Willa Cather’s Bildungsroman: The Paradox of the Song of the Lark

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Willa Cather's Bildungsroman:
The Paradox of *The Song of the Lark*

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Abstract

From the time Willa Cather discovered her passion for writing and, up until the completion of her third novel, *The Song of the Lark*, the novelist was concerned with the idea of what a successful artist was. She embarked on this self-discovery both in practice and in fiction, creating her own artists in her early fiction and living vicariously through them. She believed her creative skill was not a God-given talent that was freely bequeathed, but instead required an investment and a passion that she needed to perfect. Cather’s attempt to reconcile her conflict of perfecting art can be traced to an investigation of her early writings, including her short stories and early novels, which contain autobiographical features. This, in turn, reveals her evolution as a writer.

Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* marks an important turning point for the author in her advancement as a novelist. As with her publication of *Alexander’s Bridge*, Cather’s early writing was in imitation of Henry James, but later found her voice in *O Pioneers!* in the style of minimalist writing. *The Song of the Lark* was her most personal and autobiographical novel, but also resulted to be her longest. Despite the voice she had acquired in *O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark* resembled maximalism rather than minimalism, placing the novel in a paradox: a work that told the achievement of an artist that, unfortunately, did not result in masterful taste. However, in her next novel, *My Ántonia*, she corrected course with her minimalist style to produce one of her most masterful works of prairie life, concluding the search and bringing peace to the topic of artist for Cather.
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Chapter I

Introduction

“Art, it seems to me, should simplify. That, indeed is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process; finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole—so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader’s consciousness as much as if it were the type on the page.” (Willa Cather “On the Art of Fiction” 939)

From the time Willa Cather discovered her passion for writing and, up until the completion of her third novel, *The Song of the Lark*, the novelist was concerned with the idea of what a successful artist was. She embarked on this self-discovery both in practice and in fiction, creating her own artists in her early fiction and living vicariously through them. She believed her creative skill was not a God-given talent that was freely bequeathed, but instead required an investment and a passion that she needed to perfect.

Cather’s fascination with the artist emerged in her fiction. Her attempt to reconcile her conflict of perfecting art can be traced to an investigation of her early writings, including her short stories and early novels, which contain autobiographical features. This, in turn, reveals her evolution as a writer.

When Cather turned to female writers of her time she found their passion “emotional in the extreme, self-centered, self-absorbed, centrifugal” (*The World and the Parish*, vol. 1 146). The novelist turned to male writers as her role models and developed her earlier style in accordance to theirs—her most notable muse being Henry James. Her admiration for Henry James is well documented. When she was a reviewer in Pittsburgh during the 1890s, she examined both *The Other
House (1896) and In the Cage (1989) with high praise. She viewed James as “a great master” (The World and the Parish, vol. 1 275) and found his short stories from The Lesson of the Master and Terminations as stories one “may find out something of what it means to be really an artist. The framework is perfect and the polish is absolutely without flaw” (275). Cather had such strong admiration for James’s work that a lot of Jamesian imitation is found in her own book of short stories, The Troll Garden (1905). This collection is important to Cather’s artistry, as the majority of stories included are a discovery of the artist and Cather’s own failures as artist. In an interview, Cather admits that after graduating from The University of Nebraska she “wanted to write after the best style of Henry James—the foremost mind that ever applied itself to literature in America. I was trying to work in a sophisticated medium and write about highly developed people whom I knew only superficially” (Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters 37). After the publication of The Troll Garden, a colleague of hers sent a copy to Henry James to read. The author responded negatively to reading any novel by “young American females” (The Selected Letters of Willa Cather 395). This information was relayed to Cather to which she responded in support of James’s critique, “a bracing moral stimulant” (O’Brien 309).

However much admiration she had for James, the author that caused the greatest influence on Cather’s writing career was Sarah Orne Jewett, one of the most prominent local colorists of the time. Jewett wrote about the everyday people of her native Maine seacoast. However, it took Cather’s first failed attempt at a novel, Alexander’s Bridge (1912), one of the most Jamesian works Cather produced, to bring her to her true artistic voice. While Alexander’s Bridge was
well-received by the public, Cather and Jewett immediately felt and recognized the writing style as imitative of Henry James and not her own.

While Cather was compiling and writing short stories, poetry, and eventually her novel, she held full-time positions. She worked at The Nebraska State Journal as columnist, and later as editor for Home Monthly and the Daily Leader. While not loving her jobs, her pragmatic self knew the value and importance of earning a living. She continued submitting short fiction to various magazines, including Cosmopolitan, under the pseudonym of Elizabeth L. Seymour, and concluded her journalistic career as editor at one of the most famous newspapers in New York City: McClure. These responsibilities demonstrate Cather’s determination, will and effort to pursue her craft, some of the important characteristics she valued in a successful artist. Before publishing Alexander’s Bridge, Cather was already beginning work on her next novel through short stories: “The Bohemian Girl” and “Alexandra.” The first inspired her first successful novel, O Pioneers! (1913) and then “The White Mulberry Tree,” later becoming a chapter of O Pioneers! She does not analyze the artist and instead depicts the lives of the people of Nebraska, a place in the United States very few metropolitan readers had interest in.

The same year she published O Pioneers! Cather interviewed Olive Fremstad, a Swedish-born singer, who later became her inspiration for Thea Kronberg, the heroine of The Song of the Lark (1915), Cather’s most autobiographical work. Before beginning work on Song of the Lark, Cather promised McClure to ghostwrite his autobiography, which she did in between
publishing *O Pioneers!* and *Song of the Lark*, on top of writing additional articles at *McClure’s*.

*The Song of the Lark* ends Cather’s pursuit of the artistic voice. She never again writes about the artist and the artist’s self-discovery. Instead, the next novel she publishes is another local colorist novel on the people of Nebraska: *My Ántonia* (1916). The artist is left behind, so much so, that in her adapted short story compilation, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, she has cut some of the artist-subjected stories and replaced them with others not relating to the artistic dilemma. Why did Cather end the passionate subject of the artist’s development in *Song of the Lark*?

Cather’s writing career demonstrates the various modes of composition she needed to adapt to before she came to her true artistic voice. She had produced works as theater reviewer, editor, journalist, autobiographical ghostwriter, while also publishing works for magazines, journals and newspapers. Cather spent 22 years writing before publishing her first successful novel. This dedication to developing her own writing is exemplified in Thea’s resolve to become a recognized opera singer in *The Song of the Lark*.

If *Song of the Lark* was indeed Cather’s turning point in discovering her voice as an artist, one questions why she later described her book so harshly:

> When my third book, *The Song of the Lark*, came along, Heinemann turned it down ... because he thought in that book 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. ... At that time, I did not altogether agree with Mr. Heinemann ... One is always a little on the defensive about one’s last book. But when the next book, *My Ántonia*, came along, quite of itself and with no direction from me, it took the road of *O Pioneers!*, not the road of *The Song of the Lark*. Too much detail
is apt, like any other form of extravagance, to become slightly vulgar (emphasis added); and it quite destroys in a book a very satisfying element analogous to what painters call “composition.” (“My First Novels [There Were Two]” 965)

Contrary to *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, *The Song of the Lark*’s voice and method of writing has a “full-blooded method” which contains “[t]oo much detail ... becom[ing] slightly vulgar.” What the other two novels have is a minimalistic writing style, allowing Cather to employ the local colorist method, while inherently creating her sought-after artistic voice. Nevertheless, the importance of *The Song of the Lark* remains as it portrays Cather’s own journey as artist, a Bildungsroman demonstrating the qualities she believed necessary to succeed in her artistry, which in turn allowed Cather the necessary closure to find her true voice as novelist and artist. In the interest of exploring Cather’s view of the artist up until the creation of *The Song of the Lark*, I will analyze and investigate Cather’s early short stories centering upon the theme of artist, essays of her own fiction writing, biographical information regarding her childhood, college and early writing career as well as critical scholarly analysis on her early works.
Chapter II  
Minimalism:  
Definition and Its Place in Willa Cather’s Writing  

Minimalism is not just a physical result, but it is also an internal one: separating from the needs and wants of society and bringing about a personal discovery. In the case of Willa Cather it is a self-discovery of artistic expression. Cather did not believe metropolitan readers had any interest in reading about Nebraska and its people. After she wrote “The Bohemian Girl,” McClure’s son-in-law offered Cather $750 for the story. Cather was taken aback, and insisted on less for the piece, given McClure never paid her more than $500. “This unusual scene—a writer insisting that she be paid less than an editor proposed—reflects Cather’s amazement that sophisticated Easterners would appreciate fiction about Nebraska immigrants. ‘What did they see in it?’ she asked Sargeant” (O’Brien 399). Cather took this interest in the livings of the Divide to heart, stepped beyond her original perception about her readers and told her stories from back home: a biographically-inspired work. O’Brien adds: “By the time ‘The Bohemian Girl’ appeared in the August 1912 issue of McClure’s, however, Cather was a more self-assured writer” (399). For the purposes of this thesis, minimalistic writing is defined as writing which is inspired from an instinctual origin rather than one of imitation; its prose is composed through an art of simplification and editing; it allows a reader the freedom of interpreting the text at hand and hence, a release of
control from the author; lastly, it requires an objective view of events, particularly with Cather’s idolizing tendencies of her protagonists.

From early on, Cather was always a spontaneous thinker, writer, critic and commentator. She never feared to express herself, sometimes to her detriment, as was the case with her friend, Louise Pound. She had criticized her family in an article she wrote, and their relationship never regained its former glory. Cather also did not fear to criticize those of her own gender, gaining dislike from the feminist movement. When she wrote My Ántonia, the novel “came along, quite of itself and with no direction from me” (O’Brien 94). She found herself to be “controlled rather than controlling” the events of her creativity and art. When implementing an imitative approach to writing, Cather’s storyline became lost in the style and technique, which was oftentimes convoluted. The message of her stories often appeared forced as a result, given Cather was writing of topics she presumed readers would enjoy. Minimalistic writing takes shape, at least in origin, from one’s instinct. “All she is doing is coming into a room to tell you about some people she used to know and love … She doesn’t invent so much as rearrange her memories, and the memories come to her unconsciously, as though written in her mind” (Lee 20). The least of minimalism is imitation, an issue Cather struggled with most as she gained recognition as an author. As Carl says to Alexandra in O Pioneers!, “I’ve been away engraving other men’s pictures, and you’ve stayed at home and made your own” (116). O Pioneers! was Cather’s first novel that expressed her true voice as author. To have this scene between Carl and Alexandra at the end of the novel depicts Cather’s two creative voices: her old imitative Jamesian voice in the form of Carl, and her new genuine artistic voice as
Alexandra—a voice she embraced and discovered on her own. Even the essay that led her onto her path of authorship while in high school was a genuine piece of work that was her own. She wrote it without the slightest deterrent of pleasing readers or gaining recognition as an author. This is known to be true, given her true pursuit was to become a medical doctor and authorship was not on her radar. Her true intention was sparked from her own creativity and interest.

