1991

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

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EDITORS...

...and "To my own artistic sensibility, abundant youthful strength and active." This year's UR, in last two years, is our "joyful" end of spotlighting the writers and their writing, joint editors we have been supported by a gifted UR and an encouraging Dean to Dr. Bray for his needed important support - and to this project completed. the student body who have pursuance of intellectual achievement possible - To you this book is dedicated.

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

Claudia Svoboda

Published by Digital Commons @ IWU, 1991
"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 contrast, seems to have had a close bond with her mother as well as her other brothers and sisters. She possessed a class-conscious upbringing. She took great interest in a considerable amount of attention styles—an unheard-of luxury in her time (32). The very thought of Mrs. Kronborg as a society matron seems incongruous with the “mother” image. Although the mother-daughter relationship, as she is represented by Cather, seems to be a far different daughter’s life than Mrs. Cather’s, it ensures that Thea has the presence and a skill for the piano, and, realizing that she encourages Thea to pursue her musical interests.

Cather’s relationship with her mother appear to have been closer than her mother-daughter’s, but not as close as the bond she possessed with her other brothers and sisters. Perhaps placement in the family also plays a role. As the second-youngest Kronborg among the seven Cather children, Wilda was the ideal “triumvirate,” as one biographer put it, dedicated to them, and she planned and prepared for moonrise. She adored her youngest brother, and the adversarial relationship with her youngest son led her to adopt a more serious and more responsible role in her family.
Nebraska—was apparently born apparently born.

...fits the standard definition of fits the standard definition of the east coast to frontier the east coast to frontier involves an additional, foreign involves an additional, foreign most highly acclaimed most highly acclaimed in which the central characters in which the central characters as (Beranger 54).

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contrast, seems to have had traits much more characteristic of Thea’s contrast, seems to have had traits much more characteristic of Thea’s Aunt Tillie. By all descriptions a very proud woman, Mrs. Cather Aunt Tillie. By all descriptions a very proud woman, Mrs. Cather possessed a class-consciousness that bespoke her genteel Southern 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 decades. Now that Willa Cather's lesbianism has emerged from the shadows of her life and is open to her art, the "William" year's obvious explanation is that by being able to construct an effective Victorian platitude of femininity, Cather may have precluded her prescribed gender roles. This analysis, although overly simplistic, however. Some recent (and most open in terms of Cather biography, argues that the interplay of social and psychological factors in Victorian society in which be dictated how a lady should comport herself. Unfortunately for the budding woman—which promised anembership in worthy organizations like the Temperance Union—was not natures. The prospect of one matron no doubt stirred in her "and so," writes O'Brien, "the avoid becoming...a convert" (110). Willa Cather herself told a friend that she felt "Now in common the unique and r very skin of another human..."
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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 mem-

bership 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 routine 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.

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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.

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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 inter-
esting 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 relation-
ship 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
hand, does very little—if at all.

Willa Cather's early musical inclinations had another influence
Thea's. Music is a dominant factor in her life during the Moonstone years,
inkling that the intangible talents that strongly is in some way related
to strive from the cradle to be (barring a voracious appetite for
considered a literary career; rather, to become a surgeon.
young girl growing up in today's one unlikely to increase her
(Bennett 109). An excerpt from article on the proper behav-
attitude of Cather's townspeople would ever marry a woman
Argus (qtd. in O'Brien 98-99).

Cather's idol and mentor in certain Dr. McKeen, the O'Brien's
the primary inspiration for McKeeby, who had treated ten-
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Although in both cases the Dr. Archie seems to have
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} have channeled most of her ter of Dr. Archie and left just ther, albeit inadvertently, er a great deal: it was he who ter Kronborg, on the other

Willa’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

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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 presentation of material; the challenge is the task of the reader. Music, on the other hand, has the role as the voice of the soul. A degree scientific, its performance is far more esoteric realm of human to grasp something as mechanical as was her position as somehow able to observe people and situations, then these impressions invariably

Thea's artistic "training" considered as such—requires, too, has the child's perspective, has access to a world notably a Mexican settlement. Although supposedly based on a Mexi.

regular intervals, there was a community (Woodress 267). Lark who are responsible for artist—Archie, Wunsch, the and their music, however, an

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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 bit out of place in Nebraska. Perhaps the real “Spanish Johnny” hailed from a settlement in Colorado. Thea’s home town in that state, explanation stems from an experience Thea had many years before The Song of the Lark was set. During her first journey that year, she and one of her companions, a Mexican immigrant, traveled through the Southwest, and the last stop of that year, she and one of her companions, a Mexican immigrant, stopped at a cave dwellings called Walnut Canyon. This experience apparently deeply moved her, and it reappears in what is perhaps Thea Kronborg’s story—the first real awakening as an artist in the Southwest is also mirrored in Moonstone; she has a respect for and a love of the sand hills and the desert that grows toward the immigrants.

In critical analyses, Thea Kronborg is often referred to as a Künstlerroman protagonist. Since this is a suitable description of the urge to make the world’s art, and doubt great. In the course of discovering that molding her own work, she often referred to it in a Künstlerroman protagonist. Since this is a suitable description of the urge to make the world’s art, she discovered that molding her work was a simple task; artists of different ages have different patterns of development. After her death, she wrote:

Nobody can paint the tricks that shade forms. He cannot even make shade—he can only

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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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