

HEROINE ARTISTS IN CATHER'S EARLY NOVELS

by

DEBRA DEE MUNN, B.A.

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CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .   | ii   |
| CHAPTER   |      |
| I. INTRODUCTION: CATHER'S PIONEER ARTISTS . .   | 1    |
| II. THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE TO THE LAND . . . .                                       | 12   |
| III. THE COST OF THE STRUGGLE: ITS EFFECT<br>UPON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS . . . . | 38   |
| IV. THE ARTIST AND HER ART: ANTONIA AS<br>CATHER'S ULTIMATE ARTIST . . . . .          | 71   |
| LIST OF SOURCES CONSULTED . . . . .   | 100  |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: CATHER'S PIONEER ARTISTS

Willa Cather brought together at least three of her interests in the early novels, O Pioneers! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), and My Antonia (1918). All three have as their protagonists Continental European immigrant heroines, and all three combine Cather's interest both in the pioneer and the artist, two types of individuals which she equated. Each of the heroines--Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and Antonia Shimerda--is an embodiment of both the pioneer to the New World and the artist who strives for expression in her own special medium.

Though she was born in Virginia of Welsh and Scotch-Irish stock herself, Cather chose in these early novels to write about the struggles of the immigrant rather than those of the native American pioneer. The question of why she chose the immigrant is dealt with by John H. Randall III, who explains that Cather viewed life in Europe as being much more pleasant and more stimulating than life in America's Middle West. European culture represented to her a civilization based upon "civilized sensibility, a heightened enjoyment of life, and a response to art," three qualities which Cather did not find in the lives of most Americans. For all the advantages that European culture offered over the native American life, however, Randall says there was

one that Cather believed to be lacking in the older culture: an opportunity for the individual to develop as freely as he desired. It was America that truly offered the liberty for one to become an individual and to develop personal talents without being held back. According to Randall, these two cultural characteristics of the Old and the New Worlds account for Cather's choice of the European immigrant rather than the native American pioneer as her protagonist. With this combination of Old World values and New World freedoms, Willa Cather was able to draw a character who was "the cream of two continents" and who "combines the best features of both Old World and New."<sup>1</sup> Randall also points out that Cather's European immigrant heroine is a reversal of one of Henry James's most important themes, that of the American in Europe. Just as James writes about the American who travels to Europe to broaden his experience, Cather writes about the European who is initiated into a fuller, freer life by his experience in America:

only in America can he combine the aesthetic attraction of the search for beauty with the moral virtues inherent in the idyll of the garden, the cultivated sensibility with the ethical integrity of the agrarian dream.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), pp. 96-97.

<sup>2</sup>Randall, p. 99.

The question remains still why Cather did not write about pioneers of Anglo-Saxon origin, a heritage which she herself shared and presumably understood. The answer may be found in a factual resumé of the history of Nebraska which Willa Cather wrote in 1923, where she shows her dislike of native-born Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent, who were so often provincial and bigoted against Continental Europeans.

Unfortunately, their American neighbors were seldom open-minded enough to understand the Europeans, or to profit by their older traditions. Our settlers from New England, cautious and convinced of their own superiority, kept themselves insulated as much as possible from foreign influences. The incomers from the South--from Missouri, Kentucky, the two Virginias--were provincial and utterly without curiosity. They were kind neighbors--lent a hand to help a Swede when he was sick or in trouble. But I am quite sure that Knut Hamsun might have worked a year for any one of our Southern farmers, and his employer would never have discovered that there was anything unusual about the Norwegian. A New England settler might have noticed that his chore-boy had a kind of intelligence, but he would have distrusted and stonily disregarded it. If the daughter of a shiftless West Virginia mountaineer married the nephew of a professor at the University of Upsala, the native family felt disgraced by such an alliance.<sup>3</sup>

Probably the most important reason for Cather's choice of Continental Europeans as the protagonists for her early novels lies in her early fascination with the foreigners she knew after her family moved to the Nebraska Divide when she was nine years old. Native-born Americans were actually

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<sup>3</sup>Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," These United States (second series), ed. Ernest Gruening (New York, 1925), pp. 147-148.

in the minority among these pioneers that influenced Cather as a child. The Burlington Railroad had offered land for sale which had been grabbed up by immigrants of twenty-three nationalities, led by those from Bohemia, Denmark, Germany, Russia and Sweden.<sup>4</sup> The young, impressionable Willa Cather was fascinated by their Old World colonies, which "spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette."<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that this early glimpse of the Old World, which was so different from anything she had ever known, should have been so exciting to the young girl. This early stimulation doubtlessly helped to develop Willa Cather into an artist, by exposing her to a new environment rich with fictional possibilities. Her family had fortunately but unknowingly brought a future artist into an environment that provided exactly the kind of mental stimulation which would develop her creative powers. Everywhere on the Divide was a chance to observe firsthand Old World mini-cultures which exalted the arts as a valuable part of everyday life. The variety of cultures and languages that were available for observation on the physically barren prairies made them rich with intellectual stimuli for a

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Gerber, Willa Cather (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," The Nation, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 237.

sensitive artist-in-the-making. Willa Cather points out the number of exotic cultures which held fascination for her as a child:

On Sunday we could drive to a Norwegian church and listen to a sermon in that language, or to a Danish or a Swedish church. We could go to the French Catholic settlement in the next county and hear a sermon in French or into the Bohemian township and hear one in Czech, or<sup>6</sup> we could go to church with the German Lutherans.

It was as if the young Willa Cather had actually found herself at the most impressionable time of her life in the very heart of the Old World, with a rare opportunity to absorb the flavors of the various nationalities which had been grouped together for fulfillment in the New World. It is no wonder, then, that she chose to write about these individuals from Continental Europe, who were, to her, "the cream of two continents."

Willa Cather herself admitted that she had never, in her adult life, found any experience which could stimulate her more than her early ones as a child in contact with the immigrant women. In 1915 she told H. W. Boynton of the New York Evening Post,

I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women at her baking or butter-making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said--as if I had got inside another person's skin. If one

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<sup>6</sup> Willa Cather, The Nation, 237.

begins that early, it is the story of the man-eating tiger over again--no other adventure ever carries one quite so far.<sup>7</sup>

The influence of these immigrant women with their Old World ways had a profound effect upon Willa Cather, the novelist. The three heroines of the early novels are all drawn from real-life prototypes. Alexandra Bergson and the other characters in O Pioneers! are drawn from "some Scandinavians and Bohemians who had been neighbors of ours when I . . . was eight or nine years old."<sup>8</sup> Cather also claimed, "O Pioneers! interested me tremendously because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbors, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it."<sup>9</sup>

The idea for the character of Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark came to Willa Cather after her meeting in 1913 with the Swedish opera star Olive Fremstad, who reminded her of the immigrant women that she had known on the

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<sup>7</sup> Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 169-170, as quoted from Willa Cather's interview with H. W. Boynton, "Chapters in 'The Great American Novel,'" New York Evening Post, Nov. 13, 1915.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Tuck McFarland, Willa Cather (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> "My First Novels" in Willa Cather on Writing (New York: Knopf, 1949), reprinted from The Colophon (Part 6, 1931).

Divide. When she later interviewed Fremstad at the singer's apartment, she was astonished at the resemblance of the Swedish prima donna to the pioneer women she had known in childhood. Here, Willa Cather decided, was Alexandra Bergson with a voice. Even the furnishings in Olive Fremstad's apartment seemed to Willa Cather's eyes to represent the same taste as Alexandra exhibited in her home on the prairie in Nebraska.<sup>10</sup>

The prototype for Antonia Shimerda in My Antonia was a young Bohemian named Annie Sadilek Pavelka, who was the hired girl employed by Willa Cather's neighbors, the Miners, who appear as the Harlings in the novel. Annie Sadilek had deeply impressed Willa Cather with her great vitality and love for life. Cather told the painter Grant Reynard that she had realized her own artistic strength only after she "remembered the little Bohemian maid . . . who had befriended her in her early youth out in Nebraska, and . . . [she] wrote in a flood of feeling about those times and days."<sup>11</sup>

Willa Cather's decision to write about the Continental European immigrants who shared their rich culture with

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<sup>10</sup>James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 163.

<sup>11</sup>Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 168.

the New World proved to be very important to early twentieth-century American literature. James Schroeter states that Willa Cather managed to crystallize the experience of the immigrants to the New World through the stories of the three heroines:

It was as though in telling the story of the struggle and triumph of Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and Antonia Shimerda, Willa Cather had cut through the claptrap to the salient fact of the American experience of her time--the coming of the immigrant, his struggle, assimilation, triumph--and places the permanent, official seal of an accomplished art on that segment of American history.<sup>12</sup>

Willa Cather managed also to combine her interest in artists with her concern with the immigrant pioneers. Cather believed, in fact, that the pioneer and the artist were the same type of individual, that each created from his own imagination a work of art from raw materials. E. K. Brown discusses the independence which characterizes the seemingly different types of creators:

Underneath all the distinctions that separated them, and more telling than any, was the impulse they shared to turn from all the tracks of routine and convention to make a track of their own. A farmer like Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers!, a farm-wife like Antonia Shimerda in My Antonia were creators just as surely as the artist in "A Sculptor's Funeral."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>"Willa Cather and The Professor's House," Willa Cather and Her Critics, ed. James Schroeter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 365.

<sup>13</sup>Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, completed by Leon Edel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. x, refers to Willa Cather's short story, "A Sculptor's Funeral."

Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom show yet another connection between Cather's pioneers and her artists. They claim that the artists in Willa Cather's novels are

pilgrims of imagination, driven by a single mission. All of her artists are urged forward by their inner need to seek and find a direction of life, their art being the instrument by which they guide themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, then, for Willa Cather the terms "pioneers" and "artists" are practically interchangeable. It is also clear that for Cather, the term "artist" can be used to describe someone other than those involved with the conventional "fine arts." Cather's understanding of what an artist was went well beyond the conventional definition to describe an individual who was able to approach life with an outlook of keen enjoyment, painstaking effort, and appreciation for beauty. Cather believed these traits to be just as evident in the common, ordinary people who led plain, undistinguished lives as they were in the more prominent, worldly individuals who were known by their professions as artists. Willa Cather included as artists "the German housewife who sets before her family on Thanksgiving Day a perfectly roasted goose" and "the farmer who goes out in the morning to harness his team, and pauses to admire the sunrise."<sup>15</sup> These

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<sup>14</sup>Bloom and Bloom, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup>Gerber, p. 92, quotes from Eleanor Hinman, Interview with Willa Cather in the Lincoln Sunday Star, November 6, 1921.

two ordinary individuals possess the same powers of observation, the same desire to do their best at whatever task they undertake, and the same enthusiastic response to beauty that any artist must have. In a larger sense, both the German housewife and the farmer are artists whose medium of expression is not the sculptor's clay or the singer's voice, but life itself, which in the hands of masters such as themselves, is transformed into a splendid creation.

Antonia Shimerda is representative of this group of artists who transform the raw material of an outwardly ordinary existence into the most awesome artistic achievement of all--the joyous life. These artists of life are the truest, most successful artists of all, because their medium of expression is the greatest one of all. Antonia's vehicle for creation is so much vaster even than Alexandra's farmland or Thea's operatically trained voice, and she is a more successful artist in her mode of creation than they are in theirs. Antonia is far more content with her achievement than Alexandra or Thea are with theirs, and she is for Cather and the reader, the consummate artist.

Cather's choosing a simple, uneducated heroine who is probably unaware for the most part that she is an artist perhaps reveals the author's own personal dissatisfaction with the traditional artist's life. As an artist herself, Cather was intimately aware of the dilemma faced by both Alexandra and Thea--that of deciding how much time and energy

to devote to art, even at the expense of the personal life which provides the necessary inspiration for the artistic endeavor. Antonia's simplicity and joyous inner vitality, as well as the fact that her medium of expression is the personal life itself--enable her to succeed as an artist without ever having to face the problem of an Alexandra or a Thea, who must continually sacrifice their personal lives to their art. It appears then, that My Antonia may have been the book about the heroine artist that Willa Cather had attempted to write in the earlier O Pioneers! and The Song of the Lark. Though each portrays a heroine artist who is the embodiment of both the pioneer and the artist, these two novels seem to be practice for the later one in which Cather portrays the qualities most necessary for the true, fulfilled artist.

Apparently no full-length study of Antonia's superiority as an artist has been attempted. Separate chapters in this thesis will demonstrate Antonia's superiority, through comparisons of the relationships of each of the three protagonists, to the land, to other people, and to her own art.

## CHAPTER II

### THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE TO THE LAND

As a pioneer making her way in the New World, each of the three heroines has a strong tie to the newly adopted homeland which has replaced "the old country." The land serves as much more than a physical setting on which the action takes place. It takes on the role of a main character, and is itself one of the greatest forces to be reckoned with. While the three heroines all share a deep love for the land, they each have a different, highly individual response to it, with Antonia's ultimately being the deepest.

Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers! is the tamer of the land, the one who more than either Thea or Antonia, subordinates and controls the land in order to make it productive. Alexandra is the epitome of the true pioneer, having all the qualities necessary to turn the wilderness into a veritable Garden of Eden where human populations can thrive. More than the other two heroines, Alexandra has the discipline and foresight to create an empire from the once-barren soil. Because of her determination, strength, and imagination, Alexandra Bergson is able, despite the terrific odds against her, to succeed in turning her farm into one of the richest ones on the Divide.

Alexandra's success with the land springs from her understanding of it and from her will to subordinate herself

to it so that, paradoxically, she is able to conquer it. At first, the land seems hostile to encroachment by human beings who would dominate it. Cather writes that the land is the "great fact . . . which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes."<sup>1</sup> It is, she explains, a land that "wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness."

