

Bond Between Human And The Nature: A Critical Study On Willa Cather's *The Song Of The Lark*

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Abstract

Environmental themes are prominent in the narrative subtexts of several of Willa Cather's early novels. However, Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915) readings do not fully examine her use of love tales as an intentional narrative technique that ties individual people with one other and the country. We'll focus on how the love tales in *The Song of the Lark* intertwine between people and the land to help readers establish a stronger connection with nature. Cather elevates the love tales well beyond their fundamental power to evoke readers' emotions or display a symbolic depiction of the American landscape's tremendous modification throughout the 1910s by accomplishing this. As a result, her use of love tales as a narrative technique helps the reader relate to environmental changes on an interpersonal and human level. It is also possible that this literary style might be very successful in today's environmental debate because of its ability to persuade the reader to raise their environmental consciousness and perhaps affect future behaviour. The study argues that these bridges are built on one of the most fundamental tenets of the collective unconscious: the common situation of love and the shared experience of loss, and that this operates in Cather's *The Song of the Lark* to traverse the divide to a true identifier with, respect for, and sustainable improvement of the connection between people and nature.

Key Words: Feminism, Environment, Nature, love

The second book in Willa Cather's Prairie Trilogy, *The Song of the Lark*, was a remarkable departure from the prairie. 'O, Pioneers!' The grassland is completely absent from *The Song of the Lark*. Rather, the action takes place in places like Moonstone, Colorado, Chicago, Panther Caon, Arizona, and throughout Europe in this book. In creating *The Song of the Lark*, Cather strayed far from her original concept, a love tale set in the prairies that she had long held dear to her heart.

In the words of Randolph Bourne, "Her diversion into *The Song of the Lark* carried her into an area that neither her style nor her zeal truly qualified her for." The following is an excerpt from Bourne (145). Another observation made by several of Cather's colleagues was that the author seemed "very bored with her narrative" (Anonymous 129). Readers and reviewers alike seemed to be underwhelmed by the work, but Cather herself seemed to be dissatisfied. A song called "*The Song of the Lark*," according to Mildred Bennett, "did not fit her." Because of the volume of content, "she felt that it was too much," she added. "I had not removed it well enough." According to (Bennett 201), Even Cather herself admitted that she hadn't achieved her goals.

Even though the work was widely panned, many realized what Cather was trying to accomplish: discovering the new American frontier in the Southwest. Even though she found some inspiration in this new frontier, it was no match for the open spaces of the prairie. Her genuine love was not with this man..... Because she couldn't write *The Song of the Lark* with the same realism as her earlier work, O Pioneers! readers and reviewers alike concluded that Cather was not at home in her new society. As one of her contemporaries put it,

"Miss Cather would perhaps be shocked to know how sharp were the contrasts between those parts of her book which are built out of her own experience and those which are imagined. Her defects are almost wholly those of unassimilated experience" (Anonymous 129).

In the end, however, *The Song of Lark* was a failure; it did succeed in telling some really meaningful love tales that were deeply rooted in the region itself. Ray Kennedy's undying love for Thea Kronborg and Thea Kronborg's passion for the Southwest are two of the novel's most moving

love tales. Let's take a closer look at what it was like for Cather to fall in love with the wild west. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather's goal was similar to in *O Pioneers!*—to bring her readers closer to the country by intertwining love tales.

Even though Cather's love of the prairie was not explicitly conveyed in *The Song of the Lark*, this concept of integration did come through in her overwhelming spiritual devotion to the frontier. Carl Jung's concept of "individuation" inspired this assimilation. Human individuation, according to Jung, was characterized by the "unknown vista or some unanticipated upheaval" that confronts people later in life. A catastrophe might catalyze a paradigm shift. In other cases, it manifests itself as a deep sense of self-doubt. It might take the form of a profound longing or a nudge in the right way (Min 3). Although Cather's work *The Song of the Lark* was based on "unassimilated experience," she was also searching for the frontier in both herself and her writing around the time of the novel's publication.

When Cather's family relocated to Nebraska in 1883, the grassland was her first introduction to the frontier. However, when she returned to the Nebraska prairie of her youth in 1910, the landscape had altered so dramatically that the frontier she had known and loved was no longer available: Willa Cather: *The Road is All's* narrator, David Strathairn, states that "Cather went home to Nebraska in the spring of 1912." However, the sleepy town from her youth was long gone. She travelled to Arizona and New Mexico in search of "the frontier of her imagination" (Willa Cather Film). Cather needed to find a means to live with her love for Nebraska, being a love for what it had once been rather than for what it had become.

"I believe each writer is attempting to find his or her way out of darkness," says poet Tony Mares. The unending struggle between light and darkness is the driving force behind everything. To sum it up, death is always the victor. Ultimately, "defining light" overcomes it" (Willa Cather Film). At least in part, Cather discovered her "defining light" in the Southwest. It felt like a healthy counterbalance to the arrogant individualism, spiritual emptiness, and corrupt materialism of contemporary American society, where gaining and spending were the only holy activities" in the Southwest Indians' culture. (O'Brien 414). Cather's new prairie would be the Southwest when she

wrote *The Song of the Lark*. Like a result, she found herself "... feeling full and integrated" in the Southwest, where she faced a place that could still speak to her as the prairie had (418).

