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# Willa Cather and Thea Kronborg: Two Stories of an Artist's Development

*Claudia Svoboda*

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“Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose.”

— *Oscar Wilde*

Critical and biographical literature dealing with the life and art of Willa Cather often notes *The Song of the Lark* as “the most autobiographical fiction she ever wrote” (Woodress 266). Cather scholars and biographers also seem to agree that particularly the early sequences of the novel have a firm basis in the author’s own Red Cloud, Nebraska childhood. At first glance, there do indeed appear to be striking similarities, most notably between young Thea Kronborg’s friends and individuals who figured prominently in Cather’s early life. Under more careful scrutiny, however, there arise inconsistencies between Cather’s background and Thea’s that widen the gap between life and fiction. Although these cracks in the autobiographical veneer may initially appear negligible, they do, in the final analysis, definitely distinguish the author from her fictitious double.

One immediately obvious discrepancy between the childhoods of Cather and Thea lies in their respective ethnic backgrounds. Thea Kronborg is of solidly Swedish descent, and this heritage is very much a part of her every-day family life. The dominant language in the Kronborg household is Swedish, and the stories the children are told involve adventures of their Scandinavian ancestors. Willa Cather, on the other hand, came from a Southern patrician background. The tales that she heard in early childhood—such as the escapades of her maternal grandmother, who once helped a slave girl escape to the North—were entirely American (Woodress 19-27). Cather lived the first nine years of her life in a Virginia plantation house, while Thea Kronborg—although her story begins at precisely

the time that the Cathers moved to Nebraska—was apparently born in the Southwest.

Although her family definitely fits the standard definition of “pioneers” because of their trek from the east coast to frontier country, Willa Cather’s pioneer ideal involves an additional, foreign element. This is evident in two of her most highly acclaimed novels—*O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*—in which the central characters are foreigners, most notably Bohemians (Beranger 54).

While Willa Cather was growing up, several of the homesteads surrounding Red Cloud were farmed by Bohemians, and the young girl spent many an afternoon listening to these people tell of their homes in the old country. Perhaps the reason she was so impressed by these immigrants was that their frontier experience was compounded by the necessary adjustment to a completely new culture. They were, in many ways, facing two “frontiers”—new land and a new country—and it is understandable that they would have represented to Cather the ultimate in pioneer spirit. In all likelihood Cather may have given Thea Kronborg a Bohemian ancestry as well, had the character not been based on the Wagnerian soprano Olive Fremstad, a Swede who grew up in Minnesota (Beranger 55). By combining Fremstad’s ethnic background with images from her own more traditionally American upbringing, Cather was able to sufficiently “embellish” Thea’s childhood to make it fit her pioneer ideal.

A comparison of the personalities of Mrs. Kronborg and Virginia Boak Cather, Willa’s mother, brings to light another fundamental difference between fact and fiction. Mrs. Kronborg is wonderfully characterized as a pillar of strength and the head of her family. She personifies the warm, earthy, yet unbending spirit so

typical of Cather’s vision of pioneer spirit. Virginia Cather, in

Svoboda '89: Willa Cather and Thea Kronborg: Two Stories of an Artist's Development contrast, seems to have had traits much more characteristic of Thea's Aunt Tillie. By all descriptions a very proud woman, Mrs. Cather possessed a class-consciousness that bespoke her genteel Southern upbringing. She took great interest in fashion and commanded a considerable amount of attention by always dressing in the latest styles—an unheard-of luxury in a frontier community (Bennett 29-32). The very thought of Mrs. Kronborg as a fashion-conscious society matron seems incongruous; it detracts from her "earth mother" image. Although there is no evidence of a particularly close mother-daughter relationship in either case, Mrs. Kronborg—at least as she is represented by Cather—seems to be a greater force in her daughter's life than Mrs. Cather was in young Willa's. It is she who ensures that Thea has the parlor to herself so that she may practice the piano, and, realizing that her daughter has an unusual talent, encourages Thea to pursue her music.