Only pioneers such as Alexandra are able to cultivate this stubborn, difficult prairie which refuses the attempts of so many who would subdue it. Alexandra's own father is one of the many unfortunates who fail to make anything of the land because they fail to understand it. Willa Cather writes, "In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame" (p. 20). John Bergson has the physical strength necessary for the true pioneer, but he lacks the one thing--the imagination which sees future possibilities--that his daughter Alexandra possesses and that ultimately makes her farm so successful.

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<sup>1</sup>Willa Cather, O Pioneers! (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p. 281. (After the first reference to each novel used in this study, subsequent references will be to the same edition by page number only given parenthetically in the text.)

Her father realizes that she possesses this trait even before she is twelve years old. Because Alexandra has always been the most helpful to him of all his children, and because he depends upon her foresight and clear-headedness, it is to her that John Bergson bequeaths the future of his land. It is Alexandra, rather than her oafish brothers Lou and Oscar, who is by nature cut out to be a farmer. Shortly before his death John Bergson reflects that

[i]t was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. It was Alexandra who could always tell about what it had cost to fatten each steer, and who could guess the weight of a hog before it went on the scales closer than John Bergson himself. Lou and Oscar were industrious, but he could never teach them to use their heads about their work. (p. 23)

From the beginning as manager of the farm, Alexandra has imagination and faith in the land which cause her to take chances which ultimately pay off. When many of the other farmers on the Divide are becoming discouraged enough to sell their farms to move back East, Alexandra, despite the objections of her conservative brothers, buys more land. She explains to Lou that she knows, intuitively, that the land has a promising future for those who are willing to be patient with it, and who understand what it is able to become. Cather writes,

Lou was pacing the floor. "But how do you know that land is going to go up enough to pay the mortgages and--"

"And make us rich besides?" Alexandra put in firmly. "I can't explain that, Lou. You'll have

to take my word for it. I know, that's all. When you drive about over the country you can feel it coming." (p. 67)

Alexandra understands that to become successful as a tamer of the soil, she must not approach the task arrogantly, but that to survive she must bend her own will to the will of the land. As a true pioneer, Alexandra draws her joy from her submission to the land, which, paradoxically, submits itself to her in turn. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom point out the paradoxical relationship in Cather's novels between nature and the true pioneer such as Alexandra. They write, "Nature for all its apparent cruelty is the force that will temper the pioneer and bring him, as a result of his acquiescence, to his ultimate peace."<sup>2</sup>

And it is through her relationship to nature that Alexandra receives her greatest comfort and inner strength. Cather writes that Alexandra enjoys looking at the progression of stars through the nighttime sky, that "[i]t fortified her to reflect upon great operations of nature" (p. 70). She probably perceives herself as a part of those operations.

The most intense joy that Alexandra feels springs from her close identity with nature, especially the prairies of the Divide, and from her anticipation of their future

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<sup>2</sup>Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 28.

greatness.

She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring. (p. 71)

It is this close identity with nature which gives Alexandra the confidence to proceed with her empire-building. This role as empire-builder comes naturally to Alexandra, because, as Dorothy Tuck McFarland points out, Alexandra Bergson personifies the ideal of man's creative relationship to the land.<sup>3</sup> Because Alexandra is willing to subdue the land with love rather than with force, she succeeds in cultivating rich farmland on the Divide where so many other pioneers have failed, because of their arrogance and misunderstanding. Her right relationship with the land produces right order.<sup>4</sup> Sixteen years after John Bergson's death and Alexandra's subsequent takeover of the farm, a miraculous change has been wrought on the once-barren prairie. Cather writes that "any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson" (p. 83).

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<sup>3</sup>Willa Cather (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 22-23.

<sup>4</sup>McFarland, p. 23.

Alexandra, with her creativity and foresight, carves out of the once hostile land a small orderly estate. Harmony clearly exists between the hardworking farmer and the conquered prairies, as revealed by

a big white house that stood on a hill, several miles across the fields. There were so many sheds and out-buildings grouped about it that the place looked not unlike a tiny village. A stranger, approaching it, could not help noticing the beauty and fruitfulness of the outlying fields. There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail. On either side of the road, for a mile before you reached the foot of the hill, stood tall osage orange hedges, their glossy green marking off the yellow fields. South of the hill, in a low, sheltered swale, surrounded by a mulberry hedge, was the orchard, its fruit trees knee-deep in timothy grass. (p. 83)

The symmetry and careful planning of the farm shows that Alexandra's true realm is nature. Willa Cather writes,

When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. There is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees. You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best. (p. 84)

Though Alexandra expresses herself so well in the soil that she becomes one of the richest farmers on the Divide, it is with characteristic modesty that she refrains from taking the credit for her success. Alexandra explains that the success of farming on the Divide is not owing to the hard work of the pioneers:

The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still. (p. 116)

Despite her refusal to take credit for taming the land, Alexandra's statement contains a key phrase which belies her modesty. If the land "pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right" until it "woke up out of its sleep," it is obvious that those who wake up the lethargic land are pioneers such as Alexandra Bergson, who know "how to work it right."

Alexandra so loses herself in her work with the land that farming takes on a significance for her which is almost sexual. At times she seems to feel the fecundity of the soil within herself, times when Alexandra "was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil" (p. 36). Cather's description of the relationship between the farmers and the land further reveals the intensity of emotion akin to sexual delight that tillers of the soil such as Alexandra feel, and which they imagine their partner the earth to feel.

There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal with a soft, deep sigh of happiness. (p. 76)

If Alexandra's deepest joy comes from her partnership with the earth she helps to make productive, she nevertheless harbors no illusions about her possession of it. She realizes that the land is eternal, while the individuals who make it fruitful can have no lasting power over it. As she tells her lifelong friend who is to become her husband,

The land belongs to the future, Carl; that's the way it seems to me. . . . We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while. (pp. 307-308)

Therein lies the reason why Alexandra has been able to tame the land. Because of her ability to subordinate her will to the land she understands and loves, she is able to enter into a reciprocal relationship with it to enable it to give a fruitful yield. Early in the novel, when Alexandra sets out with her brother Emil to survey the farms on the Divide, it seems as though she is selected by the land for its purpose. Cather writes about Alexandra's unity of spirit with the land:

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and understanding. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then, the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. (p. 36)

And, as Cather writes at the end of the novel, it is the hearts of true pioneers such as Alexandra that will

ultimately be received by the "fortunate country" "into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (p. 309). Thus, as David Daiches comments, the ending of the novel "establishes Alexandra as a kind of Earth Mother or Corn Goddess, a Ceres who presides over the fruitful land, symbol of the success of the pioneers in taming the reluctant but immensely promising soil."<sup>5</sup>

Another immigrant to the New World, Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark, also experiences a deep love for her adopted homeland, though her response to her Southwestern environment differs from the response of Alexandra to her Nebraska farm. While Alexandra lovingly conquers the farmlands of Nebraska, Thea draws her strength, comfort, and artistic inspiration from the soil of the Southwest. Her home in Moonstone, Colorado, is just as much the "frontier" for her as the untamed prairies of Nebraska are to Alexandra and Antonia. Thea is a communicant with the land, drinking from the beauty and strength she finds there in order to pour it out again in her own art. And when she has become a successful, though world-weary opera star, she again turns to her memories of the land for solace.

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<sup>5</sup>Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951), p. 28.

The wide, open spaces of the desert have the same freeing effect upon Thea's spirit as the openness of the prairies has upon Alexandra and Antonia. It uplifts her spirits, while it spawns and frees her artistic development. Thea's inner freedom to develop her musical talent comes in large part from the inspiration she receives from this open land that she loves. She actually absorbs the attitude of freedom from the land itself. Thea knows that

wire fences might mark the end of a man's pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains and forests can. It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang--and one's heart sang there, too.<sup>6</sup>

The country seems to her

young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range.  
(p. 276)

Thea herself is a product of the land, just as the brilliant desert flowers are. She is, in fact, a great deal like them. Her childhood music teacher Wunsch realizes,

Yes, she was like a flower full of sun, but not the soft German flowers of his childhood. . . . she was like the yellow prickly-pear blossoms that open there in the desert; thornier and sturdier than the maiden flowers he remembered; not so sweet, but wonderful. (p. 122)

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<sup>6</sup>Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), pp. 276-277.

Thea's attachment to the land seems to be stronger than her ties to any of the characters in the novel. The sand hills just outside her hometown are especially dear to her. On Thea's thirteenth birthday, she and her teacher Wunsch first share the secret of Thea's blossoming talent. Afterward, Thea walks alone in the desert, "picking up crystals and looking into the yellow prickly-pear blossoms," as she realizes clearly for the first time that someday she will leave her home to pursue her art. The sand hills represent to Thea the desert environment that she loves, and she will miss them more than the people in Moonstone when she leaves. Cather writes,

She looked at the sand hills until she wished she were a sand hill. And yet she knew that she was going to leave them all behind some day. They would be changing all day long, yellow and purple and lavender, and she would not be there. (p. 100)

It is these familiar sand hills "that she loves better than anything near Moonstone" (p. 58) that Thea remembers when in Chicago she hears Dvorak's New World Symphony for the first time. When Thea hears the theme of the Largo, she feels a new excitement and a hunger to pursue her own artistic talent. The music conjures up images in Thea's mind of her own familiar desert land.

Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains; the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. (p. 251)

When Thea returns to Moonstone from Chicago, it is the sand hills that she is the happiest to return to. Cather writes that Thea "missed them in Chicago; had been homesick for their brilliant morning gold and for their soft colours at evening. The Lake, somehow, had never taken their place" (p. 281).

Another special spot in Moonstone that Thea loves and draws comfort from is the garden belonging to the Kohlers, the couple who lodge her music teacher, Wunsch. The garden is a literal oasis in the desert environment; and to Thea, it is a blessed retreat and a symbol of good fortune. On Thea's thirteenth birthday, the Kohlers' garden is especially beautiful with its blooming linden trees, and Mrs. Kohler tells Thea that it is good luck for one to have a birthday when the lindens are in bloom. In this scene the desert and the garden, two aspects of the land Thea loves, are viewed together. Cather writes,

It was one of those still days of intense light, when every particle of mica in the soil flashed like a little mirror, and the glare from the plain below seemed more intense than the rays from above. The sand ridge ran glittering gold out to where the mirage licked them up, shining and steaming like a lake in the tropics. The sky looked like blue lava, forever incapable of clouds--a turquoise bowl that was the lid of the desert. And yet within Mrs. Kohler's green patch the water dripped, the beds had all been hosed, and the air was fresh with rapidly evaporating moisture. (p. 93)

Years later, as a successful, dedicated opera star Thea will recall the importance of the scene for her when she tells

her friend Doctor Archie, "They save me: the old things, things like the Kohlers' garden. I try all the new things, and then go back to the old" (p. 551).

All through the novel Thea returns, mentally if not physically, to the setting of her childhood which gave her her earliest driving force and ambition at the same time that it provided solace for her. While Thea is in Chicago taking lessons from Harsanyi and later from Madison Bowers, she finds the same kind of retreat at the Art Institute as she found in the sand hills or the Kohlers' garden. For it is at the Art Institute that Thea discovers a picture which strikes a most familiar chord within her, because it reminds her of the land to which she has always been responsive. Gazing at the picture, titled "The Song of the Lark," Thea is able to view on canvas a representation of her own artistic awakening, her own discovery of beauty. Thea responds so deeply to the picture because she identifies with its subject matter: "[t]he flat country, the early morning light, the wet fields, the look in the girl's heavy face--" (p. 249).

Besides the familiar desert land near her home in Moonstone, Colorado, Thea turns to the ancient cliff-dwellings of Panther Cañon in Arizona for comfort and a renewal of artistic inspiration.<sup>7</sup> Because she is discouraged

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<sup>7</sup> Willa Cather herself was intrigued by the houses cut out of rocks that she found on several trips to the

and depleted, Thea comes to the Arizona ranch of her friend Fred Ottenburg's family to lose herself again in the beauty of nature.

The first night that Thea spends on the ranch, she realizes that she is once again under the spell of the land which had bewitched her long before she was tormented by her desire to achieve. She is once again able to draw strength and comfort and for the moment feels no compulsion whatsoever. Cather describes Thea's feelings on her first night in Arizona:

She was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember. She had loved the sun, and the brilliant solitudes of sand and sun, long before these other things had come along to fasten themselves upon her and torment her. (p. 369)

Her stay in Arizona ultimately proves to be exactly what Thea needs in order to rediscover her purpose in life. Just as her early contact with the desert around Moonstone has shaped her personality, her life in the cliff-dwellings of Arizona forms a new artistic awareness that becomes a part of her being. Once again, she responds to the beauty of nature which has meaning for her. Cather describes Thea's faculty to absorb selectively:

A great deal escaped her eye as she passed through the world. But the things which were for her, she saw; she experienced them physically and remembered

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Southwest, and she transfers this fascination for the rock-houses to Thea Kronborg.

them as if they had once been a part of herself. . . . There were memories of light on the sand hills, of masses of prickly-pear blossoms she had found in the desert in early childhood, of the late afternoon sun pouring through the grape leaves and the mint bed in Mrs. Kohler's garden, which she would never lose. These recollections were a part of her mind and personality. In Chicago she had got almost nothing that went into her subconscious self and took root there. But here, in Panther Cañon, there were again things which seemed destined for her. (p. 374)

Thea spends long, peaceful days soaking up the sunshine in a rock-house where she retreats to release tension and to regain her strength. Her two years in Chicago have left her drained of energy and without any sense of direction. The relationship that develops between Thea Kronborg and Panther Cañon enables her first to "get back to the earliest sources of gladness" and then once again to draw her ambition and inspiration for her art from the land once inhabited by the ancient Cliff-Dwellers who placed a high value on art and who communicate their strivings for beauty across the centuries to the receptive Thea. As she "lie[s] there hour after hour in the sun and listen[s] to the strident whirr of the big locusts, and to the light, ironical laughter of the quaking asps" (p. 372), Thea has a chance to reflect upon the direction she wants her life to take. She realizes that

[a]ll 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, as she drew herself out long upon the rug, 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. (p. 372)

Thea had realized when she was in Chicago that "[i]t was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere" (p. 272); and it is here at the ancient cliff-dwellings that the meeting takes place. During her interlude in Arizona, Thea is intrigued by the ancient, vanished race who, in spite of its harsh living conditions, was inspired to create beauty in magnificent pottery.