As she entered this road of self-origination and inner inspiration, she discovered the value and beauty of editing her work: “Art, it seems to me, should simplify” (“On the Art of Fiction” 939). Cather herself stated that her early prose was involved and “foamy-at-the-mouth” (Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters). She recognizes the need to pare down and edit her work, “the hardest thing for a young artist to do” (Acoccella 14). She recognized, described herself as “young,” as she lacked experience in authorship. She shares that “even then ... it was a crime to write like I did” (Hockett), referring specifically to her early prose. Just as one does not feel free to think in an overcrowded, cluttered space, “[t]he novel, for a long time, has been over-furnished” (“The Novel Démeublé” 834). Cather continues:

There is popular superstition that “realism” asserts itself 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. ... Is the story of a banker who is unfaithful to his wife and who ruins himself by speculation in trying to gratify the caprices of his mistress, at all reinforced by the masterly exposition of banking, our whole system of credits, the methods of the Stock Exchange? Of course, if the story is thin, these things do reinforce it in a sense,—any amount of red meat thrown into the scale to make the beam dip. But are the banking system and the Stock Exchange worth being written about at all? Have such things any proper place in imaginative art? (834)
Cather wrote during a time where the stream of consciousness style of composition was becoming well-received with novelist Virginia Woolf, a design of writing created in continuous flow, uninterrupted by syntax, editing or dialogue in the conventional sense. Cather values writing that does not distract the reader with unimportant elements, as she exemplifies with the banker in pursuit of a mistress. Knowing the complexity of the stock exchange and banking system is not critical in understanding the psychological love triangle in the story. Cather decrees journalism for that same reason: “The whole aim of that school of writing was novelty—never a very important thing in art. They gave us, altogether, poor standards—taught us to multiply our ideas instead of condense them” (“On the Art of Fiction” 939). She continued by stating that “the process was all the time one of simplifying, of sacrificing many conceptions good in themselves for one that was better and more universal.” Minimalist writing allows the reader to enjoy the situation at hand and, when relevant to the story, includes further furnishing surrounding the storyline.

In line with editing and paring down a piece of fiction to its bare necessities, minimalist writing allows for the use of “the thing not named” (“The Novel Démeublé” 837), one of Cather’s more famous lines that has been analyzed by critics. In her essay, she explains that it is “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.” Here Cather is, again, at a juxtaposition where she wants readers to hear something that cannot be heard. What Cather is referring to is entrusting to readers the freedom
to interpret emotions, situations and events at their own discretion. It gives readers the use of their imagination, critical thinking skills, and the chance to pick up and reread the same novel multiple times. This allowed freedom gives readers a different interpretation and understanding of the novel at every read of the same novel:

How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiteration concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended; leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little—for the nursery tale, no less than the tragedy, is killed by tasteless amplitude. The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls. (837)

Cather here compares the classic Greek plays’ layout and furnishing to that of minimalist writing: readers and audience members alike are able to understand and interpret a scene very differently depending on their state of mind, their past knowledge, and their past experience because of the bare stage and broad interpretation that can come from it. “[F]inding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole—so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader’s consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page” (“On the Art of Fiction” 939). Cather sought out a balance, one that would provide the reader with as little detail to explore the scene on their own terms without losing interest.

Cather herself was plagued by her controlling demeanor. Even when it came to the media and photographers, she ensured she was in control of what they could post, photograph, how she would dress, and what kind of persona she would subject on camera (Goldberg). Using a minimalist method of writing not only
extended the sense of self-insight to her readers but also to Cather herself. She needed to begin with letting go of what she, in the long run, would not be able to control anyway: her readers’ thoughts, ideas and opinions. Imitative writing lacks inner creativity, and results in a calculative production of every scene and piece to stay true to the expected imitative work. When she wrote *Alexander’s Bridge* everything was controlled and calculated given it was in imitation of Henry James’s style. When Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* she herself did not know how to feel about her journey into her Nebraska childhood, a place that caused her anxiety and suffocation:

> The West always paralyzes me a little. When I am away from it I remember only the tang on the tongue. But when I come back I always feel a little of the fright I felt when I was a child. I always feel afraid of losing something, and I don’t in the least know what it is. It’s real enough to make a tightness in my chest even now, and when I was little it was even stronger. ... I used always to be sure that I’d never get out, that I would die in a cornfield. Now I know I will get out again, but I still get attacks of fright. I wish I didn’t. (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 150)

Taking away major emotional attachments, possibly biased descriptions, and focusing on the elements that she wanted her readers to explore allowed her to come to terms with her life there. Readers had never explored the world of Nebraska, and this was Cather’s chance to allow them exposure to the Divide. By sharing with readers the life that she most treasured and haunted her, one that was true and her own, she was able to let go of some of that control over her readers’ critique about the West.

However, Cather’s chief failure in encapsulating the minimalist style is due to her trouble in idolizing artists as heroes:
there were a favored few to whom [Cather] gave herself completely. Her friendships were sudden and they were intense. Her concept of personal relationships was based on a strong and almost unreasoning sense of loyalty ... All her life she remained and wished to remain a hero-worshipper. ... She often idolized people she admired ... A consequence of her hero worship was that her interest in the creative people was extremely personal; she was more apt to be interested in the artist rather than in his art. (Randall 16)

Just as *The Song of the Lark* is a piece inspired by Cather’s own artistic journey, it is also inspired by the life of Swedish opera singer, Olive Fremstad, with whom Cather grew closely acquainted. The content of the novel was one redacting not only Cather’s own story, but the story of someone she admired. Knowing this person she greatly admired was likely to read her novel, removing chronological information, whether poignant or relevant to the story, was challenging for Cather.

She writes to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant on December 7, 1915:

I had the good luck to meet Fremstad in Lincoln just after she had finished the book [*The Song of the Lark*]—she had seen it in Brentanos on her way to the train before leaving N.Y. and had snatched it up. I felt rather as if I had received a decoration after our first interview about it. I had thought she might be furious, but she was flowing with excitement. She declared that even the latter part had the right “stimmung” and said “you might think that it’s all old stuff to me, and yet I know what she was up against and I wanted her to pull it off.” But she said a great many things, which you can hear if you wish; among them was the gratifying remark that it was the only book about an artist she’d ever read in which she felt there was “something doing in the artist.” (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 212)

The tone is evident: Cather sought to write for the pleasure of her heroes. In retrospect, Cather was so bothered by the length of the novel that she attempted to cut it by a tenth of its original in 1932. Despite this, the novel still read long, and Cather herself was still not satisfied with its result. She tells in the preface to the new edition of *The Song of the Lark*:
The chief fault of the book is that it describes a descending curve; 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,” as we say. Success is never so interesting as struggle—not even to the successful, not even to the most mercenary forms of ambition. ... The interesting and important fact that, in an artist of the type I chose, personal life becomes paler as the imaginative life becomes richer, does not, however, excuse my story for becoming paler. 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. ... I should have disregarded conventional design and stopped where my first conception stopped, telling the latter part of the story by suggestion merely. What I cared about, and still care about, was the girl's escape; the play of blind chance, the way in which commonplace occurrences fell together to liberate her from commonness. (xxxi-xxxii)

Cather emphasizes her purpose for writing the novel: to share the Bildungsroman of an artist, a Künstlerroman more specifically, of herself and that of Olive Fremstad. She wanted to share the struggle, perseverance and education of the artist, and how she could overcome those challenges just as she and Olive Fremstad had. The act of narrating stories of times inspired makes Cather the novelist she is known for today, *The Song of the Lark* is a piece that lacks minimalism and, hence, true artistry. Cather cannot separate herself from its content due to its strong biographical influence compared to her other more successful novels. Reaching the artistic success Cather had been in search of for so long had finally become a reality after the publication of *O Pioneers!* as was her need to express it, despite its artistic consequences.
Chapter III

Willa Cather’s Reflection:
Qualities and Characteristics of Successful Artistry
and their Biographical Resemblance

The qualities essential to successful artistry in Willa Cather’s writings have been a regular topic of study and discussion among critics. Frequently the topic of artist is found in Cather’s writing given she herself is in pursuit of becoming a novelist, an artist. Cather, as author and individual, was always in pursuit of finding balance in her life—whether it was to help her write her next novel, make new acquaintances or handle new criticism. For the same reason that Cather experiences a need for stability, her artist also faces the need to balance characteristics that are opposing in nature. These qualities are separated into four principal categories: discipline notwithstanding passion, sacrifice through isolation, separation from the Divide alongside a support system, and artistic innovation requiring a classical appreciation.
Discipline Notwithstanding Passion:
An Idealist Cather with Pragmatic Methods

Without a doubt, an artist without discipline will forego an unprecedented work of art. Similarly, an artist will not pursue the development of painstaking efforts without a passion for the arts motivating and inspiring her to create.

Familiarizing oneself with Cather’s life and experiences gives readers the understanding that she was an idealist with pragmatic methods. When an idea ventured into her mind, Cather put all her energy and effort into perfecting the newfound ideal. As a child, she aspired to become a medical doctor. She had developed a small laboratory in her family’s home and would dissect frogs with great interest. She signed her name in letters and documents as “William Cather, MD” and explored the idea of cross-dressing to comprehend the dimensions of being male.

When Cather felt she had achieved all she could in her schooling at Red Cloud, she asked her parents to send her to the university. “She insisted on going to college. The family had no money to fund her aspiration, but she was desperate to go. Therefore, the funds were borrowed and Cather went off to Lincoln, to take the preparatory course that would enable her to enter the University of Nebraska” (Acocella 10-1). Even though Cather’s desire was to become a novelist and not a journalist, she took positions of employment early on to earn a living and experience independence, knowing full well she could not become a burden to her parents caring for five other children. She surmised that she could continue
developing her writing and expand her network by working as an editor and journalist while continuously writing fiction in her spare time:

Strong in her character was the conviction that men and women of ability could succeed if they were only determined enough, and could force other people to recognize their achievement. She had little sympathy for failure and no patience with excuses. (Randall 14)

Cather’s ideals to become a medical doctor, pursue a university education, take up writing as a career and develop her views on women writers all correspond to her idealistic self. However, her actions upon implementing them show Cather’s traits as a pragmatist: the dissections of frogs in order to experience exemplary traits to the medical profession, her disciplined endeavors in writing and editing for the 22 years before publishing her first successful novel, and her earning of a necessary wage while perfecting a skill for writing:

The power of the divine writers Cather admired in the 1890s did not arise solely from ecstasy, inspiration, or self-abandonment. The supreme creators possessed gifts that she feared the woman writer lacked: discipline, shaping intelligence, and craft. She associated these qualitative with the artist’s control and command of form. (O’Brien 159)

Cather knew she had to work hard to distinguish herself from the female writers she so much disliked and depicts those views in her literary pieces. In “Paul’s Case,” Cather describes the demise of an artist who does not practice self-discipline. Paul is described as an addict, whose eyes have a “hysterical brilliancy” and his pupils are “abnormally large, as though he were addicted to belladonna” and indulges in “orgies of living” and “debauches” (97). While Paul is infatuated with the artists and attends the theater faithfully, his interest lies in the material implication of artistry, rather than art itself. He judges others by their lack of material wealth, such as his father and his home, an “ugliness and commonness that he always had”
and “experienced a physical depression which follows a debauch: the loathing of respectable beds, of common food, of a house penetrated by kitchen odors; a shuddering repulsion for the flavorless, colorless mass of everyday existence” (102).