Cather's relationships with her siblings, on the other hand, appear to have been closer than Thea's with hers. Thea is very much attached to her youngest brother, Thor, but she has little to say to her other brothers and sisters, particularly Anna. Her chronological placement in the family also differs from Cather's: Thea is the second-youngest Kronborg, whereas Willa was the oldest of the seven Cather children. While she was growing up, Cather seems to have been extremely close to her two oldest brothers; "they were a triumvirate," as one biographer notes. Cather's first book was dedicated to them, and she recalled in the inscription how they "lay and planned at moonrise,/On an island in a western river,/Of the conquest of the world together" (qtd. in Robinson 79). She also adored her youngest brother and sister, but apparently had an adversarial relationship with her middle sister, Jessie, the "Anna" of

the Cather clan (Woodress 25). Overall, however, the Cather children were a much more closely-knit group than the young Kronborgs; perhaps Thea's comparative alienation from her siblings is a device to set her apart and make her appear "different" from the start.

For her part, Willa Cather certainly needed no help in distinguishing herself from the crowd. While Thea shows no outward signs of nonconformity—it would perhaps be more accurate to describe her as a "loner" rather than a nonconformist—Cather went out of her way to set herself apart in this respect. As one biographer notes,

She developed a wide streak of nonconformity. Before she was thirteen she had cut her hair shorter than most boys and was signing her name William Cather, Jr., or Wm. Cather, M.D. She expressed a vast contempt for skirts and dresses, wore boys' clothes, a derby, and carried a cane. (Woodress 55)

In a late nineteenth-century small town environment, this behavior would certainly have won her considerable attention. Years after Willa Cather had left Red Cloud, those who remembered her recalled that her "unorthodox dress and manner brought her. . . .notoriety and made her the subject of much talk around town" (O'Brien 97).

Cather's possible reasons for undergoing this metamorphosis to "William"—a role she did not relinquish until her third year in college—have puzzled and intrigued her biographers over the

Svoboda '89: Willa Cather and Thea Kronborg: Two Stories of an Artist's Development. The shadows of her life and is openly discussed as a contributing factor to her art, the "William" years begin to make more sense. The most obvious explanation is that by assuming a masculine role, Cather was able to construct an effective barrier against the confining Victorian platitudes of femininity that she was expected to observe. By alienating herself at so young an age from the "female norm," Cather may have precluded her chances of ever fully identifying with her prescribed gender role.

This analysis, although it may be valid to some extent, is overly simplistic, however. Sharon O'Brien, author of the most recent (and most open in terms of exploring Cather's lesbianism) Cather biography, argues that "William resulted from a complex interplay of social and psychological factors" (O'Brien 97). The Victorian society in which both Thea and Cather were raised firmly dictated how a lady should or (more importantly) should *not* behave. Unfortunately for the budding artists, the world of the Victorian woman—which promised among its more colorful activities membership in worthy organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union—was not entirely suited to their more passionate natures. The prospect of one day becoming a respectable Red Cloud matron no doubt stirred in young Willa the liveliest apprehension, "and so," writes O'Brien, "the adolescent girl became William to avoid becoming. . . a conventionally assigned identity" (O'Brien 110). Willa Cather herself may have interpreted this adolescent struggle with her identity as an early indication that her life was not destined to take the route of other Red Cloud girls'; she later wrote to a friend that she felt "Novelists, opera singers, even doctors have in common the unique and marvelous experience of entering into the very skin of another human being. What can compare with it?" (qtd.



in O'Brien 92). The evolution of "William" may therefore have marked the beginning of Willa Cather's awareness of herself as an artist; at this point she realized that she was "different." It is interesting to note that although Thea Kronborg shows no obvious signs of such an awakening during her adolescent years, it is during this time that she first experiences feelings of exhilaration from a power she knows to be singularly hers.