Thea spends nearly every afternoon while she is in Arizona looking for potsherds, many of which have beautiful designs painted on them. She comes to identify herself with the "unbreakable continuity of art" that she sees exhibited in the pottery that remains as a testament to the ancient peoples' love for beauty and artistic endeavor.<sup>8</sup> Her own yearning for beauty kindles within her a feeling of kinship with this vanished race who made beauty a part of its everyday life. Cather tells of Thea's feelings as she contemplates the ancient art.

This care, expended upon vessels that could not hold food or water any better for the additional labour put upon them, made her heart go out to these ancient potters. They had not only expressed their desire, but they had expressed it as beautifully as they could. Food, fire, water, and something else--even here, in this crack in the world, so far back in the night of the past! Down here at the beginning, that painful thing was already stirring; the seed of sorrow, and of so much delight. (p. 379)

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<sup>8</sup>Bloom and Bloom, p. 119.

Because of the centuries-old expression of beauty that Thea finds in the rock-houses, her inspiration to succeed in her own art is renewed. She thinks of what her now deceased friend Ray Kennedy told her about the Cliff-Dwellers and their power to inspire one across the centuries.

When you sit in the sun and let your heels hang out of a doorway that drops a thousand feet, ideas come to you. You begin to feel what the human race has been up against from the beginning. There's something mighty elevating about those old habitations. You feel like it's up to you to do your best, on account of those fellows having it so hard. You feel like you owed them something. (p. 149)

Thea comes to realize what her own role in the creation and transmission of beauty is to be. She feels, indeed, as though a weighty responsibility to do her best lies upon her.

Yes, Ray Kennedy was right. All these things made one feel that one ought to do one's best, and help to fulfil some desire of the dust that slept there. A dream had been dreamed there long ago, in the night of ages, and the wind had whispered some promise to the sadness of the savage. In their own way, those people had felt the beginnings of what was to come. These potsherds were like fetters that bound one to a long chain of human endeavour. (p. 380)

The world to Thea now seems a much older and richer place. Her vacation in Panther Cañon has helped her to simplify and order her ideas so that she is able to make a decision about the future of her art. No longer does Thea need to cling fast to "whatever was left of Moonstone in her mind" (p. 382) to decide what to do with her life, because the "Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and

higher obligations" (p. 383).<sup>9</sup>

Thea's inspiration is crystallized one afternoon when she is lying peacefully on a blanket in the door of her rock-house. While she is in this attitude of repose and responsiveness, a magnificent eagle sails over the cleft in which Thea lay. Sent as a messenger from the ancient people, the eagle transmits the inspiration and desire that was once theirs to Thea Kronborg. She leaps up, accepting the ancient challenge.

O eagle of eagles! Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! From a cleft in the heart of the world she saluted it. . . . It had come all the way; when men lived in caves, it was there. A vanished race; but along the trails, in the stream, under the spreading cactus, there still glittered in the sun the bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desire. (p. 399)

As the desert land near Moonstone, Colorado, serves as Thea's earliest source of comfort and joy, and finally of inspiration, it is the ancient rock-houses of Panther Cañon which serve as the wellspring for Thea's artistic renewal.

As strong as the ties are which bind Alexandra and Thea to the land, Antonia's are even stronger. Antonia's

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<sup>9</sup>E. K. Brown in Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, completed by Leon Edel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 170-171, explains the significance of the ancient civilization to both Thea Kronborg and Willa Cather, who was similarly intrigued by the ruins she visited in Walnut Canyon, Arizona, the prototype of Panther Cañon in the novel. Brown explains that the ancient ruins provide a "lengthening of one's past as an American, especially if one were a Western American, an enlarging of one's frame of reference."

relationship to the prairies of Nebraska is so close that at times it seems as though she and the land are actually extensions of each other. Whereas Alexandra Bergson is the tamer, conqueror, and lover of the prairies and Thea Kronborg is the communicant who draws her strength and inspiration from the Southwestern desert country, Antonia Shimerda stands larger than life, as a symbol for the land itself.

It is Jim Burden, Antonia's friend, who tells us her story, who creates the larger-than-life image of her. We see Antonia through the eyes of one who is fascinated by X her and who recalls simultaneously his early experiences with the wild country and with his young friend Antonia, who because of her importance to Jim's childhood memories, is fused with the land in his remembrance of her. In this way, Antonia becomes more than an acquaintance of Jim Burden, and even more than the subject of his book. She is, for the reader as well as for her old friend Jim Burden, a symbol of all that is good and vital in the land. Antonia is herself a symbol of the soil, the quintessential Earth Mother. Therefore, it is perhaps superfluous to speak of Antonia's ties to the land, when she and the land actually share, for Jim Burden and thus for the reader, a single identity.

Willa Cather's technique in My Antonia makes Antonia's symbolic role in the novel clear at the very beginning. In the introduction, the author claims that coincidentally she ran into Jim Burden on a train, and together they mused over

old times. Both have vivid memories of Antonia, especially, and Cather writes of her, "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood." It is this fusion of Antonia with Jim Burden's childhood memories of the land that renders her character so powerful, that makes her seem "larger than life." It is the equation of Antonia with the prairies of Nebraska, in the minds of both Jim Burden and the reader, that makes Antonia the quintessential Earth Mother.

Indeed, many of Jim Burden's memories are concerned simultaneously with both the prairies and Antonia. It is impossible for either Jim or the reader to think of one without the other. One of Jim's recurring memories in the novel is of his and Antonia's running together through the prairie grasses. Jim remembers, in the glory of sunset evenings, "How many an afternoon Antonia and I have trailed along the prairie under that magnificence! And always two long black shadows flitted before us or followed after, dark spots on the ruddy grass."<sup>10</sup> Later in the novel, Jim again remembers the two youthful figures running through the fields. As Jim goes back alone over the familiar road, he "could almost believe that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as

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<sup>10</sup>Willia Cather, My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), p. 43.

our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass" (p. 322).

In one of the most vivid scenes of the novel, Antonia is so closely identified with nature and with the great prairies that it is impossible not to think of the character and the setting as one. Jim Burden has returned briefly to Black Hawk before he sets out to study law. At sunset, he and Antonia walk home together across the fields, the two as different from each other and yet as much a part of nature's setting as the sinking sun and the simultaneously rising moon. Jim remembers,

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world.  
(p. 322)

During this moment of confrontation shared with Antonia, Jim "felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there" (p. 322). During this scene Jim clearly associates Antonia with those fields and their comforting power over him. As he takes "those brown hands" which are the color of soil, and "[holds] them against [his] breast," Jim feels "once more how strong and warm and good they were [and are]," and he remembers "how many kind things they had done for [him]"

(p. 322). Antonia with those warm, soil-colored hands is clearly an Earth Mother, symbolizing the goodness and warmth of the land at its kindest and friendliest times.

Another scene, which Jim recalls early in the novel, also helps to point out the identification of Antonia with the soil. The two youngsters, he remembers, were resting against a warm bank of earth, on a day when "the little buzzing things that lived in the grasses were all dead--all but one." Suddenly,

a little insect of the palest, frailest green hopped painfully out of the buffalo grass and tried to leap into a bunch of bluestem. He missed it, fell back, and sat with his head sunk between his long legs, his antennae quivering, as if he were waiting for something to come and finish him. (p. 39)

Taking pity on the one surviving, yet fearful, insect, the Earth Mother Antonia "made a warm nest for him in her hands; talked to him gaily and indulgently in Bohemian. Presently he began to sing for us--a thin, rusty little chirp" (p. 39). Later, when the sun had begun to set and Jim and Antonia had decided to go home, Jim remembers that he wondered,

What were we to do with the frail little creature we had lured back to life by false pretenses? I offered my pockets, but Tony shook her head and carefully put the green insect in her hair, tying her big handkerchief down loosely over her curls. (p. 40)

Clearly the frail insect must have felt as much at home in Antonia's hair as he did in the soil of the fields. When Antonia's father later attempted to put his hand on her hair,

she caught his wrist and lifted it carefully away, explaining that the insect was resting there. It eventually began to chirp again, feebly and scratchily, in Antonia's hair, doubtlessly as content there as it would have been buried deep in the grasses of the prairie.

Antonia's identity with the soil is further strengthened at a point in the novel when the girl is beginning to grow into a young woman. After the hard times experienced by the Bohemian family following the suicide of Mr. Shimerda, Jim Burden remembers that Antonia at the age of fifteen worked as hard as her brother Ambrosch on the family farm. She explained to Jim why she could not continue going to school.

I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm. (p. 123)

Shortly after making this speech, Antonia had started to cry silently, secretly disappointed because she could not continue her studies. Her relationship to the earth, and her desire "to make this land one good farm," however, had been established by that time. As she worked in the fields, Jim Burden had noticed how much she actually seemed to be a part of the earth itself, with her soil-colored skin and her strong neck, which to him seemed like "the bole of a tree." Jim observes that

[s]he kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's.

Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries. (p. 122)

Jim Burden constantly equates Antonia with the land. When he returns to visit her at the end of the novel, she is a happy farm wife surrounded by an adoring brood of children. Her maternal feelings, Jim learns, extend even beyond her children to the earth and to the world of growing things. Even the trees on the farm receive Antonia's careful mothering. She explains to Jim her feelings for the trees:

"I love them as if they were people," she said, rubbing her hand over the bark. "There wasn't a tree here when we first came. We planted every one, and used to carry water for them, too--after we'd been working in the fields all day. Anton, he was a city man, and he used to get discouraged. But I couldn't feel so tired that I wouldn't fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like children. Many a night after he was asleep I've got up and come out and carried water to the poor things." (p. 340)

Jim Burden imagines Antonia as a kind of big sister or mother figure, and his memories and perceptions of Antonia link her to the country life and to the soil itself. Antonia seems to spring directly from the earth and to give herself lovingly back to it again with her life of toil and care. René Rapin explains that in her eagerness, strength, and stubbornness, Antonia is actually "[a] peasant Thea whose deep-rooted virtues can only blossom out in the country, on the big flat wind-swept tableland where is space around her, room for her to play unconstrained and free and write upon the horizon the great simple gestures of man

wringing his bread from the earth."<sup>11</sup>

Antonia can be compared not only to Thea for her strength of personality, but also to Alexandra, another farmer who understands the land. Antonia, like Alexandra, knows that she must be patient to reap any good from the soil. Both of the characters might be called "fatalists" in their approach to farming, in that they submit themselves to the land in such a way as to succeed in the venture.<sup>12</sup>

A major difference between Antonia and Alexandra exists, however. Alexandra Bergson's success comes because she is the conqueror of the land, the builder of an empire; Antonia Shimerda's success is the result not so much of what she does as of what she is. Alexandra consciously merges her own identity with the soil in order to produce crops and to be a successful farmer. Antonia, as we see her through Jim Burden's eyes, springs without conscious effort from the soil itself. She is of the soil whereas Alexandra through her own volition is able ultimately to merge with it. Whereas Alexandra Bergson is an Earth Goddess, a Ceres with dominion over the land, Antonia as Earth Mother is even closer to it, being in essence the land itself.

Because she is of the soil, the open spaces of the fields and prairies provide Antonia salvation. When she is

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<sup>11</sup>Willa Cather (New York: Robert M. McBride & Company, 1930), p. 48.

<sup>12</sup>Bloom and Bloom, p. 32.

living in town, she is unhappy without knowing the reason. But on a farm, she is able to fulfill the role for which she is clearly intended. She explains to Jim when he returns to visit her at the end of the novel,

I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here. (p. 320)

She is content only on a farm where she is one with the land.

She tells Jim,

I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them out here. (p. 343)

Antonia is sad while she lives in town because she is away from her element. Symbolizing the soil itself in her adopted country, Antonia has ties to the New Land which seem inevitably greater than either Alexandra's or Thea's. Close as these two heroines are to the land, with Thea's drawing inspiration from it and Alexandra's wielding dominion over it, Antonia is even closer since it is her being and she and the land are one.

## CHAPTER III

### THE COST OF THE STRUGGLE: ITS EFFECT UPON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

All three heroines single-mindedly pursue their goals, letting nothing stand in their way. The pursuit of the goal and its ultimate achievement leave Alexandra Berg-ron and Thea Kronborg little time or energy for personal relationships. Only Antonia Shimerda, because of the nature of her goal--to raise a large family and to live happily on her own farm--is able to maintain satisfactory human relationships at the same time that she works to attain what means most to her.

In O Pioneers!, Alexandra's role as the builder of an empire and tamer of the unwilling soil leaves little room in her life for any kind of personal relationships. Her work as a pioneer drains Alexandra, mentally as well as physically. Her entire existence revolves around the farm, and all the components of her life and personality are necessarily sublimated to her efforts to tame the land. Alexandra is totally preoccupied with her desire to make the land productive, and she submerges herself thoroughly in her work. Willa Cather explains that this total submersion of herself is what enables her to succeed: "It was because she had so much personality to put into her enterprises and succeeded in putting it into them so completely, that her

affairs prospered better than those of her neighbors" (p. 203).

Because she does prosper better than her neighbors, most of them are jealous of her accomplishment. Because her neighbors, including her brothers Lou and Oscar, lack her creative imagination, they ridicule Alexandra's unconventional, though productive, ideas, which are the very reasons for her success. Throughout the novel, Lou and Oscar are representative of those who are set against Alexandra because of their own conventionality and lack of creativity. From the beginning of Alexandra's position as manager of the Bergson farm, her two brothers are afraid of being made conspicuous and ridiculous if they carry out their sister's schemes. Only grudgingly do they ever consent to try any new idea which Alexandra has, since they themselves are content with mediocrity. Cather explains their fear of being thought different in any way by their neighbors.

