

ANALYSIS

The Song of the Lark (1915)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“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. Thea Kronborg begins as a Methodist preacher’s daughter in a little town in Colorado, and ends as Sieglinde at the Metropolitan Opera House, with a packed house ‘roaring’ at her and bombarding her with ‘a greeting that was almost savage in its fierceness.’ As for Fairy Princes, there are no less than three of them, the first a Galahad in the sooty overalls of a freight conductor, the second a small town doctor with a disagreeable wife, and the third Mr. Fred Ottenburg...

But if the tale is thus conventional in its outlines, it is full of novelty and ingenuity in its details.... 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

Review of *The Song of the Lark*
Smart Set (January 1916)

“Thea, a genius in her own right, outgrows her Colorado birthplace and becomes a famous singer with the fierce energy of a pioneer who happens to be an instinctive artist rather than an instinctive manager, like Alexandra, or an instinctive mother, like Antonia. Because women are here the heroes, neither wars, as among the ancients, nor machines, as among the moderns, determine the principal activities. The moods of the novels have an even more epic air than the actions.... Thea Kronborg, troubled by the swarming sensations of her first year in Chicago, has to find her true self again in that marvelous desert canyon in Arizona where hot sun and bright, cold water and dim memories of the cliff-dwelling Ancient Peoples detach her from the stupid faces that have haunted and unnerved her. Pioneers and artists alike are threatened by a world which may trespass against them....

A great singer must be an athlete and an actor, training for months and years for the sake of a few hours of triumph before a living audience. The story of Thea Kronborg is the story of her unspeculative, demoniac integrity. She lifts herself from handicapping conditions almost as an animal shoulders its way through scratching underbrush to food and water. Thea may be checked and delayed by all sorts of human complications, but her deeper nature never loses the sense of its right direction. Ambition with her is scarcely more than the passion of self-preservation in a potent spirit.”

Carl Van Doren

The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 284-86

“Thea Kronberg, daughter of a Swedish minister in Colorado, during her growth to adolescence develops an obsessive interest in music. Her ability on the piano is encouraged by her eccentric German music teacher, Professor Wunsch, and by Dr. Howard Archie, a kindly, educated physician whose unfortunate marriage taints his life. Set apart from the townspeople by her talents and ardent nature, she prefers such friends as ‘Spanish Johnny’ Tellamantez and the railroad worker Ray Kennedy, who falls in love with her but dies in a train wreck, leaving her his insurance. With this sum she goes to Chicago, at 17, to study with the pianist Andor Harsanyi, who finds in her the same innate taste and artistic integrity that mark his own character.

When he discovers that she is earning her way by singing in a church choir, he listens to her voice, and finds it has great possibilities. He sends her to study voice with Madison Bowers, whose chill, selfish attitude repels her, but through him she meets the wealthy young brewer Fred Ottenburg, who introduces her to such socially prominent friends and art patrons as the Nathanmeyers. After she becomes ill and discouraged, despite her progress, Ottenburg invites her to his father's Arizona ranch. They fall in love, and traveled together in Mexico, but separate because Fred, already married, is unable to obtain a divorce. Dr. Archie advances her the money necessary for study in Europe, and after ten years she becomes a great Wagnerian soprano of the Metropolitan Opera. Although she later marries Ottenburg after his wife's death, her life is expressed and bound up in her career, in which she finds not happiness but the fulfillment of the driving artistic impulse that has always ruled her."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 707

"Between *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, Willa Cather wrote her longest novel, *The Song of the Lark* (1915). It begins about 1890 in the parsonage of a small town in Colorado, moves to Chicago and the life of a music student there in the early days of the Thomas orchestra, makes an excursion into the canyons of the Southwest (later to be so impressively presented in *The Professor's House*), and, passing over Thea's period of study abroad, ends in New York, where she is singing Wagnerian roles at the Metropolitan. *The Song of the Lark* presents 'Moonstone,' Colorado, with extraordinary fidelity. The first section gives vivid pictures of various personages through whom the growing artist's sensibilities are awakened. There are Doctor Archie, whose skill and sympathy mean so much; the Kohlers, with their quaint German ways, forever planting trees to make shade; Professor Wunsch, the pitiful, derelict music-master; Ray Kennedy, the ill-starred young brakeman, who loves Thea, and whose life insurance is the means of launching her upon her career; and Spanish Johnny, with his sensitive spirit and his disreputable ways.

Miss Cather later virtually repudiated *The Song of the Lark* on the ground that 'the full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody' was not the right method for her. Moreover, 'The book set out to tell of an artist's awakening and struggle.... It should have been content to do that.' Yet the last part of the novel is by no means entirely unsuccessful; like George Moore's *Evelyn Innes*, it remains one of the best studies we have in fiction of the artistic life of a great stage artist. Where it fails, as in Thea's affair with Fred Ottenburg, the trouble is not that Thea has 'arrived' but that Willa Cather is writing outside her range."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 325-26

"The author said this was both her favorite novel and the one that satisfied her least. It deals with the transformation of Thea Kronborg, daughter of a Swedish preacher in Moonstone, Col., from a passionate, troubled, eager adolescent into a famous opera singer. Thea is to some extent drawn from the famous Wagnerian opera singer Olive Fremstad."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1058

"In the vast bulk of literature about women prior to *The Song of the Lark*, who marries whom, or at least who goes to bed with whom, is not only not a small matter, it is the subject.... To my knowledge, *The Song of the Lark* is the first completely serious female *Kunstlerroman*, the first portrait-of-an-artist-as-a-young-woman in which the heroine's artistic development is the whole story, with sex an incidental matter—as incidental, for example, as in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which was published in the same year.... *The Song of the Lark* is Cather's most autobiographical novel."

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 1-2

Michael Hollister (2015)