifflin when discussing marketing strategies; she suggested advertising to target students at women's colleges because Thea's aggressive careerism would appeal to them.

To return to Cather and her own artistic career, perhaps we should recognize something of Cather in "Kronborg," as well as in the earlier sections of the novel. Cather, like Thea, had a wealthy patron, Isabelle McClung, a woman often described in more transcendent terms as Cather's "muse." During her years as a journalist and high school teacher in Pittsburgh, Cather lived in the McClung household, and after she spent the

summer of 1912 in Nebraska, she stayed in Pittsburgh for several months to begin writing *O Pioneers!* Biographers and literary critics (partially at Cather's suggestion) have characterized Cather as arriving in Arizona a harried magazine editor and leaving a nascent great novelist, as if her identity as a great creative artist was entirely separate from the more business-oriented work of editing magazines. Her continued association with *McClure's* was essential to her writing of *The Song of the Lark*, however—no "Three American Singers," no Thea Kronborg—and in any event, Cather had not fully detached herself from the editorial side of *McClure's*. After leaving Pittsburgh and arriving back in New York City in 1912, she moved into a new apartment in Greenwich Village with Edith Lewis, who was an editor at *McClure's* until early 1915 (and who may thus have served as Cather's editor for "Three American Singers"). After three years at *Every Week* magazine, Lewis spent the rest of her working life in advertising and continued to share a home with Cather. For the remainder of her career as a novelist, Cather, like the heroine of *The Song of the Lark*, remained vitally engaged with the business of art.

—Melissa Homestead