They did not mind hard work, but they hated experiments and could never see the use of taking pains. Even Lou, who was more elastic than his older brother, disliked to do anything different from their neighbors. He felt that it made them conspicuous and gave people a chance to talk about them. (p. 45)

Lou's and Oscar's concern with convention exhibits itself many times in the novel. The first example occurs after Alexandra has talked with the old hermit Ivar, and is convinced that she must build a more sanitary corral for her

hogs. The conventionally-minded Lou will not even listen to Ivar's explanation that hogs like to be clean. Instead, he nudges his brother and claims disdainfully that Ivar is filling Alexandra full of notions, that "[s]he'll be for having the pigs sleep with us, next" (p. 45).

Alexandra further alienates her brothers when she wants to stay on the prairies and decides to buy more farm land at a time when the unsuccessful farmers are giving up their property to move away. Lou and Oscar themselves

would have been happier with their uncle Otto, in the bakery shop in Chicago. Like most of their neighbors, they were meant to follow in paths already marked out for them, not to break trails in a new country. A steady job, a few holidays, nothing to think about, and they would have been very happy. It was no fault of theirs that they had been dragged into the wilderness when they were little boys. (pp. 47-48)

The two brothers who are not meant to be pioneers are aghast at the plans of their farsighted sister. Instead of backing her plans to acquire more land, they are in favor of getting out of the mistake which they believe their father to have made in the first place. Alexandra is able to talk them into staying and consenting to buy more land only by assuring them that she knows intuitively that her plan will succeed, and that the land can be profitably cultivated.

Sixteen years after Alexandra's takeover of her father's farm, she has indeed become one of the most successful and richest farmers on the Divide. In spite of the fact that she has demonstrated her skill at managing a farm

and has even established an empire for herself and her family out of the barren prairies, her brothers Lou and Oscar, as well as many others on the Divide, are still skeptical about her "notions," since as "Crazy" Ivar sorrowfully explains to Alexandra, "The way here is for all to do alike" (p. 92). Alexandra puts up the first silo on the Divide, and her foreman, Barney Flinn, is critical of her newest idea, but concedes, "To be sure, if the thing don't work, we'll have plenty of feed without it, indeed" (pp. 88-89). Nelse Jensen, the suitor of one of Alexandra's hired girls, tells her,

Lou, he says he wouldn't have no silo on his place if you'd give it to him. He says the feed uten it gives the stock the bloat. He heard of somebody lost four head of horses, feedin' 'em that stuff.  
(p. 89)

As in her other enterprises, this one too is successful, and Alexandra once again paves the way for the other settlers who lack the courage or inventiveness to be the first to try new ideas. Alexandra paves the way for her neighbors in other ways, too. She puts in the first field of alfalfa after hearing about it from a young university student. Lou and Oscar, of course, are opposed to this experiment, just as they had been opposed to her planting of wheat. To explain the wisdom of planting alfalfa, Alexandra reminds Lou,

You all laughed at me when I said our land here was about ready for wheat, and I had to raise three big wheat crops before the neighbors quit putting all

their land in corn. Why, I remember you cried, Lou, when we put in the first big wheat-planting, and said everybody was laughing at us. (p. 171)

These less creative farmers, exemplified by Lou and Oscar, profit from Alexandra's willingness to experiment; yet they hold that very inventiveness against her. As her brother Emil points out to Alexandra, Lou and Oscar are representative of the type of Swedes who are "never willing to find out how much they don't know. . . . Always so pleased with themselves! There's no getting behind that conceited Swedish grin" (p. 239).

Lou and Oscar again irritate Alexandra when they urge her to send her boarder Ivar to an asylum, since he, too, is unconventional. Ivar lets his hair grow long, goes barefoot, and has religious visions, but is absolutely harmless. The insistence of Alexandra's brothers that she send him away amuses as well as angers her, as she laughs, "Ivar's queer, certainly, but he has more sense than half the hands I hire" (p. 100). When Lou warns her that any one of the neighbors could take out a complaint against him and have him taken away by force, Alexandra's reply is, "Well, Lou, if any of the neighbors try that, I'll have myself appointed Ivar's guardian and take the case to court, that's all. I am perfectly satisfied with him" (p. 101).

Alexandra does not fear being regarded as odd, as do her brothers and others in the community. Alexandra herself is never afraid of what her neighbors will say. As

she tells Ivar, "Let people go on talking as they like, and we will go on living as we think best" (p. 94).

The difficulties that Alexandra has with her personal relationships, however, take away from the satisfaction that she is able to derive from her accomplishments. The jealousy and pettiness of Lou and Oscar eventually isolate Alexandra. When Carl Linstrum, a childhood friend, returns to see Alexandra, Lou and Oscar are afraid that their sister will marry him and that they will therefore lose some of her land that would otherwise go to their children. Oscar tells his sister that "people have begun to talk," that "people think you're getting taken in" (p. 166). Their selfish fear that they could lose land to Carl, coupled with their fear that their sister will be thought ridiculous by the community, causes a break between them and Alexandra which is never healed. When Alexandra discovers the extent of her brothers' pettiness, she comments, "I think I would rather not have lived to find out what I have to-day" (p. 172).

Alexandra faces an even more intense personal sorrow when her favorite brother Emil and her friend Marie Shabata are killed after they are caught making love by Marie's jealous husband, Frank Shabata. Since Alexandra had always worked to build up her empire for Emil, his death leaves her feeling as if all her work has been in vain. The double murder has left Alexandra especially bereaved. She

is troubled too because she herself was never aware of the relationship that existed between Emil and Marie, and she feels guilt for having provided opportunities on many occasions for the two passionate young people to see each other. Willa Cather describes Alexandra's emotional blindness:

If Alexandra had had much imagination she might have guessed what was going on in Marie's mind, and she would have seen long before what was going on in Emil's. But that, as Emil himself had more than once reflected, was Alexandra's blind side, and her life had not been of the kind to sharpen her vision. Her training had all been toward the end of making her proficient in what she had undertaken to do. Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields. (p. 203)

At one point Marie had tried to talk to Alexandra about her unsatisfactory relationship with her husband Frank, but Alexandra had felt uncomfortable and changed the subject. Cather writes,

Alexandra had never heard Marie speak so frankly about her husband before, and she felt that it was wiser not to encourage her. No good, she reasoned, ever came from talking about such things, and while Marie was thinking aloud, Alexandra had been steadily searching the hat-boxes. 'Aren't these the patterns, Maria?' (p. 198)

Though the younger woman was her friend, Alexandra could not share Marie's spontaneity of feeling and irrepressible emotion. Apparently resenting the distance thus existing between them, Marie, on one occasion, had stiffened when Alexandra placed her hand on Marie's arm to comfort her. Alexandra had sensed that her friend was tired,

but she never guessed that Marie was troubled because of her feelings for Emil. Cather explains the effect of Alexandra's manner:

There was about Alexandra something of the impervious calm of the fatalist, always disconcerting to very young people, who cannot feel that the heart lives at all unless it is still at the mercy of storms; unless its strings can scream to the touch of pain. (p. 226)

Alexandra's ability thus to dedicate herself fully and calmly to her calling had effectively removed her from the turbulence which engulfed her brother and Marie. Though it had been misinterpreted as cold heartlessness by the unfortunate lovers, the deep "underground river" of life for Alexandra flowed on, but in private.

One of the memories which made Alexandra happy was of an experience she had shared with Emil, the sight of a single wild duck which seemed to her more beautiful than anything she had ever seen. Though this recollection, like others she cherished, had a particularly impersonal tone, Cather writes of these memories seemingly without personal connection that

to her they were very personal. Her mind was a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things. Not many people would have cared to read it; only a happy few. (p. 205)

Cather seems finally to say that if Alexandra was cut off from others less sensitive to beauty and growth, the vividness of her own perception made up for the loss.

Alexandra's association with men from girlhood had been through work. Cather tells us, "She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries" (p. 205). Even as a very young girl, she had squelched a flirtatious attempt made by a traveling clothing drummer who noticed her beautiful thick braids and exclaimed, "My God, girl, what a head of hair!" (p. 8). After the drummer made this rather innocent comment, Alexandra "stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip--most unnecessary severity." The little man was so startled that

he actually let his cigar fall to the sidewalk and went off weakly in the teeth of the wind to the saloon. His hand was still unsteady when he took his glass from the bartender. His feeble flirtatious instincts had been crushed before, but never so mercilessly. He felt cheap and ill-used, as if some one had taken advantage of him. (p. 8)

Because Alexandra refuses to follow the traditional feminine pattern of behavior, most of the other persons she knows fail to think of her as a woman, even when she is courted near the end of the novel by Carl Linstrum. When Marie Shabata hinted to Emil that Alexandra might have been thinking of marrying Carl, Emil exploded in amusement, "Alexandra's never been in love, you crazy!" (p. 154). Later, as he reflected on what seemed to him to be the absurdity of people forty years old who wanted to get married, he realized that he had never thought of Alexandra as a woman, but only as his sister.

Alexandra's true femininity and her love for the land merge symbolically in a recurring daydream. In this fancy which persisted throughout her girlhood,

she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew, he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she would feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields. (p. 206)

Her lover is larger than life, far superior to any on the Divide, and directly a part of the sun and the fields.

Alexandra rejects the sentimental fantasy as she has always resisted sentimentality. Cather explains that

[a]fter such a reverie she would rise hastily, angry with herself, and go down to the bath-house that was partitioned off the kitchen shed. There she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far. (p. 206)

Whether or not Alexandra's "cold shower," amounting to a physical chastisement is a kind of sexual fastidiousness, it clearly allies with her persistent refusal to "indulge in sentimental reveries" at the same time that it indicates her humanness.

As the years pass, her daydream changes to where the strong figure who carries her becomes more of a symbol for a life companion who is able to take bodily weariness from her. Cather writes that as Alexandra grew older,

this fancy more often came to her when she was tired than when she was fresh and strong. Sometimes, after she had been in the open all day, overseeing the branding of the cattle or the loading of the pigs, she would come in chilled, take a concoction of spices and warm home-made wine, and go to bed with her body actually aching with fatigue. Then, just before she went to sleep, she had the old sensation of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness. (pp. 206-207)

Finally, after Alexandra is left feeling thoroughly defeated because of the deaths of Emil and Marie and the resulting futility which she senses in her own life, Alexandra has the old illusion again, this time more vividly than she has experienced it for many years. So despondent is Alexandra at this time that

[a]ll the physical operations of life seemed difficult and painful. She longed to be free from her own body, which ached and was so heavy. And longing itself was heavy: she yearned to be free of that. (p. 282)

It is in this attitude of extreme fatigue that Alexandra at last realizes, almost with a kind of relief, that her illusory lover has changed from a human one to "the mightiest of all lovers"--death--which will come to free her at last from the pain of her lonely, unsatisfied life. In her disappointment with life, Alexandra longs for the new lover--death--to take away all her pain and bitterness.

Ironically, it is after Alexandra's period of disillusionment that she decides to marry her old friend Carl

Linstrum.<sup>1</sup> There is a firm basis of friendship for the two to build upon. Carl comes nowhere close to being the type of lover that Alexandra had so often punished herself for dreaming about. He himself tells her that the men that she knows are all weak and inconsequential, even himself. He tells her, "It is your fate to be always surrounded by little men. And I am no better than the rest" (p. 181). Carl is "too little to face the criticism of even such men as Lou and Oscar" (p. 181), themselves "little men" who object to Alexandra's involvement with Carl. It is only after Alexandra's ties with these two brothers are broken that she and Carl feel free enough to get married.<sup>2</sup>

While there is no great passion involved in Alexandra's marriage to Carl, there nevertheless exists a contentment arising from the fact that the two are comfortable together. Alexandra tells Carl, "I think we shall be very happy. I haven't any fears. I think when friends marry,

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Gerber in Willa Cather (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), pp. 86-87, claims that the marriages of both Thea and Alexandra are "afterthoughts, attempts to beat the bargain made with life." The marriages, Gerber points out, are more truly consolation prizes than they are triumphs.

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in Willa Cather: A Memoir (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 91, says that the strong Alexandra marries the rather weak, sensitive man "who in the pioneer world--and even in these United States in general--does often marry the strong matriarchal woman."

they are safe. We don't suffer like--those young ones" (p. 308), referring to Emil and Marie who were destroyed by their passion for each other.

Alexandra's role commits her to the hard work of making her farm productive. Because she has such determination to achieve her goals, she is not deterred from them either by the pettiness of those who deal with her unjustly or by deep personal involvements which would divert her energy and thought from her love affair with the land, which until her goals have been achieved and prior to Emil's death provides her with a satisfying relationship.

Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark is much like Alexandra Bergsón in that the ambitious pursuit of her goal diverts her from personal relationships. All of Thea's time, energy, and interests are directed from the time of her early youth to her preparation for a career as an opera singer. Thea, like Alexandra, foregoes becoming too emotionally involved with others because to do so would inevitably detract from her one real passion in life--to be an artist.