The material future his father holds for them both is what drives Paul to leave town with embezzled money from his workplace. He spends all the stolen cash at the Waldorf Hotel, enjoying intoxication and sexual pleasure with a stranger from Yale University. “Paul continually exalts the artificial over the natural” (Randall 29) and blocks off his passion for art, passion for something being a naturally-derived instinct everyone is capable of. He shuts off his passion and will by prioritizing his impulsive materialism and his lack of self-control, two attributes Cather loathes in false artists. “The reason for Paul’s failure is his essential passivity. He wants to be a spectator, not an actor” (Randall 31). Even when Paul commits suicide, he does so in a way that will forgo effort, finding that to end his life with a handgun “was not the way” (112) and opts to throw himself in front of a moving train instead. “He is the direct opposite of Willa Cather’s later protagonists who win through asserting themselves and their wills. Paul refuses to assert himself at all” (Randall 31).

Thea labors to perfect her piano skills. In The Song of the Lark, Cather emphasizes the emotional distress and hardship Thea experiences with both Wunsch and her beloved Harsanyi, Thea’s piano teachers. Thea’s first winter in Chicago with Harsanyi, is troublesome:

But for Thea Kronborg, that winter was almost beyond enduring. She always remembered it as the happiest and wildest and saddest of her life. Things came too fast for her; she had not had enough preparation.
There were times when she came home from her lessons and lay upon her bed hating Wunsch and her family, hating a world that had let her grow up so ignorant; when she wishes that she could die then and there, and be born over again to begin anew. ... [A] great deal of the time she was comfortless. (*The Song of the Lark* 104)

The pain is vivid, much like it is described during Cather’s time in Pittsburgh teaching English at Central High School. It was a lot of tiring work, of which she was unsure of the impact she was making and confused as to whether it was the career of choice she wanted to pursue. Early on as a child, when faced with challenges, Thea “had trained herself to put her mind to what she was doing, otherwise she would have come to grief with her complicated daily schedule” (*The Song of the Lark* 38). Wunsch describes her as “doggedly industrious” and of “stubborn will” (58), descriptions one would agree suited Willa Cather as well. Cather describes those moments of ease and “friendliness of the world” for Thea are momentary and are not bound to last if she wants to continue moving forward (75). Cather makes clear that the path of an artist is an industrious and challenging one, even for the young. For years Thea works on her piano skills until Harsanyi, her second piano instructor, is able to determine her true talent: singing. “What a voice!” is his response to Thea’s voice when first discovered (*The Song of the Lark* 112):

> Harsanyi sprang from his chair and dropped lightly upon his toes, a kind of ENTRE-CHAT that he sometimes executed when he formed a sudden resolution, or when he was about to follow a pure intuition, against reason. (111)

As a child, Cather had an avid interest in becoming a medical doctor *until* her English teacher demonstrated the possibility of becoming an author by publishing her school paper in *The Nebraska State Journal*. However, as it is with Cather’s
need to find balance, discipline without passion in the arts will yield fruitless results. Cather “wanted to know that individual force, will, and passion could make a difference” (O’Brien 152). Passion, in this case, is two-fold: a desire for art, notwithstanding human sympathy and feeling. To Cather

authors are not made of marble or of ice, and human sympathy is a sweet thing. There is much to suffer, much to undergo: the awful loneliness, the longing for human fellowship and for human love. (The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896 435)

An artist must experience pain and desolation, but also love. This range of feeling allows the artist to perform her artistry. Being placid and content does not bring inspiration and a push for a masterpiece: it is her challenges, her passion, and her heartbreak that pushes artistry forward. Thea herself never felt like piano was an easy endeavor and, frequently, particularly during her training in Chicago, felt defeated by her learning and practice. The first impressions from her new teacher in Chicago set the tone for the hardships ahead of her:

Andor Harsanyi had never had a pupil in the least like Thea Kronborg. He had never had one more intelligent, and he had never had one so ignorant. When Thea sat down to take her first lesson from him, she had never heard a work by Beethoven or a composition by Chopin.

... Harsanyi found in Thea a pupil with sure, strong hands, one who read rapidly and intelligently, who had, he felt, a richly gifted nature. But she had been given no direction, and her ardor was unawakened. She had never heard a symphony orchestra. The literature of the piano was an undiscovered world to her. He wondered how she had been able to work so hard when she knew so little of what she was working toward. (Song of the Lark 103)

However, Harsanyi does recognize the will a work ethic Thea has, much like Cather had in her own writing. Frequently, Thea feels resolute to pursue piano, and shuts herself away from Harsanyi due to depression (The Song of the Lark 105). Even
after discovering that singing is her true artistry and calling, she still struggles against her peers, despite her natural talent. In order to support herself financially whenever her family couldn’t, Thea needs to continue playing piano and working at the church in order to afford lodging and Mr. Bower’s lessons, her voice instructor:

Thea had been in Chicago for two months [since her last visit home]. She had a small church position which partly paid her living expenses, and she paid for her singing lessons by playing Bower’s accompaniments every afternoon from two until six. She had been compelled to leave her old friends Mrs. Lorch and Mrs. Andersen, because the long ride from North Chicago to Bower’s studio in Michigan Avenue took too much time—an hour in the morning, and at night, when the cars were crowded, an hour and a half. For the first month she had clung to her old room, but the bad air in the cars, at the end of a long day’s work, fatigued her greatly and was bad for her voice. (*The Song of the Lark* 147)

Bowers is a miserable man, and the training and experience with him is agonizing to Thea. Cather herself suffered from severe exhaustion in attempting to complete her personal fiction and while completing assignments for her full-time positions. She was very unhappy in her letters to her loved ones, bordering on depression:

Mr. McClure tells me that he does not think I will ever be able to do much at writing stories, that I am a good executive and I had better let it go at that. I sometimes, indeed I very often think that he is right. If I have been going forward at all in the last five years, [i]t has been progress of the head and not of the hand. At thirty-four one ought to have some sureness in their pen point and some facility in turning out a story. In other matters—things about the office—I can usually do what I set out to do and I can learn by experience, but when it comes to writing I’m a new-born baby every time—always come into it naked and shivery and without any bones. I never learn anything about it at all. ... I have not a reportorial mind—I can’t get things in fleeting glimpses and I can’t get any pleasure out of them and the excitement of it doesn’t stimulate me, it only wears me out.

Now the kind of life that makes one feel empty and shallow and superficial, that makes one dread to read and dread to think, can’t be good for one, can it? It can’t be the kind of life one was meant to live. I do think that kind of excitement does to my brain exactly
what I have seen alcohol to do men’s. It seems to spread one’s very brain cells apart so that they don’t touch. Everything leaks out as the power does in a broken circuit. (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 118-9)

Both Thea and Cather extend themselves physically and emotionally at the attempt to improve their artistry, while using every means to support themselves financially. They are tirelessly industrious, and understand that without being financially responsible they are unable to continue on the path to artistry. On the other hand, Paul, the failing artist, does everything possible to forgo any sacrifice or pain. He numbs himself to these feelings with drink, pleasure, and entertainment—as a result, cutting himself away from his true passion.

**Sacrifice Through Isolation**

The word “isolation” in reference to Willa Cather is an anticipated narrative for readers familiar with the novelist’s biography, particularly during her post-prairie days. Cather writes that the “loveliness and lovelessness” experienced by the artist and the “isolation” caused by the artistry is “loneliness which besets all mortals who are shut up alone with God, of the gloom which is the shadow of God’s hand consecrating his elect” (*The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896* 153). The novelist believed the successful artist was, in a sense, doomed with isolation in order to be granted inspiration for beautiful work. However, on the outside, her early career and artistry did not portray an isolated individual, and depicted her instead as an avid performer and
lover of the arts, keen on acquainting herself with everyone in her town, and eager to please friends, acquaintances, professors and colleagues.

However, Cather did begin her journey of isolation when she appears cross-dressing as a young man during her high school and early college days, borrowing the name of William Cather. During her studies at The University of Nebraska, Cather also isolates herself artistically and intellectually. John Randall believes the “strong impulse to reject” and “not so likely [need] to be for something as against something” was an impulse Cather derived from the Populist folklore of her time (12). Cather also isolated herself from popular norms to discover her own views, beliefs and passions by clashing against the masses.’

During her college years working as a reviewer and performing arts critic for *The Nebraska State Journal*, Cather shared her strong antagonism toward female writers: “Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusted talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it” (*The World and the Parish*, vol. 1 275). Cather did not shun from criticizing writers, performers, artists or professors. Cather struggled with self-identity, found extensive differences between herself and other female writers, and discovered her ideals and identity resonated better with male writers:

> When Cather examined her literary heritage, she saw very little that inspired her or guided her. She set up rules regarding women as artists/writers and then could not see herself in them. This was a dilemma with only one acceptable solution for a headstrong young woman like Willa Cather—create new rules, create new boundaries, create a new definition of woman/artist. (Turnage 19)

One of the most important things that caused Cather’s strong criticism of the female artist was their personal life and acquiescence to marriage, as “[m]arried
nightingales seldom sing” (*The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896* 176). An artist that resorts to marriage is prevented from devoting the time and energy necessary to her profession. Marriage cuts off meaningful emotions and experiences that can only come from a solitary life; romantic love turns one’s attention to fulfilling someone else’s desires rather than the desire to act, create or produce one’s own art.

Cather’s own choice of art over human relationships is evident, but she is not the only one to employ it. “Miss [Sarah Orne] Jewett, too, had turned away from marriage” (Sergeant 116), and formed her primary intimacies with other women like Cather. “Cather’s remark suggests that Jewett may have been a model for her personal as well as professional life” (O’Brien 337). Discovering mentors like Jewett gave Cather a greater understanding of the female artist, particularly female authors that did not fit into the negative and limiting mold Cather had always determined them to be.

Thea faces moments of isolation early on in her artistic journey. As a child, she experiences “constant turmoil” as she is suffocated by familial and friendly support, “drown[ing] the voice within” (*The Song of the Lark* 58), her artistic voice. It is only when she is given her own bedroom that “the beginning of a new era in Thea’s life” emerges, acknowledged as one of the “most important things that ever happened to her” as a person, and, most notably, as an artist (58). This experience parallels Cather’s own childhood as she receives her own room in the family attic, like Thea, an experience that leads to important ambitions like attending medical school, finding interest in classical readings and languages, and traveling to complete her university studies. Having their own space, away from others,
isolated, allows artists the chance to create without social or emotional influence upon their work. This allows the inspiration to originate from within.

Early on, Thea isolates herself from her peers, knowing that doing so will provide her with a deeper understanding of the world and art: “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. She would rather be hated than be stupid, any day” (*The Song of the Lark* 38). Thea harbored her way of thinking, isolating her views and thoughts to protect her creative nature. Even in her learning process, her instructors complained of how slow and stubbornly she learned pieces and music. However, once she understood the lesson, she flourished beyond expectations:

[Harsanyi] had often noticed that she could not think a thing out in delivery of the whole song, the first part as well as the last. He had often noticed that she could not think a thing out in passages. Until she saw it as a whole, she wandered like a blind man surrounded by torments. After she once had her “revelation,” after she got the idea that to her—not always to him—explained everything, then she went forward rapidly. But she was not always easy to help. She was sometimes impervious to suggestion; she would stare at him as if she were deaf and ignore everything he told her to do. Then, all at once, something would happen in her brain and she would begin to do all that he had been for weeks telling her to do, without realizing that he had ever told her. (*The Song of the Lark* 114)

Within the realm of isolation, there in an element of sacrifice. In some cases isolation pairs together with sacrifice and other times it functions of its own. As described earlier, Cather believed that the way for the artist to experience passion, compassion, anger and longing was to make sacrifices. One of the main sacrifices is relinquishing romantic relationships.
When Dr. Archie, Thea’s personal friend and the town’s physician, inquires on her personal life, Thea’s response shows she has relinquished all personal relationships altogether:

My dear doctor, I don’t have any. 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. (264)

This realm of forgoing personal relationships takes a whole new dimension here: one of sacrifice for the sake of art. In order to develop her vocation and build up recognition, the artist must isolate herself and cut off from the world in order to improve herself. Thea does this so that no one may rely on her as a friend so she can focus on her singing career. A great example of this is when Dr. Archie and Fred are visiting Thea for dinner, when she receives a phone call asking if she would step in for another one of the opera singers to play the part of Sieglinde, one of the roles she could have only dreamed of. Her response, at first, is of fear and paralysis. Together, they scurry and grab together her costume, wig, cab, and musical scores. Thea complains, “If only you hadn’t made me eat—Damn that duck!” (252). Her life revolves around the opera, and so must those who are part of her life. Just as much as Thea had to drop everything to attend the opera, so did her dinner guests, her close friends.