Willa Cather's father, Charles Cather, may have considerably influenced his daughter's early preference for a male identity as well. A quiet, well-read man with a gently and somewhat effeminate manner, Mr. Cather was by all descriptions the antithesis of the full-blooded American frontiersman (O'Brien 14-16). Young Willa was extremely close to her father, and she may have felt that since he did not fit the standard male image, she could somehow be like him by not conforming to her own expected role. At first glance, Peter Kronborg, Thea's father, appears to share many of Mr. Cather's character traits: he, too, is soft-spoken and altogether atypical of the traditional picture of the western settler. Although they may share certain surface characteristics, the personalities of these two men differ considerably in the final analysis. The quiet manner that may be attributed to intellectual activity in Charles Cather appears as nervous timidity in Peter Kronborg. In general Mr. Kronborg is characterized as likeable but somewhat foolish and more than a little dull, and he certainly does not enjoy an exceptionally close relationship with Thea. Willa Cather seems to have channeled most of her father's positive aspects into the character of Dr. Archie and left just the shell for Mr. Kronborg. Charles Cather, albeit inadvertently, appears to have influenced his daughter a great deal: it was he who gave her an early passion for books. Peter Kronborg, on the other

Svoboda '89: Willa Cather and Thea Kronborg: Two Stories of an Artist's Development, does very little—if anything—to fuel Thea's artistic ambitions.

Willa Cather's early ambitions differed quite drastically from Thea's. Music is a dominant force in Thea's life; the piano seems to be her constant companion from earliest childhood on. Although during the Moonstone years she could never dream how far—and in which direction—her art would take her, Thea nevertheless has an inkling that the intangible "possession" whose presence she feels so strongly is in some way related to music. Cather, in contrast, did not strive from the cradle to become a writer; there exists no evidence (barring a voracious appetite for books) that she even fleetingly considered a literary career while she was growing up. She aspired, rather, to become a surgeon, certainly an unusual ambition for a young girl growing up in the Nebraska of the 1880's and 90's, and one unlikely to increase her popularity in conservative Red Cloud (Bennett 109). An excerpt from a mid-1880's Red Cloud newspaper article on the proper behavior of young ladies attests to the critical attitude of Cather's townspeople: "Why, what man in his right mind would ever marry a woman doctor?" grumbled the *Webster County Argus* (qtd. in O'Brien 98-99).

Cather's idol and mentor during these rebellious years was a certain Dr. McKeeby, the Cather family physician and presumably the primary inspiration for Dr. Archie in *The Song of the Lark*. Dr. McKeeby had treated ten-year-old Willa during her bout with what is now thought to have been childhood polio, just as Dr. Archie takes care of Thea when she is ill with pneumonia (Bennett 111-114). Although in both cases these relationships have considerable impact on the young girls' development, they differ in the specific nature of their influence. Dr. Archie plays a key role in Thea's education; he opens the world of literature to her. It is Archie who introduces

Thea to the books that ultimately shape the dreams and ideals that she carries with her as an integral part of her Moonstone legacy—the very ideals, perhaps, that feed the “passion” recognized by Harsanyi as the force responsible for the magic in her artistry. Willa Cather’s familiarity with literature was, in contrast, cultivated at a much earlier age and under the guidance of her father. Residents of Red Cloud later recalled young Willa perched on the counter of the town’s general store, spouting passages from English literature with amazing accuracy under the watchful eye of Mr. Cather (Woodress 53). Her interest in Dr. McKeeby was not due to any remarkable knowledge he may have had of the classics; she was far more interested in his profession, for he was her link to the world of medicine. McKeeby often allowed her to accompany him on calls, and these experiences left interesting impressions on her: the teenage Willa Cather’s idea of perfect bliss was, as she wrote in a friend’s album, “slicing toads and amputating limbs.” Her relish for the latter of these delightful procedures undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that McKeeby once allowed her to administer chloroform while he performed such an operation on a young boy (Bennett 112-114). While Thea Kronborg may have had some tomboyish tendencies, it would be difficult to imagine her deriving any degree of pleasure from the mutilation of bodies, amphibian or human. She is far too sensitive to beauty—as evidenced by her love of nature—to be capable of Cather’s rather brutal scientific curiosity.

These differences in childhood ambitions may also represent a subtle demarcation between Thea’s art and that of Cather. Writing is perhaps one of the more “scientific” art forms; it requires sharp powers of observation and logical interpretation. It naturally seeks

to evoke certain emotions, but it usually does so through fairly direct

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presentation of material; the creation of a spiritual effect is ultimately the task of the reader. Music, on the other hand, traditionally plays a role as the voice of the soul. Although its composition may be to a degree scientific, its performance demands an understanding of the far more esoteric realm of human feelings. Thea's art calls upon her to grasp something as mechanical as a written note and transform it, through her voice, into a thrill of emotion. Conversely, Cather's writing required her to carefully observe life, dissect it as neatly as she did her toads, and then present it to her readers for digestion. Her experiences with Dr. McKeeby were surely beneficial to this end, as was her position as somewhat of the village eccentric. She was able to observe people and situations from unusual perspectives, and these impressions invariably resurfaced in her writing.