From the very beginning of her life, Thea must strive to achieve against a background of narrow-minded townsfolk who do not understand either her ambition or her talent. In this way, Thea is very much like Alexandra, who also has to cope with persons who are more conventional and less talented than herself. Thea learns early in life that

she has to rely primarily upon herself, because the world is filled with those whom she calls her "natural enemies." Thea must fight her way even more vigorously than Alexandra through the provincialism that threatens to stifle her, because Thea is the daughter of the Methodist minister of the small town of Moonstone, Colorado. Cather explains the extra pressures to conform that are felt by the Kronborg family as Thea is growing up, and Thea's own attempts to keep people from talking.<sup>3</sup>

The fear of the tongue, that terror of little towns, is usually felt more keenly by the minister's family than by other households. Whenever the Kronborgs wanted to do anything, even to buy a new carpet, they had to take counsel together as to whether people would talk. Mrs. Kronborg had her own conviction that people talked when they felt like it, and said what they chose, no matter how the minister's family conducted themselves. But she did not impart these dangerous ideas to her children. Thea was still under the belief that public opinion could be placated; that if you clucked often enough, the hens would mistake you for one of themselves. (p. 159)

Despite the few conciliations that Thea makes in order to placate public opinion, such as agreeing to play the organ and to lead the singing at prayer-meetings one winter, she still must rise above the pettiness of those who are her "natural enemies" and who, as Thea soon finds

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<sup>3</sup>For two excellent discussions of Thea's escape from the provincialism of her small town, see Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. 59-61, and E. K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, completed by Leon Edel, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 190-192.

out, cannot be placated by her conciliations because of their narrow viewpoints.

Thea's two major enemies in Moonstone are Lily Fisher, a conceited singer known as the "Baptist Prodigy," and Mrs. Livery Johnson, an extremely narrow-minded woman who "disapproved of a child whose chosen associates were Mexicans and sinners, and who was, as she pointedly put it, 'bold with men'" (p. 75).

Thea's unconventional though harmless behavior and her friendships with persons with whom it is considered unusual for a young girl to associate, cause trouble for her even among the members of her own family. Thea's natural trust in the large-mindedness and generosity of others prohibits her for a long time from seeing that she has "natural enemies" even in her own family. Her sister Anna, the epitome of rigid morality and middle-class convention, strongly disapproves of Thea's friendship with the musical, spontaneous Mexicans, and of practically everything that Thea is and does. Cather describes Anna's reactions to her sister:

Thea, and all Thea's ways and friends, seemed indecorous to Anna. She not only felt a grave social discrimination against the Mexicans; she could not forget that Spanish Johnny was a drunkard and that 'nobody knew what he did when he ran away from home.' Thea pretended, of course, that she liked the Mexicans because they were fond of music; but everyone knew that music was nothing very real, and that it did not matter in a girl's relations with people. (pp. 167-168)

Thea has more trouble with her family because of her relationship with the Mexicans after she attends a dance held by the Mexican community. Her brothers Gus and Charley join Anna in questioning Thea about why she is friendly with them. Thea is fully aware that except for her mother, her family disapproves of her unconventional friendship with persons from the Mexican community of Moonstone. Hurt and angry by their bigotry, she retreats to her room where she realizes that her family, too, must be counted in the group of people against whom she must struggle to achieve success. Thea recognizes with shock and bitterness that "Anna and Gus and Charley were among the people whom she had always recognized as her natural enemies" (p. 301) and that "[n]othing that she would ever do in the world would seem important to them, and nothing they would ever do would seem important to her" (p. 302).

After such a disappointing insight into the nature of her family's feelings toward her, Thea

felt differently toward the house and everything in it, as if the battered old furniture that seemed so kindly, and the old carpets on which she had played, had been nourishing a secret grudge against her and were not to be trusted any more.  
(p. 303)

Besides the narrow-mindedness that she finds in her family and acquaintances in Moonstone, Thea discovers the same trait in others elsewhere. She eventually comes to realize that the satisfaction with mediocrity and the hunger

for social approval are present everywhere. Even more frightening to Thea is her discovery that there exists a force in the world that attempts actually to steal away her inspiration and her desire to achieve her goal to be an artist. When Thea leaves the concert hall in Chicago after she has heard Dvorak's New World Symphony for the first time, she is aware that

[t]here was some power abroad in the world bent upon taking away from her that feeling with which she had come out of the concert hall. Everything seemed to sweep down on her to tear it out from under her cape. If one had that, the world became one's enemy; people, buildings, wagons, cars, rushed at one to crush it under, to make one let go of it.  
(p. 254)

Thea for the first time realizes just what she must fight in order to achieve success, and from her bitter recognition of the struggle ahead of her she forges a new determination. Cather writes that Thea knew that her enemies

were no longer remote and negligible; they had to be met, they were lined up against her, they were there to take something from her. Very well; they should never have it. They might trample her to death, but they should never have it.  
(p. 254)

Thus Thea is diverted from having close ties with all but a select few with whom her inspiration and desire to achieve is "safe," but with even these few she is never able to have as fulfilling relationships as she desires, simply because her art leaves her very little energy for any other pursuit.<sup>4</sup> In this total preoccupation with her

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<sup>4</sup>Willa Cather herself experienced this same intense

life's goal, Thea resembles Alexandra Bergson, whose single-minded ambition to cultivate her farm causes her to relegate personal relationships to second place. While Thea is not blind to the feelings of others, as Alexandra sometimes is, she, like Alexandra, must nevertheless sacrifice her personal life upon the altar of her ultimate goal. Therefore, Thea's life becomes just as essentially lonely and unfulfilling as Alexandra's is for her. Just as Alexandra Bergson loses her personal life in the soil, Thea Kronborg loses hers in her singing. Her loss is even more acute than Alexandra's, since Thea's operatic career physically as well as emotionally separates her from those few persons for whom she cares. Even when her mother is dying and pleading for Thea to return to see her, Thea is unable to oblige her, though she claims that she wants to go to her mother more than she wants anything else in the world. But the circumstances of her career do not allow her to leave Dresden, where complications in the opera have given Thea a previously unhoped-for opportunity for a big part, that of Elizabeth in "Tannhäuser." Unless Thea fails, she knows that she cannot leave Dresden for six months. Cather explains,

it was not that she chose to stay; she had to stay-- or lose everything. The next few months would put

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preoccupation, according to Sergeant, p. 134.

her five years ahead, or would put her back so far that it would be of no use to struggle further.  
(p. 491)

Thea tells Doctor Archie that she plans to return to Moonstone as soon as she is free to take her mother back to Germany with her. Thea begs her mother to wait for her for six months. Mrs. Kronborg knows, however, when she receives Thea's letter that she will never see her daughter again. When Mrs. Kronborg dies shortly thereafter, Thea's reaction is to pour her new grief over the loss of her mother into her singing to give it even more force and depth than usual.

The loss of her mother also causes Thea to realize that other persons, no matter who they are, can never mean as much to her as her art does. She explains to Fred Ottenburg, her friend of many years whom she marries finally, why she reserves her energy exclusively for her art and values art above human relationships: "I've only a few friends, but I can lose every one of them, if it has to be. I learned how to lose when my mother died" (p. 559). Fred sums up Thea's dedication to art at the expense of personal relationships when he chides her, "[A]fter the one responsibility you do feel, I doubt if you've enough left to feel responsible to God!" (p. 558).

As cold and ruthless as Thea appears to be in the pursuit of her artistry, she realizes, however, that there is a lack of meaningful involvement in her personal life,

which has become practically nonexistent.<sup>5</sup> Her own envy of the richness of other people's lives becomes apparent to the reader when Thea remembers a scene that touched her deeply. One afternoon she had gone to a recital of the famous pianist Paderewski. In front of Thea had sat an old German couple, whose enjoyment of the music and each other made Thea long for the same sort of companionship in her own life. Thea remembers enviously,

When the pianist began a lovely melody in the first movement of the Beethoven D minor sonata, the old lady put out her plump hand and touched her husband's sleeve and they looked at each other in recognition. They both wore glasses, but such a look! Like forget-me-nots, and so full of happy recollections. Thea wanted to put her arms around them and ask them how they had been able to keep a feeling like that, like a nosegay in a glass of water. (p. 561)

The longing obvious in Thea's remembrance of the old German couple shows her real need for human companionship. Throughout the novel Thea has several relationships with men, but because of her preoccupation with art, none of the relationships are of long-term standing until her marriage to Fred, which takes place toward the end of the novel. Unlike Alexandra Bergson, who seems to deny her sexuality and refuses to recognize it, Thea has several relationships

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<sup>5</sup>Sergeant, p. 137, claims that Willa Cather "maintains that a great opera singer must sacrifice the woman in her to her fame. The something final, dry and ruthless that happened to the mature diva far removed her from the intense, passionate, richly endowed child and girl."

which could conceivably become deep involvements. In each case, however, circumstances prevent the masculine characters from marrying Thea, with whom it is clear that they are in love, though her feelings are not so obvious. David Daiches points out that three of the four men with whom Thea becomes involved serve as dei ex machina to her.<sup>6</sup> Each of them steps in to rescue the heroine at a critical point in her life.

Doctor Howard Archie is a handsome, young, unhappily married physician in Moonstone who cures eleven-year-old Thea from a serious case of pneumonia. Later when Thea is grown, he again rescues her by lending her the money which enables her to continue her musical studies in Germany. Because of the age difference between himself and Thea, and the fact of his marriage, Doctor Archie is not able to become involved with Thea in a romantic way. Ray Kennedy is another character from Moonstone who is a friend to Thea, but who is prevented from marrying her. Ray decides while Thea is very young that he wants to marry her when she grows up, but he comes to realize that his dream has been unrealistic, that "Thea was never meant for any rough fellow like him. . . . she was bound for the big terminals of the world; no way stations for her" (p. 187). After Ray's death in a railway accident, it is revealed that his life has been

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<sup>6</sup>Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951), pp. 31-32.

insured for six hundred dollars in Thea's favor. Before his death, he tells Doctor Archie that he wants the money to be used to enable Thea to study music in Chicago. It is this money which starts her on her career. The third man who serves as a deux ex machina to Thea is Fred Ottenburg. His interest in her career over the many years of their acquaintance helps to spur her on through spells of weariness and depression. It is Fred who offers Thea the retreat which renews her ambition when he sends her to his family's ranch in Arizona. Fred is very much in love with Thea, and he seems to be a perfect mate for her. He understands and encourages her artistic drive, knowing that the usual marriage relationship would not appeal to her, that marriage, for Thea, would be merely incidental to her true purpose in life. Fred tells Thea, "You're not a nest-building bird" (p. 394).

He convinces her that if she were to marry him, she would be completely free to pursue her career. When she agrees to marry him, however, he admits that he is already married to an incurably insane woman from whom he cannot be freed. Fred convinces himself that by permitting Thea to fall in love with him instead of with a more conventional man who would tie her down, she will be freer to continue the pursuit of her art. As he tells himself fiercely, he will deceive her not once but a hundred times to keep her free (p. 424).

Thea has one more unsuccessful relationship before she is ultimately to marry Fred Ottenburg. Thea becomes involved with Nordquist, a man who is also married, though separated, from a wife who will grant him a divorce only upon Thea's payment to her of a hundred thousand marks. Thea angrily sends Nordquist away.

After Fred's wife dies, he and Thea are free to marry. In the epilogue of the novel, the fact that they have married is mentioned only in passing. Like Alexandra Bergson's marriage to Carl Linstrum, Thea's marriage to Fred Ottenburg seems almost incidental, both to the plot of the novel and seemingly, to Thea herself, whose true marriage is to her art.

Thea's success as an opera star leaves her virtually without any personal life. Doctor Archie tells Thea that she does not have enough personal life outside of her work. Her reply is,

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. (p. 546)

Willa Cather herself in the preface to The Song of the Lark explains,

As Thea Kronborg is more and more released in the dramatic and musical possibilities of her profession, as her artistic life grows fuller and fuller, it becomes more interesting to her than her own life. . . . Her human life is made up of exacting

engagements and dull business detail, of shifts to evade an idle, gaping world which is determined that no artist shall ever do his best. Her artistic life is the only one in which she is happy, or free, or even very real.

Of the three heroines, only Antonia is able to combine successfully her personal relationships with her ambitions. Antonia's ambitions are of a different sort from Alexandra's or Thea's. The very essence of her goal--to raise a family on her own farm--requires that she maintain fulfilling human relationships at the same time that she achieves her dream. Because she has even more problems relating to her personal life than either Thea or Alexandra, however, it is all the more remarkable that Antonia is ultimately a winner in the realm of interpersonal relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Antonia's life is hard from the beginning of the novel. Except for her father's loving concern, Antonia receives very little care from her family as she is growing up as a Bohemian immigrant on the prairies of Nebraska. She has to overcome the effects of an unhappy relationship with her cross, irritating mother and her domineering brother Ambrosch. In her late teens, Antonia works as a hired girl for the Harlings, the neighbors of her old friend Jim

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<sup>7</sup>For a brief discussion of the difficulties which Antonia overcomes, see James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 180.

Burden. While she is a hired girl, Antonia is subject to the prejudicial attitude of the townsfolk of Black Hawk toward the immigrant girls from the country who go to work in town to help support their families. After Antonia's days as a hired girl are over, she suffers the heartbreak and social disgrace of bearing the illegitimate child of a man who deserts her after having promised to marry her. Yet of the three heroines, it is Antonia who, in spite of difficulties, manages finally to have the most successful ties with other people.

Antonia's extremely close, loving relationship with her father gives her a lifelong sensitivity and concern for others which become the basis of her relationships with other people. When Anton Shimerda kills himself because of his homesickness for his European homeland, Antonia is heartbroken but determines that she will work that much harder to help her family produce a good yield on its farm. Years later when she has her own farm, Antonia explains to Jim that she still feels as close to her father as ever, even though he is dead. She feels as the years pass that she actually gets to know him better, and she admits that she still talks to him. Because of this early, extremely happy and close relationship with her father, Antonia forms the basis for good personal relationships which lasts for as long as the reader shares her life.

A few years after her father's suicide, Antonia goes to work in Black Hawk for the Harlings. Jim Burden and his grandparents have already moved to town, and they, especially Jim, are thrilled to be able to renew their ties with their old neighbor Antonia, who is at the time a cheerful, vivacious seventeen-year-old. The move to the Harlings' house has a fortunate effect on Antonia's personality, for it gives her a chance to escape from the rough ways and extremely hard manual labor that was so much a part of her life with her contentious mother and her bossy older brother Ambrosch. Jim and his grandmother are especially glad that Antonia will be separated from her family, since they feared that she was getting to be too much like them. In addition, Antonia has opportunities to develop her social skills more fully at the Harlings' house than she would have had back on her family's farm.