Since she was seeking a new frontier in her imagination, she achieved success with *The Song of the Lark* by portraying individuals looking for purpose, a place to belong, and a feeling of love in the early 1900s. In Susan Rosowski's words, "Cather in her work conveys the loneliness of those who can't find someone to love... the horrible, agonizing loneliness of wanting..." (From the Willa Cather film). They are particularly strong because they reflect Cather's feelings about love for Ray and Thea and the country in the novels. Cather conveys the "longing for connection" that Rosowski talks about in these pieces. Cather's personal experiences of love and grief are reflected in these works.

Ray Kennedy works for the railroad. It has been noted that Cather wrote of Ray as being a "radical idealist," a "free-thinker," and "very romantic" (TSL 42). Ray sees these qualities in Thea, and it's what drew him to her in the first place. When Ray took a cigar from a newlywed railroad guy, he told himself, "I know enough not to marry until I have met my ideal, and I can maintain her like a queen." As "an aggressive idealist," Ray (48). He discovers this ideal in Thea.

Ray's affection for Thea is sincere and unwavering. He loves her, even though she does not adore him in return. "On his walk from the depot to his boardinghouse, Ray Kennedy frequently glanced up and saw Thea's light glowing while the rest of the house was dark, and felt pleased as by a pleasant welcome," Cather writes (53). "Of course, he was living for Thea," Cather says (98). And, although his income was derived from the train that now crisscrossed and would permanently alter the natural scene, the substance of his emotions and love was derived from the land: "He was a devoted soul, and numerous disappointments had not altered his character."

He was still, at heart, the same youngster who had settled down to freeze with his sheep in a Wyoming snowstorm when he was sixteen... (TSL 53). Ray is a powerful guy, yet he isn't heartless in the least.

Ray's love for Thea is as ardent, as deep, and as unconditional as his readiness to die with his sheep in a snowstorm out of devotion and compassion for the animals in his care. He decides not to

marry until he can marry her—which he knows in his heart will never happen. So, even if he gets fatally crushed by a train because of his caboose man’s self-involved recklessness and slowly suffers a painful death in which his body is completely damaged, he still pleads for Thea. Rather than asking her to console him, he consoles her. After his death, Ray leaves Thea \$500 (about \$11,000 in today’s money). He gives it freely, his only request being that she utilizes it to leave Moonstone and pursue her ambition of being a singer in Chicago. He understands that Moonstone will not be able to fulfil her desire, and he understands the sorrow of not fulfilling one’s aspirations because of his unrequited love for Thea. Ray cares so much about Thea and wants her to reach her full potential that he provides her with the opportunity for self-realization—or, as Jung put it, individuation—not only by allowing her to visit Chicago but, more importantly, by providing her with the means to have the profoundly enlightening experience she has in Panther Caon. Through her time in Panther Caon, his belief in and commitment to Thea, a love he gained from the earth and his fellow animals, helps Thea fully discover herself and be one with her essence.

“Ray Kennedy, a railroader romancer,” writes Richard Giannone, “brings the young artist to other beginnings...” (Giannone). He physically helps her start over by supporting her escape from Moonstone, but he had already sown the seed of the Southwest in Thea many years before. Ray informs Thea when she is a young adolescent, “You begin to sense what the human race has been up against from the beginning,” in an almost prophetic comment about the Southwest. Those antique habitations have a wonderful uplifting quality about them.” Song 149 by Cather. “The significance of the human narrative is his gift to Thea,” writes Giannone (Giannone 134). Ray’s actual present to Thea is the healing abilities that the Southwest will bestow upon her, not the money he leaves her.

So, after a year in Chicago, Thea spends the summer in Panther Caon in Arizona, amid the Navajo “Ancient People’s” abandoned habitations. She had the sensation of returning to her childhood’s freedom, amazement, and safety: “The personality that she had been so weary of appeared to give up on her. It was absorbed like blotting paper by the lofty, brilliant air... She was returning to the oldest sources of joy she could remember. She felt fully free of the enslaving urge to succeed in life. Darkness regained the wonderful enchantment that it had in youth” (Cather, Song

266). Ray offers her a gift that will live well beyond her summer in the Caon. It sticks with her for the rest of her life, affecting her life. She credits the accomplishment of her professional aspirations to the transformational influence of her time in the Caon more than a decade later, when she relocated to Europe and accomplished her professional dreams: “I’m not sure I’d have gotten anywhere without Panther Caon,” Thea says. ““Do you have any idea what the Ancient People taught me? They educated me about the inevitability of human suffering... You have to feel it in your body; it must be deep. It’s an animal-like sensation”” (TSL 397-398). Ray’s love for Thea and his gift to her are, at their core, the transformational qualities found in nature.