Commonly, the main protagonist from *Alexander’s Bridge* is not analyzed as an artist, given his discipline of an engineer. However, Alexander’s employment requires the design and building of bridges, an occupation that requires creative thought. In this case, he will be used as an example of artist to reiterate the point of sacrifice in terms of prioritizing one’s artistic profession.
In *Alexander’s Bridge*, Alexander is a successful civil engineer and travels frequently between Boston and London. His wife resides in Boston and in London, his mistress. The guilt of living a double standard eats Alexander from within, and as he is breaking off his love affair with his mistress and returns back home, he misses a telegram on the safety of the bridge’s structure. Back home, as Alexander is inspecting the bridge, it collapses over him and his men. In terms of the artist, Alexander’s trouble originates from the fact that he is not able to forgo his relationships over his creed and creates a work that not only gets destroyed but ends in his own demise. “He wants to have his triumphant career as bridge builder, his beautiful wife, his tasteful home in Boston, *and* his love affair with Hilda. He wants to have everything and give up nothing” (Randall 39 emphasis in original). He insists that he can be both a creative individual as well as a human one. Cather propels this point when she leaves Alexander to make a choice between his affair with Hilda and his career. Regardless of choice, sacrifices would need to be made for either option.

Separation from the Divide Together with a Support System

There comes a time when one’s surroundings impede the developmental growth of artistry. Exposure to other ideas, particularly those in support of the arts, are necessary—ideas and visions that the Divide lacks. Cather “was struggling to outgrow her home environment and wanted to shock the prim and proper citizens of Red Cloud” (Randall 6). The fiction she was working on would not have been
welcomed in a town like Red Cloud, leaving Cather to find a larger, broader-minded audience elsewhere.

Cather’s early writings of Nebraska display her rejection of it. “When she wrote about Nebraska, it was with a shudder of loathing; she seemed to want to demonstrate just how hostile it was to all man’s finer feelings” (Randall 19). Cather recognized that the Divide was not a welcoming place for artists, as evidenced by the short story “Peter” (1892), a story about an immigrant violinist who commits suicide. Cather openly shared the challenges that the Divide held for its inhabitants:

Insanity and suicide are very common things in the Divide. They come on like an epidemic in the hot wind season. Those scorching dusty winds that blow up over the bluffs from Kansas seem to dry up the blood in men’s veins as they do the sap in the corn leaves. Whenever the yellow scorch creeps down over the tender inside leaves about the ear, then the coroners prepare for active duty; for the oil of the country is burned out and it does not take long for the flame to eat up the wick. It causes no great sensation there when a Dane is found swinging to his own windmill tower, and most of the Poles after they have become too careless and discouraged to shave themselves keep their razors to cut their throats with. (“On the Divide” 67)

Cather’s harsh description of the Nebraskan scene is not approached from the point of view of the artist; rather, it’s described as such for all inhabitants alike. “The Sculptor’s Funeral” (1905) is a short story of Cather’s that shows the rejection the people of small western towns have of artists and their career ambitions. The story focuses on the return of the body of a young sculptor for burial. It is coming from Boston, where the artist had relocated to pursue sculpting. The comments the townspeople make of the young man reveal the kind of environment Cather most likely endured: “It’s too bad the old man’s sons didn’t turn out better. ... He spent
money enough on Harvey to stock a dozen cattle-farms, and he might as well have poured it into Sand Creek” (“The Sculptor’s Funeral” 264). Meanwhile, the criticism does not end with the young man’s professional endeavors, but the blame is unloaded upon the father as well: “Where the old man made his mistake was in sending the boy East to school. ... There was where he got his head full of nonsense. What Harvey needed, of all people, was a course in some first-class Kansas City business college” (266). The townspeople could not understand the value of sculpting and pursing art particularly since the business industry is sure success for professionals in the Midwest.

Leaving the Divide, in part, is for the artist to find a place where she is able to express herself. It is also a way to separate her from her beliefs, environment and lack of available inspiration. The artist, by separating, learns new ways and builds new creativity and is able to return with new eyes of objectivity. As is known, Cather’s success derives from writing of the experiences in the Divide, and it was Sarah Orne Jewett who encouraged her separation from Nebraska with the intent of writing about it: “One of the few really helpful words I ever heard was from an older writer, I had from Sarah Orne Jewett when she said to me: ‘Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world so well before one can know the parish’” (Alexander’s Bridge vii). It took separating Cather from her home environment to get her started on her internal journey. She no longer wanted to write imitative works and she followed Jewett’s advice. She wrote what she felt comfortable about: home—among the women storytellers in the kitchens, in the fields, and in the community gatherings.
Thea is the exemplary artist in Cather’s own artistic success. She leaves Moonstone, her hometown, to get further training in piano, given the limitations and restrictions her town was able to provide her with:

“...It seems that for some time Thea has wanted to go away to study music. It was Kennedy’s wish that she should take his money and go to Chicago this winter. He felt that it would be an advantage to her in a business way: that even if she came back here to teach, it would give her more authority and make her position here more comfortable.”

“If Thea were your own daughter, doctor, would you consent to such a plan, at her present age?”

“I most certainly should. In fact, if she were my daughter, I’d have sent her away before this. She’s a most unusual child, and she’s only wasting herself here. At her age she should be learning, not teaching. She’ll never learn so quickly and easily as she will right now.” (The Song of the Lark 91)

Cather, similarly, leaves Red Cloud, the place where she established her love of learning, to attend the University of Nebraska. She knew she was limited in what she could acquire in her hometown, particularly with her great aspiration of becoming a medical doctor. Cather later moves East to pursue greater writing endeavors, as does Thea. Thea resides in Chicago to further her skill as pianist and later singer, gets further training in Germany in voice training, and finally becomes recognized as an operatic diva in the most famous city in the country: New York City. Here she thrives as an artist. New York City is also the place where Cather’s true career as novelist began, despite the restrictions her job at McClure laid upon her with her time and her ability to write fiction.

What’s important to note for both Cather and Thea is that, while leaving the Divide was an important career realization, neither one could have completed this endeavor without the support of their family members and friends. When Cather
chose to go to university, her parents could not afford the expense. However, they borrowed the funds to make it a reality as they believed in her ability and wanted to offer her support. As Cather shows, the artist will encounter moments when she will need financial or emotional support. Isabelle McClung offered Cather a home to stay in so Cather could focus more of her attention on her budding writing career rather than have her stress over living expenses. “Isabelle was interested in fostering someone else’s literary talent, not in developing her own” (O’Brien 236). She also offered Cather emotional support as she knew Isabelle’s interest in the arts was not a competitive one but was rather one of encouragement and interest in Cather’s abilities. When Cather moved to New York to work for McClure’s, she had the support of Edith Lewis, who first welcomed her into her apartment and later became deeply devoted to Cather’s needs, including her travel arrangements, bills and expenses. In addition, she protected her from negative critiques of her work. Lewis kept Cather company until her death:

After Lewis took a job with McClure’s (on Cather’s suggestion), she read proof for the Mary Baker Eddy series, and this marked the start of a lifelong collaboration. Beginning with The Song of the Lark, Lewis began to help Cather proofread her fiction, an activity which became “one of our greatest pleasures.” (O’Brien 354)

Oftentimes Lewis lent Cather her name in order to visit physicians anonymously and lodge in locations so as to afford the novelist her privacy. It was “[c]lear to both whose career and needs took precedence” (O’Brien 352). Without her, Cather would have not been able to manage and focus on her artistic development and may have cast those abilities aside due to the time management it took to keep up a home.
Thea, similarly, has various individuals in her life supporting her financially and emotionally. The love-stricken railway man, Ray, is the first to offer Thea the opportunity to venture out as a singer as he bequeaths her funds upon his death. With those funds she travels to Chicago and begins her professional training as a pianist, eventually resulting in her passion for professional singing. Dr. Archie, Red Cloud’s doctor, also provides her support as he visits her to check on her well-being and provides her with encouragement and admiration. He lends her money to pursue further training in Germany. Thea’s mother also supports and encourages her daughter’s endeavors. She is the first to place her in piano lessons and later follows Harsyani’s recommendation to place her into vocal training, an endeavor she is willing to commit to. She is understanding of Thea’s professional pursuits, even when her own daughter is unable to visit her on her deathbed because of a critical performance opportunity that has the chance to shape Thea’s singing future. Lastly, and probably her greatest support, is Fred, Thea’s financier and lover. As a lover, he respects her need to train and dedicate time to her singing and development. During the most difficult times, he provides her with encouragement and pushes her to pursue the dreams she absolutely wants. Moreover, he knows when she needs a break from the performance life in order to rejuvenate and get back on track even if it means cutting herself off from society to reflect only, later, to have her jump back into training full force. He is able to introduce her to key individuals, networking her further down her road toward success.

Earlier in the artist’s development the artist’s need for isolation was discussed. O’Brien explains Cather’s need to find balance between isolation and support:
During her undergraduate years, Cather imagined that the woman artist who achieved such a single-minded commitment would, like Eleanora Duse, be a solitary priestess of art. Jewett, however, did not find the writer’s momentary “selfishness” contradictory to the demands and delights of friendship, and so demonstrated that love and work might coexist, a hopeful sign to Cather who was developing her relationship with Edith Lewis at the time. (342)

The artist’s life is a complicated one, and while it is important for her, once again, to find a balance between cutting off for the sake of creativity and inward search, she must also have patient individuals in her life to remind her of her ability, offer encouragement and give her guidance. An artist does not stand alone; otherwise, who is the artist actually creating art for, if her purpose is to live in complete isolation:

But in reality Cather’s creative life was closer to Sarah Orne Jewett’s than to Thea Kronberg’s. Like Jewett, Cather did not have to choose between writing and companionship. She found several close friends who, in different and complementary ways, nourished her creativity. Recognizing the “good things with delight,” these friends—all women—provided emotional and professional support during the crucial period when Cather was deciding to commit herself full-time to writing. (O’Brien 352)

O’Brien’s point is clear: Cather embraced her friends and her support—all who henceforward guided her in the direction of becoming a novelist. However, that Thea did not have the necessary support is arguable. On the contrary, as mentioned before, she had the encouragement of family and friends, all of which Jewett and Cather also enjoyed in their writing careers.