Antonia acquires what amounts to a second mother, a much more satisfactory one than her real mother, in fact, when she becomes acquainted with her new employer, Mrs. Harling. The natural attraction they feel for one another springs from common personality traits and similar interests. Jim Burden says that he cannot imagine Antonia's living in any other house in Black Hawk than the Harlings', and he explains the kinship between the two women:

There was a basic harmony between Antonia and her mistress. They had strong, independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were

not always trying to imitate other people. They loved children and animals and music, and rough play and digging in the earth. They liked to prepare rich, hearty food and to see people eat it; to make soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them. They ridiculed conceited people and were quick to help unfortunate ones. Deep down in each of them there was a kind of hearty joviality, a relish of life, not over-delicate, but very invigorating. (p. 180)

Antonia and Mrs. Harling are alike also in the relish with which they approach everyday tasks. Jim could be describing Antonia just as much as Mrs. Harling when he remembers,

Her enthusiasm, and her violent likes and dislikes, asserted themselves in all the everyday occupations of life. Wash-day was interesting, never dreary, at the Harlings'. Preserving-time was a prolonged festival, and house-cleaning was like a revolution. When Mrs. Harling made garden that spring, we could feel the stir of her undertaking through the willow hedge that separated our place from hers. (pp. 148-149)

Antonia's happy relationship with Mrs. Harling and her children in Black Hawk helps to prepare Antonia later to take care of her own family on her own farm. Years later, when Antonia has achieved her goal and is raising her own family, Jim Burden realizes,

These children seemed to be upon very much the same terms with Antonia as the Harling children had been so many years before. They seemed to feel the same pride in her and to look to her for stories and entertainment as we used to do. (p. 351)

It is no wonder that Antonia feels at home at the Harlings' house. For though the Harlings live in town instead of in the country, Antonia is spared from being too homesick while she lives with them because the Harling property resembles very much a small farm, "with a big barn and a

garden, and an orchard and grazing lots--even a windmill" (p. 147).

Antonia's happiness in the home of Mrs. Harling helps to make up for her nonacceptance in what Jim Burden refers to as the "curious social situation in Black Hawk" (p. 197). Though all the young men are more deeply attracted to the vigorous, healthy-looking hired girls than they are to the self-indulgent, listless Black Hawk girls, they date the country girls only at the great personal risk of losing what the town considers their respectability. As a result, the hired girls are not eligible for marriage to any of the Black Hawk men, because "[t]he respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth" (p. 202).

Because of Antonia's vivacity and beauty, she is one of the most popular immigrant girls in town, especially when she dances at the tent which serves as a neutral meeting ground for the town boys and the country girls. Antonia's success as a dancer causes many of the town boys to become infatuated with her, most of them with ignoble motives. The stern, arrogant Mr. Harling discovers her slapping off the advances of one of the town boys who was supposed to be getting married the following Monday, and he tells her that she must stop going to the tent or else give up her job. Mrs. Harling is forced to acquiesce to her husband's stern decision, and Antonia, who wants to have the best times she can while she is young, is forced to leave her happy employment with the Harlings.

Antonia's leaving the Harlings causes a temporary strain in her otherwise good relations with Mrs. Harling and the children. Her next job as housekeeper for the evil money-lender Wick Cutter is ended abruptly after his attempt to rape her is fortunately foiled by Jim Burden. After this episode, Antonia becomes involved with Larry Donovan, a railroad conductor who claims that he wants to marry her, but who deserts her after making her pregnant. This social disgrace causes more problems for Antonia than either Alexandra or Thea are ever forced to face, and yet Antonia manages to overcome this obstacle which stands as more of a threat to her goal of someday raising a family than anything which happens before it.

Through her relationships with men, Antonia's personality is more fully revealed to the reader. Unlike either Alexandra or Thea, Antonia recognizes and accepts her definite need for relationships with men. Indeed, her ultimate goal to have a family obviously depends upon her ability to achieve a satisfying relationship with a man, which she eventually does. Her early attempts to befriend the hypocritical Black Hawk youths, as well as her involvement with the unscrupulous Larry Donovan, fail not because of any fault of Antonia's, but because of the men themselves.

Antonia does not allow the birth of her illegitimate baby to discourage her for long. Instead of worrying about

what people will say, she is actually proud of her new daughter. Jim reflects, "Another girl would have kept her baby out of sight, but Tony, of course, must have its picture on exhibition at the town photographer's, in a great gilt frame" (p. 303). The Widow Steavens tells Jim how much the baby means to Antonia, in spite of the social disgrace which has befallen her because of its birth:

She loved it from the first as dearly as if she'd had a ring on her finger, and was never ashamed of it. . . . no baby was ever better cared for. Antonia is a natural-born mother. (p. 318)

Instead of crushing her, her first unsuccessful attempt to begin a normal family life and hence to proceed with her goal matures Antonia for the responsibilities which finally await her after her marriage to the good-natured Anton Cuzak.

Though Cather's emphasis is upon Antonia's role as mother more than her role as wife, nowhere does she indicate that the Cuzaks do not have a relationship which is satisfying to both of them. It is true that Anton would probably have been happier living in a city where he would have had ready access to music and taverns, but in his marriage to Antonia he appears to be very content. Even if he "had been made the instrument of Antonia's special mission" (p. 367), as it seems to Jim Burden that he has, Cuzak never complains, though he longs wistfully from time to time for a more active city life or for the pleasures he

knew when he lived in Bohemia. The relationship between Anton and Antonia is obviously happy and fruitful, producing as it does "ten or eleven" children in fulfillment of Antonia's dream.

It is as a mother that Antonia experiences her greatest personal satisfaction in her relationships with others. Jim Burden returns to visit Antonia after not having seen her for twenty years, and he notices the love and closeness experienced by Antonia and her children. He observes, "In the group about Antonia I was conscious of a kind of physical harmony. They leaned this way and that, and were not afraid to touch each other" (p. 349). Jim also notices how proud all of them are of their family and of their farm. Jim observes, upon being introduced to all the children, "Clearly, they were proud of each other, and of being so many" (p. 334).

Antonia's success in her family life is all the more striking for being contrasted with Jim Burden's unhappy marriage and childlessness. Antonia expresses embarrassment when Jim tells her that he has no children, and she consoles him, "Oh, ain't that too bad! Maybe you could take one of my bad ones, now? That Leo; he's the worst of all," (p. 335) referring to the child which she admits to loving the most.

It is through Antonia's relationship to the less happy Jim Burden that the reader is permitted to see the

importance of other people to Antonia. Her love for Jim is of a motherly nature. As a grown woman, she tells him what her feelings had been for him as well as for the Harling children, "I declare, Jim, I loved you children almost as much as I love my own" (p. 334). Indeed, when Jim returns to visit Antonia, he feels almost as though he is one of the Cuzak boys, a son of Antonia. Jim explains his feelings when he is with the boys, "I felt like a boy in their company, and all manner of forgotten interests revived in me" (p. 345). Jim tells Antonia that she represents to him all the relationships that he could possibly have with a woman.<sup>8</sup> He tells her,

I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister--anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me. (p. 321)

Jim shows just how much a part of himself his dear friend really is. He speaks of "her face, which I meant always to carry with me; the closest, realest face, under all the shadows of women's faces, at the very bottom of my memory" (p. 322)

Antonia's power to "become a part" of Jim, as well as the others with whom she comes in contact, assures the success of her personal relationships. Unlike the overly

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<sup>8</sup>For a discussion about Jim's reasons for his feelings toward Antonia, see Sergeant, p. 150.

preoccupied Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg, who sublimate and sacrifice their personal relationships upon the altars of their individual ambitions, Antonia succeeds at developing intensely meaningful, satisfying bonds with others because to do so is actually itself part of her goal. Antonia herself sums up her ability to delight in other people when she asks, "Ain't it wonderful, Jim, how much people can mean to each other?" (p. 321).

CHAPTER IV  
THE ARTIST AND HER ART: ANTONIA AS  
CATHER'S ULTIMATE ARTIST

Each of the three heroines can be viewed as an artist who strives to fulfill her individual destiny by some great achievement. Early in life each has a need for positive achievement and a feeling that something special will happen to her. Each also possesses the talent and driving ambition necessary for the accomplishment of her goal. Though their mediums of expression differ, all three women are artists who create their individual types of beauty. For Alexandra Bergson, "it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (p. 84) as a farseeing pioneer who creates a lush farm for herself and her family out of the barren prairie lands. For Thea Kronborg, the agency of expression is her voice, which is "vitality; a lightness in the body and a driving power in the blood" (p. 381). For Antonia Shimerda, however, artistry comes through her everyday life itself; and Antonia is described as "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (p. 353).

Both Thea and Alexandra are caught in the age-old dilemma between their commitments to art and their responsibilities to life itself.<sup>1</sup> Because accomplishment in their

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<sup>1</sup>David Stouck in Willa Cather's Imagination (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 171-205, discusses

art requires total dedication of interest and energy, both Thea and Alexandra become alienated from other persons and at times even lose sight of their own personal lives. Since it is in Antonia's supremely successful interpersonal relationships and her own enjoyment of life, as Jim Burden sees it, that Antonia's artistry exists, for her there can be no dilemma. Finally, then, she becomes the consummate artist, Cather's larger-than-life figure whose rare warmth, enjoyment, and unselfish human endeavors are the true artistic accomplishment.

Alexandra Bergson's achievement with the land makes her an accomplished artist. From the resistant soil Alexandra manages to sculpt an empire for herself and her family. Turning the unfriendly soil into a Garden of Eden is a task at which Alexandra works as hard as any conventional artist ever worked to create beauty. Like most artists, Alexandra realizes very early what is important to her. At a young age, she already has the determination necessary to an artist. Cather describes the early drive of Alexandra, who "was a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next" (p. 6). Before she is twelve years old, she is already a better farmer than her father,

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Cather's persistent concern with the question of the conflict between an artist's personal life and his art, a problem with which she herself struggled.

who lacks her ability to see the rich future of the land. John Bergson depends more on Alexandra than on his sons Lou or Oscar because they lack the business sense and insight of their sister. Alexandra is the one who can guess the weight of a hog better than her father can; and it is to the young Alexandra, rather than to her father, that the neighbors go when they need advice about farming or when they run into trouble. When Carl Linstrum's family leaves the prairies to return to the city, Carl explains to Alexandra how much she has meant to his family.

"You see, we've all depended so on you," he said, "even father. He makes me laugh. When anything comes up he always says, 'I wonder that the Bergsons are going to do about that? I guess I'll go and ask her.'" (p. 52)

Carl also remembers the time when as a very little girl, Alexandra in the absence of her father helped to relieve the colic of the Linstrum's horse.

The single essential quality for Alexandra's art is her imagination which permits her to see that the land which had been unresponsive for so long to her father and to the other discouraged pioneers on the Divide would one day yield fruitful crops and even make the farmers rich. Alexandra alone among her neighbors and relatives foresees the great possibilities that the land holds. In this way she resembles a sculptor who sees the artistic possibilities inherent in his clay. This imaginative understanding of the land and its capabilities is what Cather refers to when

she writes, "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (p. 48).

Alexandra possesses the inner drive which gives her the self-sufficiency of an artist. Her farm is a success whereas the farms of many of her neighbors are not. Her success comes because "she had so much personality to put into her enterprises, and succeeded in putting it into them so completely" (p. 151). Alexandra never worries about what her convention-bound neighbors will say about her latest attempt to better her farm, and though she takes advice occasionally from those she respects, such as her boarder Ivar, she is entirely self-directed and self-motivated. She is not afraid to experiment with new methods of farming or to try new kinds of crops, despite the skepticism of her neighbors.

Besides being self-directed, Alexandra is also self-disciplined and orderly in her creation of an empire.<sup>2</sup> Her devotion to order is reflected in her flower garden, where, as Cather tells us, one feels "the order and fine arrangement, manifest all over [the] great farm," and "in the

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<sup>2</sup> Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom in Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 113, claim that all of Cather's pioneers are imbued with a regulatory sense, demonstrating her belief that man's life should be just as ordered as the natural universe of which he is a part.

fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds" (p. 84).<sup>3</sup> This sole dependence upon the self, however, inevitably draws her away from human contact, and eventually almost cuts her off from it. Her struggle to perfect her creation absorbs all of her energies and blinds her to the needs of others. Finally her single-minded pursuit of a goal which she can no longer cherish after her brother Emil's death seems more selfish and sterile than rewarding.

Alexandra's long struggle for perfection with the land is implied more than it is actually dealt with in the novel. Willa Cather skips over the sixteen years that Alexandra spends fighting with the land to describe instead the successful empire she has created, shifting the emphasis of the novel to Alexandra's contentment, or lack of it, with her creation. After the long years of struggle with the land, Alexandra is finally able to stop working so hard and to enjoy her accomplishment. However, her total commitment to her art has so diverted Alexandra from human relationships that even when she has time enough to engage in them, she is unable to let herself become involved in them to any great degree. Her art has taken her out of the sphere of personal relationships for the most part and given

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<sup>3</sup>The regulatory sense behind this orderliness seems a characteristic of all Cather's artists, who cannot create beauty without it.

her instead an altogether impersonal drive, which when satisfied, is unable to give her emotional compensation for the devastating effect it has had on her personal life. Alexandra's myopic pursuit has dulled her responsiveness to other people and perhaps even to her own feelings. Cather is certainly not advocating an artist's shutting herself off from great achievement in the interests of her personal life, but rather she seems to be presenting the dilemma of an artist whose art requires so much of the self that little remains for enjoyment in the more personal sphere.