Thea's artistic "training"—if the *Moonstone* years may be considered as such—requires a greater degree of fine-tuning. She, too, has the child's perspective of a small rural community, but she has access to a world notably absent in Cather's *Red Cloud*: the Mexican settlement. Although the character of Spanish Johnny is supposedly based on a Mexican man who came to Red Cloud at regular intervals, there was no significant Spanish population in the community (Woodress 267). Most of the characters in *The Song of the Lark* who are responsible for shaping Thea as a person and as an artist—Archie, Wunsch, the Kohlers, and even Lily Fisher—may be directly traced to one or another Red Cloud citizen. The Mexicans and their music, however, are Thea's own; through them she experiences natural, uninhibited artistic expression, free from the restrictions of conventional theory. . . .they expose her, in short, to the natural passion of art.

Willa Cather had no Mexican community to explore as she was growing up. Her nearest equivalent to Thea's experiences in this regard was her fascination with the immigrant farm people living around Red Cloud. In a 1921 interview, when asked what triggered her desire to become a writer, she commented:

I grew fond of some of the immigrants, particularly the old women, who used to tell me of their home country. I used to think them underrated, and wanted to explain them to their neighbors. Their stories used to go round and round in my head at night. This was. . . the initial impulse. I didn't know any writing people. I had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people rather than ambition. (Bohlke 20)

These people first introduced Cather to ideals that were to surface again and again in her writing. They inspired her in a manner very similar to the Mexicans' effect on Thea, for their values were as natural and unaffected as Spanish Johnny's music.

One difference between Cather's life and Thea's that may be overemphasized by many Cather biographers is the fact that Moonstone is located not in Nebraska but in southwestern Colorado. This variation in geography is not important as far as the towns themselves are concerned; for all practical purposes, Moonstone and Red Cloud share a single civic and social topography. One reason that Cather may have changed Moonstone's location is the importance of the Mexican community—a sizeable Hispanic quarter would seem a

Svoboda '89: Willa Cather and Thea Kronborg: Two Stories of an Artist's Development hailed from a settlement in Colorado, giving her the idea to place Thea's home town in that state. Another, even more probable explanation stems from an experience Cather had in 1912, three years before *The Song of the Lark* was published. In the late summer of that year, she and one of her brothers travelled extensively in the Southwest, and the last stop on their itinerary was a site of ancient cave dwellings called Walnut Canyon (Woodress 9-10). Cather was apparently deeply moved by the beauty of this dead city, and it reappears in what is perhaps one of the most important sequences in Thea Kronborg's story—the Panther Canyon chapters that mark her first real awakening as an artist. Cather's fascination with the Southwest is also mirrored in Thea's love of the land surrounding Moonstone; she has a respect and admiration for the beauty of the sand hills and the desert that is very similar to Willa Cather's feelings toward the immigrants.

In critical analyses, *The Song of the Lark* is, fittingly enough, often referred to as a *Künstlerroman*—a novel tracing an artist's development. Since this is a subject with which Cather could strongly identify, the urge to make the book largely autobiographical was no doubt great. In the course of writing the novel, however, Cather discovered that molding her life to fit that of an opera singer was no simple task; artists of different genres must necessarily follow different patterns of development. In an unfinished essay published after her death, she wrote:

Nobody can paint the sun, or sunlight. He can only paint the tricks that shadows play with it or what it does to forms. He cannot even paint those relations of light and shade—he can only paint some emotion they give him,

some man-made arrangement of them that happens  
to give him personal delight. . . .that make one nerve  
in him thrill and tremble. (Cather 123)

Both Willa Cather and Thea Kronborg are such "painters," and although their paints and brushes may be the same, their methods of applying them to the canvas differ considerably. Each chooses to express herself through a different medium, and it is from this fact that the need for certain discrepancies in their respective backgrounds arises.

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