Those characters that did not have a support system are doomed in Cather’s fiction. Paul, Cather’s classic failure of an artist, “has to be a glutton in Bohemia because he is famished for spiritual aesthetic, and emotional food in Presbyteria” (O’Brien 283). Paul lacks guidance, support, and encouragement in the arts. He
hardly understands what art is, as his father’s only concern is that he stay out of trouble and earn a living. His peers find him odd and unusual, and his teachers mock him and don’t want to make him their concern. Another artist that ends in his demise is the Boston sculptor from “The Sculptor’s Funeral” (1905). His mother detests his career pursuit, and his father is ashamed of denying him the necessary encouragement. Even though the sculptor is able to travel to Boston, away from his hometown, and become a successful sculptor, he did not have his family’s support. His career is cut short by his early death. Lastly, Alexander from Alexander’s Bridge can be seen as the failed artist due to his unrealistic, misunderstood heroism:

Viewed in the most favorable light, Alexander is a would-be Superman, a solitary hero who can only accomplish what he has to accomplish alone and who doesn’t want to be built into society because he is impatient of the restraints on his creativity which would result from obligations to others. (Randall 39)

Different from Cather, Alexander rejected assistance and support from loved ones. The narrator who visits Alexander’s wife would have been a friend to the engineer and offer him support during troubling times if asked. With assistance, admitting his weakness, he couldn’t possibly be the great engineer he imagined himself to be. Cather, on the other hand, accepted kindness from others, so long as those favors did not interfere with her artistic pursuits. She was a realist, in this respect: a pragmatist.
Artistic Innovation Requiring Classical Appreciation

Probably one of the most important successes to Cather’s career as novelist was discovering her voice through her own search for innovation. One must remember that Cather did not originally have aspirations of becoming a writer. Her interest lay in pursuing medical school. Her deep appreciation for the classics, languages, and literature was through her father and well-read neighbors. Cather was attracted to the worldliness of her neighbors and the world that novels and poetry brought her to: somewhere other than Nebraska and her small town.

However, in school, she read what she found appealing. She chose her readings because they called her and were available to her through well-read neighbors. However, as she gained recognition, she gained respect for her criticism and analysis of other writers’ work, which could only have arisen from her classical foundation and appreciation. Cather herself greatly admired Henry James and Rudyard Kipling among other authors. However, what faulted Cather was her inability to step out of the idea of what an artist consisted of and realize the actual creativity pertaining to artistry. “As her first literary reviews and opinions reveal, she firmly identified art with masculinity” (O’Brien 141). More than that, she saw novelists as heroes and idolized the idea of authorship, as Paul in “Paul’s Case” does with theater. “A consequence of her hero worship was that her interest in creative people was extremely personal; she was more apt to be interested in the artist than in his art” (16). It is no wonder that Cather wrote imitative works in Jamesian fashion. Even though Sarah Orne Jewett redirected Cather’s writing technique and pushed her to move beyond the European metropolitan setting in
her fiction writing, Cather did not listen at first. It was not until she had gotten her
hero, James, out of her system with *Alexander’s Bridge* that she was able to see the
wrong she had done and began listening to her writing instincts.

As Cather describes, writing *O Pioneers!* was a work she wrote

> entirely for myself; a story about some Scandinavians and Bohemians who had been neighbors of ours when I lived on a ranch in Nebraska, when I was eight or nine years old. 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. (“My First Novels [There Were Two]” 963).

Cather enters this dimension of writing for pleasure, unpreoccupied about content, readership or popularity. “The ‘novel of the soil’ had not then come into fashion in this country” (963). For once, Cather tapped into that sense of innovation within herself. When we compare this breakthrough of Cather’s with Thea, it is indistinguishable. Thea receives classical training early on and loves it; possibly because it is all she knows, but nevertheless she is true to it and prefers music that shows challenge and range as depicted in her performance against her rival, Kitty. Kitty sings a popular song, simple in tune but one the whole congregation enjoys and welcomes. Thea does not get the same reaction from the audience because her selection is of a secular nature. However, she readily understands the need to take the challenging musical course for her to develop true musical ability.

Thea has a breakthrough when she first discovers music, it is as if it had taken over her body, changing her appearance and demeanor, even to strangers:

> When Thea emerged from the concert hall, Mrs. Lorch’s predictions had been fulfilled. A furious gale was beating over the city from Lake Michigan. The streets were full of cold, hurrying, angry people, running for street cars and barking at each other. The sun was setting in a clear, windy sky, that flamed with red as if it were a
great fire somewhere on the edge of the city. For almost the first time
Thea was conscious of the city itself, of the congestion of life all about
her, of the brutality and power of those streams that flowed in the
streets, threatening to drive one under. ... A young man came out of
a saloon and stood eyeing her questioningly while he lit a cigarette.
“Looking for a friend to-night?” he asked. Thea drew up the collar of
her cape and walked on a few paces. The young man shrugged his
shoulders and drifted away.

Thea came back to the corner and stood there irresolutely. An
old man approached her. He, too, seemed to be waiting for a car. He
wore an overcoat with black fur collar, his gray mustache was waxed
into little points, and his eyes were watery. He kept thrusting his face
up near hers. Her hat blew off and he ran after it—a stiff, pitiful skip
he had—and brought it back to her. Then, while she was pinning her
hat on, her cape blew up, and he held it down for her, looking at her
intently. ... He leaned over and whispered something to her. It struck
her as curious that he was really quite timid, like an old beggar. “Oh,
let me ALONE!” she cried miserably between her teeth. (The Song of
the Lark 118-9)

Music, for the first time, has touched Thea in a spiritual, emotional and physical
way. She notices every aspect of the city, both its beauty and its faults, for the first
time, as if she had been dead to the world and was now alive for the very first time.
Thea is changed so much so that men confuse this ecstasy and experience of hers
for sexual arousal and pleasure, confusing her for a prostitute at a street corner.
It’s not as if Thea has never heard music before. On the contrary, she has always
gravitated toward it, particularly singing. However, for a long time she refused to
watch performances because of the failure she felt as an artist no matter how much
Harsanyi encouraged her. It’s when she is foundationally ready in her classical
understanding of music that she is able to enjoy the performance on such a moving
degree. Without her classical training, she may have never awakened the desire to
perform. Similarly, Cather hadn’t discovered her desire to become a writer until
she had written an essay in her preparatory English class courses at the University
of Nebraska. Her English teacher saw the great foundational writing Cather
exemplified and put her essay forward for publication at *The Nebraska State Journal*. Had Cather not spent countless hours reading and discussing her neighbors’ and father’s collections of classical works the novelist may have restricted her popularity to the local people of Nebraska as Dr. Cather, M.D., and never heard of the Pulitzer Prize Winner, Willa Silbert Cather.
Chapter IV

The Paradox of *The Song of the Lark*:

Cather’s Successful and Failing Artistry

I think so well of this book that I had probably better not confide to you my own opinion of it. I will say, however, that I don’t believe you publish a story like this every day. I beg you to put it by for a reading until you can take it up with some sense of leisure, for I am hoping that, although you may have to read so much, you will have a good time with this manuscript. The manuscript is untidy, but the story is not. (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 198)

Cather wrote this letter to Ferris Greenslet on March 28, 1915. The manuscript she is referring to is *The Song of the Lark*. As mentioned in the first chapter, the novel itself is important because it is the artistic journey Cather experiences in her career, therefore making the novel an important move and staple in her profession.

After some back and forth between Mr. Greenslet, Cather’s editor at Houghton Mifflin, and herself her comments to his observations and critiques are surprisingly defensive:

I have a mournful conviction that you do not get what you look for from this book, and that you find it eccentric and unsatisfying. I would do almost anything to please you, except change the story, which I can’t do. If you feel reluctant about publishing it, there is still time to call it off. I am sure that if you can give it an approving push at the start, it will make its way to a good many people. If it doesn’t, and I am mistaken, then you will have a right to be severe with me. I hate to feel that I am not living up to your expectations, but *I feel so much more confidence in this book than I did the other.* (201 emphasis added)

Evidently, Cather’s confidence is high in regards to the novel, primarily due to the fact that there is a personal attachment on her end. In her letter to Helen Seibel she mentions a preface she would have liked to have included: “I for one am tired
of ideas and ‘great notions’ for stories. I don’t want to be ‘literary.’ Here are a lot of people I used to know and love; sit down and let me tell you about them” (Selected Letters of Willa Cather 215). Cather admits that the stories included were inspired by experiences of times past in her own life and that of her friends. In her thesis, Mary Ruth Brown demonstrates the evidence showing Cather’s characters were drawn from people she knew, experiences she had, and her contradicting denials and acceptances of the origins of her inspiration (15-7).

However, one must note why this novel was so important to Cather to write the above comments to her editor. Cather shares some of the most loved moments of her life, but also some of the harshest as well. She shares her love for Spanish music and their culture, as Thea joins the Mexicans in their dances and midnight ballads. She also shows the humanity in a well-travelled but simple man like the train conductor, Ray. She exposes atheism in a compassionate way and shows the ability of a preacher's wife, like Mrs. Kronberg, to remain objective in religion, humanity, and in her own children. Cather even allows scenes of romance between Fred and Thea, scenes she normally wouldn’t have appreciated in women writer’s novellas. She discusses the challenges, mental depression and questioning Thea experiences when she trains so hard in music and feels she is not improving her abilities. Cather details the truths of the so-called glamour after success reaches Thea as she becomes a recognized singer. All the scenes mentioned are dear to Cather because she either lived them, or she lived through with Ms. Fremstad. The novel tells the coming of age story of a young Colorado preacher’s wife, poor, that through persistence, hard work, and a little help, makes it to become “grand like that,” as Thea’s Aunt Tillie puts it (The Song of the Lark 280).
Overall, *The Song of the Lark* was well-received, with very little negative criticism. However, as discussed in Chapter II of this thesis, Cather believed, in retrospect, the novel was not equal to the standard of good writing. How is it that after a successful novel like *O Pioneers!* Cather writes a novel that by no means resembles good art? To determine this, this chapter is categorized into topics that will address the question at hand: an understanding of Cather’s concern for her artistry during her early short stories and *Alexander’s Bridge* and how they are exemplified in the aforementioned works, how her artistic voice progresses and develops in writing *O Pioneers!*, and how *The Song of the Lark* serves as Cather’s artistic paradox given her artistic voice translates itself into a poorly written novel lacking a minimalist writing technique.

Willa Cather’s Concern for Her Artistry in her Early Short Stories and *Alexander’s Bridge*

In Chapter III of the thesis, the primary focus was on defining and evidencing what Cather believed a successful artist resembles and needs to accomplish to be considered as one. However, some of the reasons why her early short stories are so important to Cather’s evolution are their focus on the artists’ demise. *The Song of the Lark* is the first work of Cather’s that depicts the artist reaching the pinnacle of success. However, the early short stories describe the struggles of the artist, experiences much of which Cather herself was undergoing until her completion of *O Pioneers!* Reviewing the struggling artist is key to
understanding Cather’s own struggles as an artist as they parallel times where she suffered her own doubts in her artistic ability.