Alexandra's productive farm at first compensates for her lack of a personal life. Her hard work will pay off, she believes, because Emil, the younger brother to whom she plans to pass on her land, has become what she had hoped he would be, an adult who moves freely in the outside world with which Alexandra herself is unfamiliar. Alexandra perceives of Emil's eventual possession of her property as her own tie to her creation. Her desire to perpetuate her art through Emil may be viewed as Alexandra's attempt to continue to possess her creation, as well as her desire for an eternal achievement. Alexandra's love for the land gives her her greatest joy, though her hard work to tame the prairies exhausts her and cuts her off from the outside world. Her drudgery and discontent because of her isolation from the world outside dissolves into happiness at the thought of passing her land and her money to Emil, who is

himself part of the wide world outside the Divide. Alexandra reflects on her future heir, who can take her creation beyond the narrowness of the Divide within which she sometimes feels trapped:

Out of her father's children there was one who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for. She felt well satisfied with her life. (p. 213)

Alexandra is especially glad that Emil, whom she sees as an extension of herself, has a life outside the Divide, that he will not be subject to the narrow values and closed-mindedness of her brothers Lou and Oscar and the others like them in the country. Alexandra tells Carl Linstrum, who lives in the city, that Emil will escape from the stifling influence of country life, which causes the farmers to become rigid in their thinking. She says to Carl,

We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff. If the world were no wider than my cornfields, if there were not something beside this, I wouldn't feel that it was much worth while to work. (p. 124)

Alexandra explains that "it's what goes on in the world that reconciles me" (p. 124). The vicarious pleasure that Alexandra receives from Emil's life in the outside world and her plan to turn over her money and property to him are clearly important to her. Alexandra wants to be able to pass on the firstfruits of her art, her life's work, to a worthy heir. Emil will never settle down to the farming life, Alexandra realizes, but he will at least be able to

benefit from the fortune she has amassed, and because of her wealth, Emil will be able to live the life he chooses for himself in the wide world.

The murder of Emil and Marie seems to deprive Alexandra of her reason for existence. The happiness that she had felt at the prospect of turning over her property to Emil is snuffed out as absolutely as Emil's life had been. Alexandra's only real consolation is the medium of her art--the land itself. She eventually realizes that it will make no real difference to whom she wills her land. Even if the children of Lou and Oscar are the recipients of her property, the land itself belongs only to the future. As she tells Carl,

I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother's children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while. (p. 308)

In her temporary ownership, Alexandra Bergson has been a true artist who has sculpted the land into a beautiful and orderly creation. She personifies the ideal of man's creative relationship to the land.<sup>4</sup>

After Emil's death, however, Alexandra's work appears futile to her in the face of the capriciousness of life. Alexandra has not been able to resolve the dilemma

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<sup>4</sup>Dorothy Tuck McFarland, Willa Cather (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 20-28.

of the artist caught between dual obligations to art and to life which does not fulfill her expectations. Because of her inability to resolve the conflict, and because of the tragic circumstances of her life, Alexandra is not fulfilled through either her artistic creation or the personal sphere, and both suffer as a result.

The opera singer Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark faces the same difficulty that Alexandra Bergson does in her attempt to resolve the dilemma between the artist's complex commitments to art and her obligations for or interest in a personal sphere of life. Thea is like Alexandra in that her childhood experiences are important in their effect upon her art. Years later the mature Thea tells her old acquaintance Doctor Archie, "A child's attitude toward everything is an artist's attitude. I am more or less of an artist now, but then I was nothing else" (p. 551). It is indeed true that her early experiences gave Thea and the others around her the indication that she was special, that her life would follow no conventional path. Cather writes of Thea's self-recognition,

She knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. She brought everything to it, and it answered her; happiness consisted of that backward and forward movement of herself. (p. 100)

Thea's friendly spirit had given her a "warm sureness" which marked her as unique not only in her own eyes but in the eyes of others. Doctor Archie had noticed that there

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was something unusual about the shape of Thea's head, that in some way it seemed to promise greatness. Doctor Archie had cured eleven-year-old Thea of pneumonia, and as he felt her head, he had thought to himself,

No, he couldn't say that it was different from any other child's head, though he believed that there was something very different about her. He looked insistently at her wide, flushed face, freckled nose, fierce little mouth, and her delicate, tender chin--the one soft touch in her hard little Scandinavian face, as if some fairy godmother had caressed her there and left a cryptic promise. (p. 12)

Years later after that cryptic promise has been fulfilled through Thea's success as a singer, Doctor Archie confesses to her,

When you were little, Thea, I used always to be curious about the shape of your head. You seemed to have more inside it than most youngsters. I haven't examined it for a long time. Seems to be the usual shape, but uncommonly hard, somehow. (p. 103)

Thea's German music teacher Wunsch, along with Doctor Archie, also had recognized Thea's special quality. He realized that she was his only really talented pupil, but he had a difficult time pinpointing just what was different about Thea. Wunsch had wondered,

What was it about the child that one believed in? Was it her dogged industry. . . . Was it her imagination? More likely it was because she had both imagination and a stubborn will, curiously balancing and interpenetrating each other. There was something unconscious and unawakened about her, that tempted curiosity. She had a kind of seriousness that he had not met with in a pupil before. (p. 122)

Wunsch had been one of the first to suspect that Thea's true musical gift was her voice, rather than her ability to play

the piano. Cather writes that he had noticed that when Thea read anything in verse

the character of her voice changed altogether; it was no longer the voice which spoke the speech of Moonstone. It was a soft, rich contralto. . . . the feeling was in the voice itself, not indicated by emphasis or change of pitch. . . . It was a nature-voice . . . breathed from the creature and apart from language, like the sound of the wind in the trees, or the murmur of water. (p. 97)

Even though Wunsch realized that Thea had talent, he made sure that she also had the passion and self-confidence, the "friendly spirit" inside, without which an artist can accomplish nothing. In his broken English, he explained to Thea, "Some things cannot be taught. If you not know in the beginning, you not know in the end. For a singer there must be something in the inside from the beginning" (p. 98). This "something," this warm sureness is what gives birth to genius. Wunsch told Thea, "That is the beginning of all things. . . . It must be in the baby when it makes its first cry . . . or it is not to be" (p. 98).

Others in Moonstone were aware that Thea was somehow marked by destiny, though they were not as sure as Wunsch of the direction Thea's talent would take her. Cather writes that "Mrs. Kronborg watched her daughter thoughtfully. She found her more interesting than her other children, and she took her more seriously, without thinking much about why she did so" (p. 82). Thea's eccentric Aunt Tillie actually made enemies for her talented young niece among the church people, for she bored them by

constantly discussing the possibilities of greatness she imagined for Thea. Ray Kennedy, one of Thea's staunchest admirers, told Spanish Johnny, "That girl is developing something fine" (p. 74).

After Thea has developed her talent to become successful on the operatic stage, she reflects back on this "friendly spirit" which first appeared in her childhood to direct her to her true purpose. Thea understands the importance of her childhood feeling of specialness, that "the only things we cherish are those which in some way met our original want; the desire which formed in us in early youth, undirected, and of its own accord" (p. 488).<sup>5</sup>

Thea is like Alexandra in that she develops the self-sufficiency and self-discipline necessary for her complete devotion to her chosen pursuit. From the time she is a child, Thea has her own routine and is hard for her parents to manage only when her brothers and sisters interfere with her. Thea's need for privacy is established early, and in recognition of this need, her parents give her her own room, where she is free to keep her own schedule and to think her own thoughts, away from the rest of the family where "the clamour about her drowned the voice within herself" (p. 73). Early in the novel, Thea's self-sufficiency

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<sup>5</sup> So important is Thea's early youth to the novel that Willa Cather originally wanted to name the book Artist's Youth, but was discouraged by her publisher from doing so.

is obvious. After a talk with Ray Kennedy, who tells Thea that there will always be other people to take the hard knocks of life for her, she bristles, "That's nonsense, Ray. . . . Everybody's up against it for himself, succeeds or fails--himself" (p. 155). Thea's music teacher in Chicago voices much the same idea when he is helping Thea with her piano lessons. He tells her, "Every artist makes himself born. . . . Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play piano. That you must bring into the world yourself" (p. 221). After working with Harsanyi, Thea is encouraged to find her true purpose in life, to do the one thing she was created to do. She learns to have enough faith in herself to follow the leanings of her "friendly spirit" which urges her to be a singer rather than a pianist. Harsanyi tells Thea,

I believe that the strongest need of your nature is to find yourself, to emerge as yourself. Until I heard you sing, I wondered how you were to do this, but it has grown clearer to me every day. (p. 263)

Thea learns to emerge as the artist she is meant to be by her almost unwavering faith in herself. Like Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg finds that ultimately she must rely solely upon herself in order to achieve her goal. When she returns to Moonstone for a vacation after living in Chicago, she encounters the disapproval of several members of her family who are incapable of understanding Thea's talent. Disappointed and bitter, Thea stares at her own face in a looking-glass, as she realizes that her inner

drive is the only thing she can rely on. Cather writes of Thea's sudden bitter realization, "Yes, she and It must fight it out together. The thing that looked at her out of her own eyes was the only friend she could count on" (p. 300). Thea in her self-sufficiency comes to be very much like the great pines in the forests near Panther Cañon in Arizona, where "[e]ach tree grows alone, murmurs alone, thinks alone" (p. 367). Her feeling of self-reliance is also summed up by the words to Grieg's Tak for dit Råd, which she is learning when she and Fred Ottenburg first meet. At his request, she quotes:

'Thanks for your advice! But I prefer to steer my boat into the din of roaring breakers. Even if the journey is my last, I may find what I have never found before. Onward must I go, for I yearn for the wild sea. I long to fight my way through the angry waves, and to see how far, and how long I can make them carry me.' (p. 338)

Thea has a myopic vision centered on her art. Fred Ottenburg once tells her in a moment of amused exasperation, "You never do a single thing without an ulterior motive" (p. 391), referring to Thea's single-minded determination to become an artist at any cost. When she leaves Moonstone to begin her musical studies in Chicago, she is surprised that she does not feel a deeper sense of loss about leaving her family and the land she loves. Cather writes, "But, of course, it was herself and her own adventure that mattered to her" (p. 198). Instead of feeling that she is leaving anything important behind, on the contrary,

[e]verything that was essential seemed to be right there in the car with her. She lacked nothing. She even felt more compact and confident than usual. She was all there, and something else was there, too--in her heart, was it, or under her cheek? Anyhow, it was about her somewhere, that warm sureness, that sturdy little companion with whom she shared a secret. (p. 199)

The "sturdy little companion" is what gives Thea her drive to succeed; and it is a necessary component of the personality of artists.

It is this same inner sureness that occasionally turns Thea into a grasping, ruthless person who wants more than anything else to become an artist. Thea is determined to "have a few things before she died," and she tells herself furiously that no matter what, "she was going to get them! That was all. Let people try to stop her! . . . Let them try it once!" Cather explains that "along with the yearning that came from some deep part of her, that was selfless and exalted, Thea had a hard kind of cockiness, a determination to get ahead." Cather points out that this "fierce, stubborn self-assertion will stand its ground after the nobler feeling is overwhelmed and beaten under" (p. 274). It is this fierce self-assertion and need for achievement which leads Thea to exclaim roughly to Doctor Archie, "I only want impossible things. . . . The others don't interest me" (p. 305).

To do the thing which interests her most--to be an artist--requires that Thea intermingle the personal and

professional facets of her life. For an artist, the two must be interdependent. Thea draws, as any artist does, from her own life experiences, so that she may integrate them into her art. David Stouck points out that The Song of the Lark is a künstlerroman, a novel about an artist's development in which the initiation into experience is conceived entirely in terms of the mastery of artistic craft.<sup>6</sup> Everything that happens to Thea and all that she feels is synthesized into her art. Thea's grief at her mother's death, for example, enables her to sing even more passionately as she blends her sorrow into her art. The contempt she feels for the mediocre singers who care more about their material success than the perfection of their art is transformed into "creative hatred" which enables Thea to see the difference between popularity and true excellence. As she tells Doctor Archie, "[Y]ou can't try to do things right and not despise the people who do them wrong. How can I be indifferent? If that doesn't matter, then nothing matters" (p. 551). From the ancient Cliff-Dwellers of Arizona, Thea learns the "inevitable hardness of human life," and as she tells Fred Ottenburg, "[N]o artist gets far who doesn't know that" (p. 554). From the Cliff-Dwellers with their love for beauty expressed in their pottery, Thea also renews her inspiration for her own art. She feels as though the

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<sup>6</sup>David Stouck, p. 184.

Cliff-Dwellers transmit to her their desire for artistic endeavor. This experience renews her artistic passion, which as Harsanyi claims, is "every artist's secret" (p. 570).

Thea's passion for her art, though, like Alexandra's passion for her land, precludes her involvement in anything else. On Thea's thirteenth birthday, Wunsch had told her something she never forgot about the importance of her passion in the attainment of her goal.

Nothing is far and nothing is near, if one desires.  
The world is little, people are little, human life  
is little. There is only one big thing--desire.  
And before it, when it is big, all is little.  
(p. 95)

To Thea, it is literally true that the one and only big thing in her life is her desire, her passion, to excel in her art. Beside the magnitude of this all-encompassing desire, all the other components of Thea's life are necessarily small and insignificant. Her passion for art encroaches on every aspect of her life until it eventually pushes her personal life completely into the background. Cather writes in her preface to the novel that when Thea's "artistic life grows fuller and fuller, it becomes more interesting to her than her own life," and the real Thea Kronborg behind the opera singer becomes "somewhat dry and preoccupied" as "[h]er artistic life is the only one in which she is happy, or free, or even very real."