As a result, Ray’s love for Thea opens the way for Thea’s love of nature, which she has had since she was a little kid in Moonstone. The Moonstone landscape’s childhood influence is an external life force energizing an inside one: “Thea used to pull her mattress near her low window and lay awake for a long time, trembling with enthusiasm. Life, in truth, surges from inside, not from beyond” (TSL 127). “... tantalizes Thea with a message of freedom, boldness, and ambition,” says Moonstone’s natural scenery. She learned a great lot from humans, but it pales in contrast to the news of the earth’s naked strength” (Giannone 132). Significantly, Thea gets emotionally and spiritually battered down to the point that she becomes physically unwell when she leaves Moonstone for Chicago, away from the “vigour of the soil.”

“Even though the unconscious is unconscious, there nevertheless seems to be an intelligence and a purpose in its uninvited incursions,” according to Jung’s article, “The Study in the Process of Individuation.” Our psyches aim to self-regulate and balance our psychological state of being in the same way that our bodies intuitively strive to maintain a specific range of body temperature” (Min 7). Thea understands she has to return to the land deep, unconscious.

She returns to Moonstone after a year in Chicago as a first effort to reconnect with nature:

“Thea felt that she was coming back to her land. This earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly. The absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang—and one’s heart sang

there, too. It was hard to tell about it, for it had nothing to do with words; it was like the light of the desert at noon or the smell of the sagebrush after rain; intangible but powerful. She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her” (TSL 199).

Moonstone isn't enough for Thea. She needs a country far from her family and her history. She also requires that her connection with nature be completely between her and the land. “Here were the sandhills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the creatures that wakened and chirped in the early dawn; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the boundless desire of all flat regions,” Thea says as she arrives at Panther Caon. First recollections, long ago mornings; the wonder of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet ancient, who had imagined something despondent, something beautiful, in the dark before it was born (TSL 181-183). This contrasts sharply with Thea's experience in Chicago, which has rendered her incapacitated to the point of evoking a sense of hell:

A furious gale was beating over the city from Lake MichiganThe congestion of life all about her. . . the brutality and power threatening to drive one under The cars passed, screaming as they rounded curves, but either they were full to the doors, or were bound for places where she did not want to go. A young man came out of the saloon and stood eyeing her questioningly while he lit a cigarette. ‘Looking for a friend tonight?’ he asked An old man approached her He kept thrusting his face up near hers Then he vanished, disappeared like the Devil in a play. A cloud of dust blew in her face and blinded him. The world became one's enemy; people, buildings, wagons, carts, rushed at once to crush her under ” (TSL 181-183).

At this moment, Thea realizes she must return to the natural world and that it cannot be to Moonstone.

While Chicago's dark, cold, and filthy environment had made her sick, her stay in Panther Caon has made her whole again. Thea lives in Panther Caon “completely by the natural pull of things in the Southwest— truly submerged in the earth's life-water” (Giannone 134). This event is “an

expansion of Ray's idealism," Giannone says (134). "transformation is brought forth" in Panther Caon. She can sense the Cliff-Dwellers' daily moods, and this empathy allows her to let go of her Chicago bitterness and immerse herself in "the first sources of delight" (TSL 140). Thea is finally alive and present after a lifetime of searching—and it takes the land to teach her this. Thea's time in Panther Caon restores her soul, and she is once again connected to the natural environment as well as a people and culture that has long since vanished the Navajo:

Panther Cañon was like a thousand others—one of those abrupt fissures with which the earth in the Southwest is riddled. In this hollow (like a great fold in the rock) the Ancient People had built their houses of yellowish stone and mortar Aand the houses all smelled of the tough little cedars that twisted themselves into the very doorways. All her life, she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up. Now, she reflected it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her. She had got to a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort. Here she could lie for half a day undistracted, holding pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind—almost in her hands Her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a colour, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas." (TSL 267-270).

Thea learns to quit fighting life and instead build a relationship with the land in the shape of Panther Caon after so much failed effort to become a singer and herself. The Caon gives Thea a taste of what the Southwest frontier had to offer at the time, a setting in which "human people had imprinted the land by adapting to its necessities rather than pushing their wills onto it" (O'Brien 415). Similarly, Willa Cather's time in the Southwest enabled her to write about it as a fully integrated experience. "The ancient landscapes of the Southwest engender, above all, states of awareness that balance the impulse to command the environment with the desire to float through the natural world," writes Guy Reynolds (Reynolds 186). Cather talks about a new frontier that delivers, at least in part, what the prairie once provided before all of the grass was gone, and it was sliced through by railroad

tracks, powerlines, and endless agricultural fields. It also gives Thea a connection to the land and a strong love relationship that heals and restores her.

The fundamental strength of *The Song of the Lark* would rest in Cather's personal experience as a person and a writer, even if it did not entirely successful as the book that Willa Cather aspired to create. It's in her creation of Ray, who loves Thea unconditionally and has a deep connection to nature, as well as Thea's renewed love of nature and the change and feeling of completeness it gives.

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