Earlier the need for sacrifice in the artist’s life was reviewed, particularly with regards to her marital relationships. In “A Death in the Desert” (1903) a once-renowned signer, Katherine Gaylors, develops a lung infection and returns home to the desert to end her life. During her majestic years as a singer, she had developed a relationship with the accomplished composer, Adriance Hildarde. When Adriance is given the news of Katherine’s progressing illness, he sends his brother to deliver a message to her. The letter is described as “wonderfully tactful and tender, even for Adriance, who was tender with his valet and his stable-boy, with his old gondolier and the beggar-women who prayed to the saints for him” (212). However, the letter is “consistently egotistical” and focuses on his continuous endeavors as an artist; a new composition he has been working on. Despite this, Katherine respects and understands his stance, having been a devoted artist herself: “I want him to grow wholly into his best and greatest self, even at the cost of what is half of his charm to you [his brother] and me” (212). The story, most importantly, sheds light on the fact that making these choices of neglecting amorous relationships is indeed an actual sacrifice in Cather’s eyes, despite its benefits. Until the very end, it is painful, even for Katherine who acknowledges her choices:

He knew that she lived upon this, and that in her exhaustion which followed this turmoil of her dying senses, she slept deep and sweet, and dreamed of youth and art and days in a certain old Florentine garden, and not of bitterness and death. (212)
Cather ends the story by stating that Katherine called for Adriance in her last breathing moments. “Everett went to call her brother, but when they came back the madness of art was over for Katherine” (217). Cather herself acknowledges that the path of an artist is “maddening” and by no means conventional. It shows Cather herself also struggled and questioned the long-term results at the expense of being completely alone. Written in 1903 this was one of Cather’s earlier short stories. If one compares it to The Song of the Lark, written during a time when Cather had proven herself as a novelist, one can acknowledge that Cather had found balance with the support of loved ones in her career pursuit like Edith Lewis and Isabel McClung. This short story was written five years before Cather met Jewett, who softened Cather’s idea of living in companionship.

“Flavia and Her Artists” (1905) encapsulates Cather’s view of artists who confuse artistry with popularity rather than true artistic talent. It tells the story of Flavia, who, with no artistic ability or expression, studies and researches headlines and therefore surfaces intellectual discussion as a means to impress her guests. When the narrator, Imogen Willard, asks Jemina Broadwood, a successful actress, what her husband thinks of the hospitality, she responds:

> Why, my dear, what would any man think of having his house turned into an hotel, habited by freaks who discharge his servants, borrow his money, and insult his neighbours? This place is shunned like lazaretto! (164)

The description of the artists themselves hints at the fact that the artists have an air of superiority, an eye for common popularity, guiding the reader to question, as Cather oftentimes did of other so-called artists, their credibility in their
profession. Jemina also refuses to consider herself in the same rank as said guests in their creative abilities:

One of the *artists*? My offence may be rank, my dear, but I really don’t deserve that. Come, now, whatever badges of my tribe I may bear upon me, just let me divest you of any notion that I take myself seriously. (154 emphasis in original)

Jemina does not attempt to join the party and sneer at its hosts. She considers herself another “rank” of artist and therefore walks together with Imogen, a researcher and intellectual of respectable work. Cather brings to light, again, just as Thea had with her operatic competitors, that a successful artist steps outside of the realm of commonality and popularity and instead delves deeper, succeeding in artistic acknowledgement.

“The Garden Lodge” (1905), unlike “Flavia’s Artists,” depicts a hostess, Caroline, once a talented pianist who gave up her musical career to settle for a wealthy, successful husband. However, when she hosts an orchestra she is tempted to return to the life of an artist. She reflects upon her current life:

It was not enough; this happy, useful, well-ordered life was not enough. It did not satisfy, it was not even real. No, the other things, the shadows—they were the realities. Her father, poor Heinrich, even her mother, who had been able to sustain her poor romance and keep her little illusions amid the tasks of a scullion, were nearer happiness than she. (195)

During the time Cather was writing her short stories, she was still trying to find comfort in her novelist profession. She herself was enveloped in nice things and a luxurious lifestyle as she boarded in Isabelle McClung’s well-to-do home:

[I]t is still possible to suggest why this bond [between Cather and Isabelle McClung] was central to Cather emotionally and imaginatively. Beautiful, gracious, well-born, Isabelle possessed the “innate aristocratic refinement” Cather worshipped in the “divine femininities” she saw in the Lincoln art gallery. Isabelle was a
member of an elevated social class which Cather, despite her
democratic sympathies with Nebraska immigrants, revered. Like
Virginia Cather, she was a lady; unlike Virginia Cather, she possessed
the wealth and privilege Cather associated with that lofty rank.
Combining the power of money and status with an interest in Tolstoi
and Flaubert, Wagner and Ibsen, Isabelle satisfied her friend’s needs
to live simultaneously in conventional and unconventional worlds.
(O’Brien 236)

Cather readily admits she liked nice things. However, Cather’s idealist vision
reminded her she was pursuing her career not for the sake of a comfortable wage
and living but pursued her passion and artistry to fulfill her life goals and
accomplishments. Deep down Cather knew her love for writing grew deeper with
time, otherwise she would have resorted and decided to working as a successful
journalist or editor instead.

Cather got a lot of resistance from the Red Cloud locals after the publication
of “A Wagner Matinee” (1904):

The resulting controversy over the story was the “nearest she had
come to personal disgrace,” she told Viola Roseboro’ later. ... Family
members were particularly insulted by the supposed portrait of Aunt
Franc in Georgianna and informed Cather it wasn’t “nice” to say such
things in print. Friends and neighbors found the grim depiction of
Nebraska unfair, and Cather was even attacked in her hometown
paper by her old friend and colleague. (O’Brien 281)

The story focuses on Clark’s Aunt Georgiana who comes and visits her nephew in
Boston on her way to an estate settlement. Georgiana was once a musician and
teacher for the Boston Conservatory until she married and moved to Nebraska,
where a life of cooking, sewing, ironing, and chores awaited her. Georgiana’s busy
life had allowed her to forget how much she loved music until she gets the chance
to sit with her nephew and listen to a concert at the Wagner Matinee. She is
described as most metropolitan theater spectators might see her as: a simple
midwestern folk woman wearing queer, country clothes with worn red hands. At the sound of the music, her nephew realizes the silence his aunt has endured since walking away from music as tears stream down her face:

It never really died [her love for music], then—the soul which can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward only, like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again. She wept so throughout the development and elaboration of the melody. (240)

This moment in the story shows the true, undying passion that an artist experiences for her work. However, as Cather has consistently said, an artist must make a choice and commitment in order to succeed in her art. Georgiana made the choice of marrying and moving to the Divide as a pioneer, a choice Cather admired greatly of others. It lies in the commitments and the choices that make an artist great and embodying the pioneer spirit is no different in Cather’s eyes. Earlier in the story, Georgiana has told Clark that he must not “love [music] so well, … or it may be taken from you” (237). As Georgiana has experienced the pain of separation from her love of music, and then the reminder of that pain, she wishes to prepare her nephew for the agony he may experience, were he not to fully commit to his musical endeavors. Cather makes the observation that artistry is a life’s commitment and pursuit of passion. If the passion and commitment holds true, it will break the artist in two if a separation from art is forced upon her.

“The Willing Muse” (1907) tells the story of a literary artist who fails to achieve success as a novelist, contrary to what was predicted by his friends. He does not achieve great success because of the time he invests into his wife’s own literary abilities and accomplishments. Kenneth Gray is not aware of his own talents until his friends encourage him to pursue teaching at a small college town
in Ohio. He is passionate about literature and develops the aspiration to one day complete a great masterpiece. When he meets his future wife, Bertha, he has attempted to write a novel, which fails, but hopes his next one will be better. Through his influence, his wife’s writing develops, and she writes popular fiction that is well-received. All dedication and attention has turned to Bertha and her abilities, feeling that riding this wave of popularity may not last and they should take full advantage of the opportunity:

There was every evidence that she had absorbed from Kenneth like a water plant, but none that she had used him more violently than a clever woman may properly use her husband. (117)

Kenneth becomes her personal editor, her secretary, and her cheerleader. Just as he was serious for his own work, he is serious for her success despite the dull material she is creating. It takes hitting rock bottom for him to realize that he must dedicate his time to his own artistic talents. Upon this realization, he walks away from his home and is never to be seen again.

Kenneth’s story is fitting to Cather’s own experience. Firstly, it addresses, once more, the need to prioritize one’s artistic journey over enamored relationships. Secondly, just as Bertha has found a support system to keep her literary pursuits afloat (Cather would never call her work artistry given its popularity to the masses), Kenneth needs to find a way to dedicate time and energy to his novelistic pursuits. Cather spent too much time putting her own aspirations aside to complete her novel and instead focused on the needs that McClure had. It was only when McClure’s management was changed that Cather found the chance to walk away and fully pursue her writing. Just as Cather had failed with her first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, as did Kenneth, neither he nor Cather gave up on the
dream of completing a second, better, recognized masterpiece. Just like Kenneth, Cather had to step away into the wilderness of New Mexico to regain her vision of her future. She needed to stop assisting McClure’s and instead needed to dedicate more time to her work of fiction. It is no coincidence that Kenneth is simply editing and keeping Bertha’s literature afloat, given there is no future in it, just as Cather viewed journalism and editing for the masses and not for its quality of writing:

The whole aim of that school of writing [journalism] was novelty—never a very important thing in art. They gave us, altogether, poor standards—taught us to multiply our ideas instead of to condense them. ... The especial merit of a good reportorial story is that it shall be intensely interesting and pertinent today and shall have lost its point by tomorrow. (“On the Art of Fiction” 939)

All of Cather’s early short stories that depict the artist failing describe Cather’s own artistic repression. All of these fears, desires and questions are represented in her short stories: be it questioning her love of writing over personal companionship or the identification of a true artist’s characteristics compared to that of a false pretentious one; the financial confines of authorship and the true purpose of pursuing her dream of becoming a novelist or the fear of regret she might experience if she were to turn away from writing if she fails. Lastly, Cather described the breaking point between writing to make art a living and writing to make a difference, the decision that made all the difference in achieving her true success as author Willa Silbert Cather.
The Development of Cather’s Artistic Voice in *O Pioneers!*

Understanding Cather’s insecurities as an artist in her early short stories through failing artists and then understanding *The Song of the Lark* to be a parallel description of Cather’s feelings as a successful artist solidifies the theory that Cather wrote fiction based on her own self-identification with regards to the artist’s journey. For this reason, it is also important to understand the biographical evidence that suggests Cather had finally found her novelistic voice when writing *O Pioneers!*

Cather wrote in a letter that she is “working on another story about the length of the Bridge Builder one, and enjoying it greatly” (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 142). This is in reference to the short story, “The Bohemian Girl” (1912), which inspired the beginnings of *O Pioneers!* In truth, Cather herself didn’t even recognize the differentiation in writing technique, until she was “offered ... seven hundred and fifty dollars for it. I laughed him to scorn; *he* [Cather’s business manager, emphasis in original] doesn’t know how much a story is worth to his magazine half so well as I do, and I told him so” (143). Despite this great lack of evidence in her available letters, there is a distinct correlation between her acquaintance with Sarah Orne Jewett, her trip to New Mexico, and her change in writing with *O Pioneers!* On her trip, Cather writes:

> The longer I stayed in a country I really did care about, and among people who were a part of the country, the more unnecessary and superficial a book like *Alexander’s Bridge* seemed to me. I did no writing down there, but I recovered from the conventional editorial point of view. (“My First Novels [There Were Two]” 963)
In a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Cather writes that she has discovered, in her trip, that “[p]eople are the only interesting things there are in the world, but one had to come to the desert to find it out, and until you are in the desert, you never know how un-interesting you are yourself” (The Selected Letters of Willa Cather 154 emphasis in original). For the first time, after writing again, she is telling the story of the Divide’s housekeepers, farmers, and housewives from an interested perspective. No longer is she demeaning the workers for their lifestyle as she had done in “The Wagner Matinee.” The stories that had brought magic into her life and that she had enjoyed as a child were the immigrant housekeepers, cooks, and helpers in the Divide. She now had the chance to share them with a greater audience: her readers.