As this sublimation of her personal life in the interest of her art takes place, paradoxically her art eventually begins to suffer, too. As Thea's vitality wears thin, she must force herself anew in every performance to overcome her personal weariness so that she may at least appear on stage to be vigorous and full of life. The energy and strength which is at the very root of her artistic drive is used up by that drive; yet without it Thea cannot continue to aspire to greatness. Thea explains to Doctor Archie that she has no life which is truly personal, that art "takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life. Not much else can happen to you" (p. 546). The paradoxical dilemma that Thea faces is common to most artists. The inner drive which gives the artist the self-sufficiency and self-discipline to succeed comes from a healthy, vital personality, where the drive is nourished and strengthened. As the drive becomes stronger and more aggressive, however, it ultimately usurps the personality which gave it birth. With no real sense of self, then, the artist has nothing from which to draw the art, which finally must wither as does the personal life of the artist. An artist cannot express the self if there is no longer anything within to express. Thea in her absolute preoccupation with art tends to forget that her source of inspiration is the personal life which has practically ceased to exist. As the experience of her life becomes narrower and

narrower in its exclusive focus upon art, it follows that her artistic capabilities also become narrower until, along with her personal life, they too must eventually diminish. An artist who desires to give his best, as Thea does, must necessarily achieve a balance between these two commitments which feed upon each other. The true artist must resolve the dilemma between his commitments to art and to his own life, or like Thea Kronborg, he will face dissatisfaction in both spheres. After a performance, Thea looks forty years old, though she is still barely thirty. The price she pays for the necessarily self-centered pursuit of her art is extremely high, robbing her as it does of the personal life and vitality which feed her art. Cather writes in the preface to the novel that the real Thea, "the free creature, who retains her youth and beauty and warm imagination, is kept shut up in the closet along with the scores and wigs." Thea Kronborg, like Alexandra Bergson, is unable to resolve the dilemma of the artist's dual commitment to the interdependent spheres of personal life and art.

Antonia Shimerda, on the other hand, is successful in a way that Alexandra or Thea could never be. It is in this last novel of the three that Willa Cather finally portrays the creator artist who is also a joyous human being. Antonia's artistry is the full, selfless life she lives. For Cather she symbolizes art itself, a wellspring of simplicity and inspiration and a real creator of beauty.

Though the chances for the young Antonia to develop into a true artist seem less strong than either Alexandra's or Thea's at a similar age, she is able to overcome all the hardships. The outward circumstances of Antonia's life are more difficult than those of the other heroines. Her family life from the beginning offers little encouragement to a young artist, except for the love of beauty and the sensitivity that she inherits from her father. Her grief when his homesickness for Bohemia causes him to commit suicide is difficult for Antonia to bear. Only an innate zest for life enables the young girl to overcome the influence of her complaining, shrewish mother and sullen, domineering brother Ambrosch and even to rise above the prejudice of the townsfolk when she works as a hired girl for the Harlings in Black Hawk. The final and perhaps the greatest challenge which Antonia meets in her period of development into the admirable being she becomes is the social castigation she suffers when she is left pregnant by a railroad conductor who had promised to marry her. In spite of the stigma of bringing an illegitimate child into the world, Antonia is able to move beyond even this barrier to become an artist in the very medium, life, which had at first seemed to be against her, but which through her struggles with it, gives her the inner strength to succeed.

Antonia's childhood companion Jim Burden is able to see the special qualities which make her an artist even

during her early years on the prairie. Even before Antonia learns to speak English properly, she is able to communicate her lively intelligence and intense curiosity about the new country to Jim. The zest for living and the capability to share that zest are present even when she lives with her extremely poor family in their earthen dugout on the prairie. Antonia's generosity had been revealed early to Jim Burden when, as a token of friendship, she had tried to give her new friend a silver ring. Jim had been incredulous that she would give him something so valuable when they had barely met, and he remembers that he had refused her gift quite sternly. Antonia's interest in housekeeping is also evident early. Jim Burden remembers,

Antonia loved to help grandmother in the kitchen and to learn about cooking and housekeeping. She would stand beside her, watching her every movement. We were willing to believe that Mrs. Shimerda was a good housewife in her own country, but she managed poorly under new conditions: the conditions were bad enough, certainly! (p. 31)

Antonia's early training for the role of farm wife and mother that she is later to fill, continues when she moves to Black Hawk to work for the Harlings, the neighbors of her old friends the Burdens, who have moved to town. Years later when Antonia has a family of her own, she realizes the importance of this early training. She tells Jim,

Oh, I'm glad I went! I'd never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping if I hadn't. I learned nice ways at the Harlings', and I've been able to

bring my children up so much better. Don't you think they are pretty well-behaved for country children? If it hadn't been for what Mrs. Harling taught me, I expect I'd have brought them up like wild rabbits. (p. 344)

Besides her talent for housekeeping, Antonia's talent for spreading joy is especially apparent during her stay with the Harlings. Once again Jim remembers the keen love for life which Antonia diffuses to others.

How good it was to have Antonia near us again; to see her every day and almost every night! Her greatest fault, Mrs. Harling found, was that she so often stopped her work and fell to playing with the children. She would race about the orchard with us, or take sides in our hayfights in the barn, or be the old bear that came down from the mountain and carried off Nina. (p. 155)

Antonia's unselfish devotion to others is revealed early by her attachment to the Harlings, especially her favorite one, Charley.

Nothing that Charley wanted was too much trouble for her. She loved to put up lunches for him when he went hunting, to mend his ball-gloves and sew buttons on his shooting-coat, baked the kind of nut-cake he liked, and fed his setter dog when he was away on trips with his father. Antonia had made herself cloth working-slippers out of Mr. Harling's old coats, and in these she went padding about after Charley, fairly panting with eagerness to please him. (p. 155)

Antonia's contentment at the Harlings' house foreshadows the happiness she is later to know when she has her own family on her farm. Jim Burden remembers Antonia's ability to make every Saturday night at the Harlings' house like a party.

After the long winter evenings on the prairie, with Ambrosch's sullen silences and her mother's complaints,

the Harlings' house seemed, as she said, 'like Heaven' to her. She was never too tired to make taffy or chocolate cookies for us. If Sally whispered in her ear, or Charley gave her three winks, Tony would rush into the kitchen and build a fire in the range on which she had already cooked three meals that day. (pp. 175-176)

Antonia's true artistic vocation reveals itself during the time that she lives as a hired girl with the Harlings in Black Hawk. Jim Burden compares the similar characteristics of Antonia and her employer Mrs. Harling, who share an artistic relish for the everyday things of life. Jim remembers,

They loved children and animals and music, and rough play and digging in the earth. They liked to prepare rich, hearty food and to see people eat it; to make up soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them. . . . Deep down in each of them there was a kind of hearty joviality, a relish of life, not over-delicate, but very invigorating. I never tried to define it, but I was distinctly conscious of it. (p. 180)

As selfless and completely giving of herself as Antonia is, she never loses her independence or her self-sufficiency, not even when her course of action displeases those whom she loves. When Mr. Harling tells Antonia that her going to the evening dances in Black Hawk is hurting her reputation, she gives up her position at his house rather than giving in to the fear of the gossips of Black Hawk. Later, after Antonia is deceived by Larry Donovan and bears his illegitimate child, she does not hide the child away as some unmarried women would have done, but instead she has the baby's picture displayed proudly at the photographer's

studio. During this hard time for Antonia, she works more strenuously than ever on her family's farm, and she never loses sight of the fact that her life must go on. She tells Jim Burden of her resolution not to let her unfortunate circumstances hold her back.

Father Kelly says everybody's put into this world for something, and I know what I've got to do. I'm going to see that my little girl has a better chance than ever I had. I'm going to take care of that girl, Jim. (pp. 320-321)

Antonia's dogged determination in the face of such a personal catastrophe is as strong as any felt by Alexandra or Thea in their attempts to achieve their goals. When Jim Burden returns to Black Hawk after having been away for twenty years, he is delighted to find that Antonia has achieved her goal and still has the joy of life welling from within her, just as he has always remembered her. He had been apprehensive at the prospect of meeting her again, fearful that time might have broken her spirit and taken the joy from her. He is immensely relieved to discover, however, that though the years have aged her physically, the woman who again stands before him after twenty years is still his Antonia, the artist of life that he has cherished in his memory. Jim describes the way Antonia appears to him upon their reunion:

The eyes that peered anxiously at me were--simply Antonia's eyes. I had seen no others like them since I looked into them last, though I had looked at so many thousands of human faces. As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not di-

minished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well. (pp. 331-332)

Unlike Alexandra and Thea who are personally diminished and wrung out from their strivings for artistic achievement, Antonia has actually retained her original glow of passion. Alexandra is physically and emotionally taxed from her work with the farm, and she loses much of her zest for her cultivation of the land after her brother Emil's death. Similarly, Thea's artistic success constantly drains her vitality. Antonia, however, after her achievement never loses the zest for life which characterizes her as Cather's most successful artist. Jim Burden notices that though Antonia is no longer young and has even lost many of her teeth, her vitality has not diminished because of her achievement.

I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away. (p. 336)

From the moment that Jim arrives at Antonia's farm after his long time away from the country, he is able to see that Antonia is properly in her element, that she has achieved her goal in life--to raise her own family on her farm. The order that Antonia has worked for on her farm goes beyond the neatness and symmetry of Alexandra's farm, where there is merely a surface regularity. On Antonia's farm, the order is much deeper; there is present a real

harmony based on the obvious love and enjoyment that the happy family members share with one another. The harmony born from Antonia's relish for life is everywhere present, as Jim notices:

Ducks and geese ran quacking across my path. White cats were sunning themselves among yellow pumpkins on the porch steps. I looked through the wire screen into a big, light kitchen with a white floor. I saw a long table, rows of wooden chairs against the wall, and a shining range in one corner. Two girls were washing dishes at the sink, laughing and chattering, and a little one, in a short pinafore, sat on a stool playing with a rag baby. (p. 330)

Jim is overwhelmed by the domestic tranquility and joyousness which Antonia has managed to achieve for her family. His delight at her happy life is contrasted with his own unhappy marriage and the fact that he is himself childless. Antonia's true wellspring of joy is her children. Jim compares her maternal pride to a cat's as she pulls her children out of corners "like a mother cat bringing in her kittens" (p. 332) to display them to him. It is through her children, too, that Jim fully perceives Antonia as a literal artist of life, surrounded by her offspring which are the flesh and blood creations of her life. Jim recalls the impact of the vitality of Antonia's artistic creation:

We were standing outside talking, when they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment. (pp. 338-339)

Everywhere are signs that what Antonia has achieved for herself and her family is vigorous and satisfying and good.

In the evening on the farm, Jim reflects that

[e]verything was as it should be: the strong smell of sunflowers and ironweed in the dew, the clear blue and gold of the sky, the evening star, the purr of the milk into the pail, the grunts and squeals of the pigs fighting over their supper.  
(pp. 346-347)

Willa Cather herself makes it clear that Antonia's artistry is of the greatest possible kind. The real-life prototype for Antonia, Annie Sadilek Pavelka, is described by Cather: "She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains."<sup>7</sup> If these qualities earmark a true artist, it is clear that Antonia is even more the artist than either Alexandra or Thea. Both of these heroines lose the "keenness and sensitiveness of enjoyment" and they shove aside their "love of people" as their careers progress and crowd all else from their lives. Because of Antonia's greater inner nature, and because life itself is her medium of expression, she is able to avoid the draining of vitality and the preoccupation which robs Alexandra and Thea of the satisfaction of enjoying what they have achieved. Even the accomplishments of the two, the farming empire of Alexandra Bergson and the operatic career of Thea Kronborg, appear pale beside the achievement of Antonia--a joyous life.<sup>8</sup> The talent that

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<sup>7</sup>Philip Gerber, Willa Cather (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 92, quotes from Eleanor Hinman, Interview with Willa Cather in the Lincoln Sunday Star, November 6, 1921.

<sup>8</sup>Gerber, p. 87, describes the achievement of this

makes Antonia an artist is the rarest one of all--the capability to enjoy life fully and to transmit that joy to others with whom she comes in contact. Jim Burden sums up Antonia as the ultimate life-artist when he reflects,

She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. I had not been mistaken. She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or a gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. . . . She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races. (p. 353)

Both O Pioneers! and The Song of the Lark appear to be Willa Cather's rehearsals for My Antonia, which clarifies and enlarges the idea of the artist attempted in the earlier books. Delightful as they are, Cather's first two attempts to capture the essence of the artist in Alexandra and Thea fall far short of the glowing, vivid portrait she presents in My Antonia.<sup>9</sup> After Cather's earlier attempts to deal with the strivings and unfulfilled lives of artists,

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consummate artist: "To live merely for the rich experience of living itself is the 'career' she labors at with as much diligence as Kronborg ever practiced her scales."

<sup>9</sup>Gerber, p. 88, suggests that Cather herself was better able to comprehend the types of artists who have unfulfilled lives, such as Alexandra and Thea, than she was the joyous artists of life, such as Antonia. He explains Cather's own identification with the more conventional types of artists: "The Thea Kronborgs, the Alexandra Bergsons she knew intimately, for they were so nearly surrogates for herself. In contrast, Antonia Shimerda required not analysis but worship. She was to be marveled at, something like a Sequoia that stands forever in contradiction of all one's experience."

she enabled Antonia to emerge as stronger, more vivacious, and even more lovable than the earlier heroines, who lose their zest for life and to a great degree, even their personalities, as their artistic toil exacts more and more from them. The exuberance and loving concern which spring naturally from Antonia's personality cause her, as Jim Burden describes it, to become a part of his mind, and the minds of others whom she loves. One might even go so far as to detect a longing for a life like Antonia's on the part of Willa Cather herself, whose own life in so many ways resembled that of preoccupied Thea Kronborg. Antonia's story may even have been for Cather a means to resolve her own artistic dilemma between her dual commitments to life and to art. As the last of the three early novels which deal with the immigrant heroines as artists, My Antonia presents a picture of the most successful, happiest, and paradoxically, the simplest and most down-to-earth artist of all. The wonder of Antonia's being the ultimate artist is her simplicity, her talent for being wholly and absolutely herself. Unlike Alexandra and Thea who strive constantly to express themselves as artists, Antonia in her art is as natural as breathing.

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