It’s important to quote Cather’s trip to New Mexico and Arizona because it is there that she experiences her own awakening into true artistry, just as Thea experiences a true understanding of her art by separating from it and encountering nature: “there, and silence, and silence and the ‘wonder’, [sic] nothing else” (158).

One thing to note during this trip of Cather’s is that she experiences a great attraction to Julio, “too beautiful to be true and so different from anyone else in the world. He is the handsome one who sings” (157). Cather notes:

Well, I broke into Julio after all! I was afraid I would, and that’s the real reason I have not written before. Next to “travel” letters, I hate to get letters that rave about the beauty of untutored youths of Latin extraction. ... But Julio is not soft and sunny. He’s indifferent and opaque and has the long strong upper lip that is so conspicuous in the Aztec culture, and somber eyes with lots of old trouble in them, and his skin is the pale, bright yellow of very old gold and old races. I really think I must get him to New York. He’d make an easy living as an artist’s model. They’d fight for him. Pardon! (159)
Cather can’t help expressing her interest in Julio, describing his every living pore into minute detail. A month after the same letter, she writes yet another one, apologizing for her whirlwind of emotions then, but dreamily continues the infatuation in the next paragraph:

I did escape, some of me, you see. I wasn’t utterly drunk up by the sand of the desert. But when you are there you do feel as if you might very easily be drunk up. I may still go back for Julio. He would be lovely at Mrs. Fields’ [sic]. A mimosa tree is nothing to him. But Mrs. Gardener would snap him up and take him to Fenway Court and he would like that better than my apartment. (161)

Comparatively, Thea also discovers and begins an amorous relationship with Fred during their visit to the desert. While playing they roughly throw stones into the vast bottom of the cliffs:

... Her fury amused Fred, who took all games lightly and played them well. She was breathing hard, and little beads of moisture had gathered on her upper lip. He slipped his arm about her. “If you will look as pretty as that—“ he bent his head and kissed her. Thea was startled, gave him an angry push, drove at him with her free hand in manner quite hostile. Fred was on his mettle in an instant. He pinned both her arms down and kissed her resolutely. When he released her, she turned away and spoke over her shoulder. “That was mean of you, but I suppose I deserved what I got.”

“I should say you did deserve it,” Fred panted, “turning savage on me like that! I should say you did deserve it!”

He saw her shoulders harden. “Well, I just said I deserved it, didn’t I? What more do you want?”

“I want you to tell me why you flew at me like that! You weren’t playing; you looked as if you’d like to murder me.”

She brushed back her hair impatiently. “I didn’t mean anything really. You interrupted me when I was watching the stone. I can’t jump from one thing to another. I pushed you without thinking.”

Fred thought her back expressed contrition. He went up to her, stood behind her with his chin above her shoulder, and said something in her ear. Thea laughed and turned toward him. They left the stone-pile carelessly, as if they had never been interested in it, rounded the yellow tower, and disappeared into the second turn of
the canyon, where the dead city, interrupted by the jutting promontory, began again. (The Song of the Lark 180-1)

Critics and readers have often jumped to the conclusion that Cather was indeed not a lesbian due to her strong outspoken desires for Julio. There is a distinct parallel, as with all things written by Cather, between her trip to New Mexico and the trip Thea takes to the desert with Fred. The description of the locale, according to O'Brien, describes the scenery as a description of the female body (410-1). One could presume it is in reference to Thea and Fred’s newfound love for one another, one they both happily embrace. As Cather found, there was a sense of sexual release during her trip, where she found herself surrounded by testosterone with her brother and his male acquaintances, compared to her usual lady companions. Her description of Julio supports this necessary physical release. However, one can also understand the description of the scenery as a birthing canal, allowing both Thea and Cather to have a rebirthing experience, an event Sargeant and McClure testify to when meeting Cather after her exciting trip. As O’Brien states:

It is difficult to assess with great certainty Julio’s role either in Cather’s entrancement with the Southwest or in her creative emergence in O Pioneers! ... What we can say with certainty, though, is that her romance with Julio (like her life and fiction in general) exposes the inadequacy of the categories we generally use—male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, sexual, nonsexual—to describe human experience. It was important that Julio was male, because the gender difference meant that Cather could release powerful feelings without fear of engulfment by a maternal presence, and this was a helpful dress rehearsal for her subsequent experience of self-abandonment in the creative process. But it was equally important that he was not conventionally male. This was a love affair with a man, but it was not a heterosexual relationship as defined and arranged in patriarchal society. (413 emphasis in original)

Cather’s perception of the artist changed in this moment. In all her early short stories, even Alexander’s Bridge if we were to characterize Alexander as artist, the
artist could not have both a relationship and a successful career. Cather and Thea both come to this realization. This reasoning is reached because the first person Cather visits after she returns back from the West, before even arriving at New York, is Isabel McClung, Cather's lover. Moreover, what Cather writes while visiting Isabel in Pittsburg, after one of the most exciting and life-changing experiences out West, follows:

Do you know, I’m glad, glad to be back out of the west—for the first time in years and years I’ve had enough of it. It is too big and consuming. I’m glad to lie down among a few books and slowly come to myself again, with all that swift yellow excitement to think of. (The Selected Letters of Willa Cather 166)

Cather has finally acknowledged to herself that she can become a successful artist without having to give up on her important relationships. As Joan Acocella describes Cather, she “was homosexual in her feelings and celibate in her actions” (48). Her relationship with both Isabel McClung and Edith Lewis is one of support, love, appreciation and encouragement. Cather realized this in observing her mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett, who also had a lifelong female companion living in the same house as her. Cather allows Thea this opportunity for love and support with Fred as well. She is still firm about her belief of dedicating explicit time to her writing, but she doesn’t shun the idea of having a companion or support system. Even her short stories, compared to the early artist stories, reintroduce the artist with an open understanding of self, allowing her more flexibility in attaining her goals as artist.
Minimalism as Medium to Artistic Success and
The Paradox of *The Song of the Lark* as a Maximalist Work of Fiction

Earlier a section of a letter Cather wrote to her editor, Mr. Greenslet, was reviewed in which she praised *The Song of the Lark* as her best work yet, going as far as saying that it was an improvement over *O Pioneers!* Cather mentions *The Song of the Lark*’s downfall in her essay, “My First Novels (There Were Two)” and in the Preface she wrote to the 1932 edition of *The Song of the Lark*. Chapter II of this thesis detail the minimalist techniques Cather employed in her writing, as exemplified in her short essays and criticisms. However, in this section I show how Cather failed to employ a minimalist technique in writing *The Song of the Lark*. The novel represents a great paradox for Cather, for it describes the success of an artist, which mirrors Cather’s own success, while employing a writing technique that more closely resembles that of *Alexander’s Bridge* rather than that of *O Pioneers!*: a convoluted plot utilizing a maximalist writing style.

In Chapter III of the thesis I discussed the elements needed in an artist to thrive in the arts, particularly with the use of sacrifice for the sake of art. Just as an artist must sacrifice certain constituents in her life, the same must be done to the artist’s work of art. Randall’s analysis and interpretation of *The Song of the Lark* demonstrates the juxtaposition that the novel stands in with that regard:

The chief trouble with *The Song of the Lark* is a failure in moral vision; in it Willa Cather shows a distressing predilection for allowing her heroine to have things both ways at once. Thus in her conversion scene Thea Kronborg gives up human relations, only to get them back again in the form of all the male adulation she receives as a result of her operatic success. In the Panther Canyon episode she dedicates herself to a concept of art which is loftier and more demanding of discipline than mere self-expression, only to be allowed all the self-
expression she wants by being admired for her “big personality.” Which is regarded as the basis of her art. Finally she is allowed a free hand to do literally anything she pleases when we are told that “what she does is interesting because she does it.” This is the equivalent of giving her an emotional and artistic blank check in which any sort of conduct she may care to indulge in is approved ahead of time. Small wonder that readers balk at Willa Cather’s ecstatic rhapsodizing over Thea. (50)

Randall describes the encompassing dilemma with *The Song of the Lark*: it is counterintuitive to what Cather had always envisioned as an artist’s journey. Cather had referred to all the sacrifices that the artist must make, and *The Song of the Lark*, according to Randall, does not fit that ideology. However, as this thesis explains, there are differentiations between sacrificing relationships, which Thea does, and having a support system, which Thea needs in order to master her art. The two are confused in Randall’s criticism. What he does address, however, is the fact that Cather’s idolization of Thea does grant her protagonist “an emotional and artistic blank check.” The reason for this is that, as Cather gained confidence in her writing after *O Pioneers!* and found her voice as an artist, she felt her next step was to share her success story. The connection to the novel was so strong that she lost sight of the writing’s quality and the minimalistic traits she had discovered in *O Pioneers*. Cather indulged in the many isolated moments of the novel: the various trips to Chicago for training, the many trips Dr. Archie makes to visit Thea without a clear purpose, the number of characters and side stories that are encompassed in the novel. The reader is left confused as to where the author is taking the narrative, and as a result, an artistic success story that could have been magical is lost.

However, Cather’s own writing career was far from clear and concise, and the level of personalization that went into *The Song of the Lark* imitates exactly
that—close attachment to a story that did not allow her to sacrifice certain events, characters and elements for the sake of great art:

_The Song of the Lark_ is the first of her stories in which the author’s personal peculiarities have a seriously adverse effect on the quality of her art. ... Willa Cather nowhere attempts to soften the rough contour of Thea’s character in an effort to make her more amiable; rather she seems to admire her most for those qualities which most readers find despicable. (Randall 51)

Cather’s serious downfall in composing _The Song of the Lark_ is her inability to be objective in her writing. Minimalistic techniques that Cather had used successfully in _O Pioneers!_ are nonexistent in _The Song of the Lark_. One of the elements to a minimalist work is having the ability, as author, to release hold of their control over what her readers will and will not deduct about the story, its characters and message. The novel was written inspired by her interviews with Olive Fremstad’s and her personal career as an opera singer. Cather anticipated Ms. Fremstad’s read of the novel and excitedly awaited the diva’s review (_The Selected Letters of Willa Cather_ 212). Cather openly shared with Fremstad that her novel was inspired by the singer’s career and likely felt obliged to idolize Thea and her experience just as she did Fremstad. Moreover, she felt the need to include more of Fremstad’s story than was necessary, given she’d have the singer’s approval or disapproval after the novel’s publication. For this reason, when writing _The Song of the Lark_, Cather couldn’t risk any open interpretation of the characters or plot to her readers, in fear of Ms. Fremstad’s negative interpretation of the novel’s heroine.

Cather’s need to write for a figure repressed the novelist’s own instinctual writing abilities, another key element to minimalist writing. While Cather is not imitating a writing style as she had done with Henry James, she was imitating
accounts and life events to her own and Ms. Fremstad’s. The novel’s biographical features are to a fault, given Cather couldn’t draw the line between an autobiography and a work of fiction. The mix of the two, in this case, results in a literary disarray.

Cather rightfully states that after the publication of *The Song of the Lark*, her early writing was “foamy-at-the-mouth” and it “was a crime to write like I did.” While Cather did not go as far as writing in the style of stream of consciousness as given in an example on page 9, she does not simplify her writing and withholds her readers with the ability to think critically and creatively of the unfolding events. Cather is, again, gripping at the novel with the level of control she had for her early writing of short stories. The amount of detail and action leaves the reader with little to no imagination to interpret a scene or situation. Oftentimes, the events Thea is described in are questionable in purpose and meaning. Must the reader follow Thea through multiple trainings and educations in order to understand her development as an artist? The reason for including it, once again, is that Thea’s experience is deeply personal to Cather biographically, and depicts her own long, arduous journey as writer. She wrote for 22 years before she managed to create a work like *O Pioneers!* The “furnishing” of *Song of the Lark* is by no means bare as she admirably described the classic Greek plays; rather, it is “foamy-at-the-mouth” in its plot, description and message.

*The Song of the Lark*’s last section, “Kronborg,” appears rushed and anticlimactic. Thea has accomplished herself as an opera singer in the greatest city, New York City, Dr. Archie’s malevolent wife has died and left him to enjoy his freedom, Fred is still tied down to a wife who has gone mad and now lives in an
asylum, but nevertheless dies in time to bring Fred and Thea together toward a happy marriage and ending. Thea performs her greatest career performance and manages to bring together Harsanyi, his wife, Spanish Johnny, Dr. Archie and Fred to witness her true career achievement as an operatic diva. However, the majority of the third book depicts Thea’s unhappy venture into the world of opera, her erratic demeanor, and her brutish and self-centered ways. Could Cather have felt herself reflected in Thea as she peaked in her career? Or might Cather subconsciously questioned the validity of the novel’s essence and construction? One thing is sure: it is only her Aunt Tillie that sings Thea’s praises in the novel, and even while doing so, the reader mocks her for it, despite the true accolades that Thea receives on a national scale in the newspapers. Deep down, despite her interest in the novel, Cather, particularly toward the end of its completion, and possibly during her exchanges with Mr. Greenslet, noticed the imperfections and unskilled penmanship. In my Introduction I had questioned why, after so many years of writing about the artist and its journey, had Cather put an end to the subject after completing *The Song of the Lark*. Quite possibly, Cather may have realized the paradox that the novel stood in soon after its publication: to compose a novel on the subject of an artist’s journey which lacked, what I have defined as minimalistic writing, a true artist’s writing technique and form. The fact that she progressed with the same minimalistic style as in *O Pioneers!* when writing *My Ántonia*, making it her best writing accomplishment thus far, reiterates her awareness.
Thea has been living in Chicago for four months upon her second visit to the city. One of her landlords, Mrs. Andersen, discovers she has not been to see The Art Institute. “But the pictures! ... Ah, but Miss Kronborg, there are old masters! Oh, many of them, such as you could not see anywhere out of Europe” (116). Thea ventures into the institute one cold winter day and compels herself to see the wonders she has been missing out on. It is here she encounters the painting of the novel’s title:

But in that same room there was a picture—oh, that was the thing she ran upstairs so fast to see! That was her picture. She imagined that nobody cared for it but herself, and that it waited for her. That was a picture indeed. She liked even the name of it, “The Song of the Lark.” The flat country, the early morning light, the wet fields, the look in the girl’s heavy face—well, they were all hers, anyhow, whatever was there. She told herself that that picture was “right.” Just what she meant by this, it would take a clever person to explain. But to her the word covered the almost boundless satisfaction she felt when she looked at the picture. (117)

The connection to the painting is beyond the narrator’s explanation, as Cather herself probably felt when she chose the painting’s title for her novel. What draws Thea to the painting is the scenery that is familiar to her: “the flat county, the early morning light, the wet fields.” Two chapters earlier in the novel, Thea had reached her lowest point in Chicago: “And while she walked she cried” (105). Harsanyi couldn’t figure out what troubled the girl so much. Thea feels she is not progressing in skill and feels defeated. She is homesick, and therefore gravitates to this painting
as an invisible force would push her to, running “upstairs so fast to see!” The painting depicts her, particularly in its description of a “girl’s heavy face;” a face heavy with sorrow, challenged, worn and exhausted.

Without seeing the painting and reading Thea’s description of it, one would think this farm maid is hopeless and tired. The only uplifting part of the painting appears to be the scenery from what the narrator shares. Cather certainly describes the journey of the artist to be one of difficulty, loneliness, sacrifice, and persistence. However, when observing the painting, a flush of red cheeks and a serene look shine upon the peasant girl’s face. Given its title, the girl looks up, listening to the lark’s song at the end of the day, a time when the bird will sing in search of its mate. The scene retells the experience Thea underwent after experiencing her first orchestra. Thea had felt alive and hopeful after her first true musical experience. Similarly, after a long, hard day the young lady in the painting feels rejuvenated and hopeful for what the next day holds. Music, the lark’s beautiful song, encourages her to wake the next morning and complete another hard day’s work, just to have the chance to hear the lark’s melody once more. Just as Cather held on to the dream of becoming a writer, the challenging days paid off as she experienced the positive remarks people shared about her literature. It is uncanny how much the peasant girl in the painting resembles the description of Ántonia Shimerda, the main protagonist of My Ántonia, the novel that follows The Song of the Lark and Cather’s greatest work up until that time. One could suppose Cather was inspired by the painting and its meaning to move toward a novel that would only improve upon her other works.
Primarily, critics admired *The Song of the Lark*. In *The Nation* Henry Walcott Boynton remarks how Cather “has attempted that most dangerous of feats—to trace the genesis of genius... [because] Thea Kronborg we believe in” (“Varieties of Realism” *The Nation*, vol 101 462). Moreover, from *Deal*, Edward E. Hale believed “Cather wants to give the soul of the artist, the sense of art” in her novel and is able to capture “a fine realization of the artistic nature,” a most important element to Cather’s purpose of writing the Künstlerroman (O’Connor 69). Her effort, determination, risk and vision are certainly recognized by these critics. Cather even wrote an appreciative response to Boynton, detailing the previous commentaries he had made for *O Pioneers!* which helped her create the work that is *The Song of the Lark*:

> It seems impertinent to thank a critic whose opinion one values; but I hope it is not amiss for me to say that your sympathetic understanding of what I tried to do in my last book, and of some of the difficulties that made it hard for me to carry out my intentions, gives me very deep gratification and encouragement. I would also like to tell you that your review of “O Pioneers!” [sic] was very real help to me in undertaking the longer book. In that review you suggested some feeling on your part that the cow-puncher’s experience of the West was not the only experience possible there, and you seemed to feel that one might give some truthful account of life in a new country without pretending to a jovial brutality which, however much one might like to have it, cannot be successfully affected—at least, not by women. (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* 211)

Cather took a lot of direction from her critics and those close to her. Evidently, Boynton’s impression upon her, combined with her journey as an artist, prompted her to write a longer, more personal and maximalist novel than she previously had with *O Pioneers!*
However, not all critics responded kindly to *The Song of the Lark* and those comments also influenced Cather to rethink her approach when composing her next literary work. For *The Bookman* Frederick Taber Cooper told that an audience “who demands action, a strong well-knit plot carefully worked out with an ever-watchful eye for the greatest economy of means, will feel a growing irritation at the placid, casual manner in which things happen” (“Some Novels of the Month” 323). Moreover, James L. Ford, who wrote for *The New York Herald Tribune*, complained that it had “so much of life, of action, of character study [and] would have been even more engrossing if [Cather] had condensed it somewhat” (O’Connor 61). Critics were clear: the novel lacked focus and a clear plot, which had maximized into unnecessary commentaries upon its characters and events. However, it was Cather’s greatest champion, H.L. Mencken, who prompted Cather to take a different direction in *My Ántonia*:

> There is nothing new in the story that Willa Sibert Cather tells in *The Song of the Lark*; it is, in fact, merely one more version, with few changes, of the ancient fable of Cinderella, probably the oldest of the world’s love stories and surely the most steadily popular.

> ... But if the tale is thus conventional in its outlines, it is full of novelty and ingenuity in its detail. ... Miss Cather, indeed, here steps definitely into the small class of American novelists who are seriously to be reckoned with. Her *Alexander’s Bridge* was full of promise, and her *O Pioneers!* showed the beginnings of fulfillment. In *The Song of the Lark* she is already happily at ease, a competent journeyman. I have read no late novel, in fact, with a greater sense of intellectual stimulation. *Especially in the first half,* it is alive with sharp bits of observation, sly touches of humor, gestures of that gentle pity which is the fruit of understanding. (*H.L. Mencken On American Literature* 75 emphasis added)

Mencken’s depiction of the novel is most accurate. He tells of the failings, like the novel’s ending, length and its representation of rags to riches fairytale, as well as
its victories, such as the intellectual stimulus, detail, humor and passion. Nevertheless, a challenge remains: Cather was “happily at ease, a competent journeyman” in the world of novelists. She had told the story of *O Pioneers!* so beautifully and gained recognition as a result. Cather had finally reached a level of successful artistry as a novelist, that she desired to tell her journey in its fulfillment.

“Too much detail is apt,” as Cather had shared, a trait she regretfully employed in the writing of *The Song of the Lark*. Lacking a minimalistic writing technique and carefully considering the critiques she received on the novel from critics she trusted, Cather retreated back into her minimalistic writing technique when creating her next work, *My Ántonia*, the greatest work she had accomplished thus far in her career. Her champion, H.L. Mencken, recognized her aware discovery when writing his commentary of her composition of *My Ántonia*:

> Miss Cather is a craftsman whom I have often praised in this place, and with increasing joy. Her work, for ten years past, has shown a steady and rapid improvement, in both matter and manner. She has arrived at last at such a command of the mere devices of writing that the uses she makes of them are all concealed—her style has lost self-consciousness; her feeling for form has become instinctive. And she has got such a grip upon her materials—upon the people she sets before us and the background she displays behind them—that both take on an extraordinary reality. I know of no novel that makes the remote folk of the western prairies more real than *My Ántonia* makes them, and I know of none that makes them seem better worth knowing. Beneath the swathings of balderdash, the surface of numskulldery and illusion, the tawdry stuff of Middle Western Kultur, she discovers human beings embattled against fate and the gods, and into her picture of their dull struggle she gets a spirit that is genuinely heroic, and a pathos that is genuinely moving. It is not as they see themselves that she depicts them, but as they actually are. To representation she adds something more. There is not only the story of poor peasants, flung by fortune into lonely, inhospitable wilds; there is the eternal tragedy of man. (*H.L. Mencken’s Smart Set Criticism* 266)
Mencken covers multiple accounts of Cather’s employed minimalist style: an “instinctive” feeling for writing and story-telling, a controlled and improved form in which she has a “grip upon her materials” and, the ability to manage and simplify its contents. Evidently, Cather returned to the style employed in *O Pioneers!* when writing *My Ántonia*.

“Optima dies ... prima fugit” reads Jim in Cather’s *My Ántonia* (381). The quote comes from Virgil, which translates to “The best days ... are the first to flee.” Such was Cather’s experience in writing *The Song of the Lark*: it was a novel compiling her most treasured times and people, of her greatest accomplishments up until that point, and her proudest realizations and moments in her life. To keep their memory alive, she wrote them down in the form of her Bildungsroman, *The Song of the Lark*. Cather adored the novel and believed in its artistry but also realized that the moment had passed once she had memorialized it in her Künstlerroman. The novelist discovered that her true voice lay in minimalist writing, and had rested her peace with *The Song of the Lark*. 
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