



# The Song of the Lark

*Willa Cather*

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## **The Song of the Lark** Willa Cather

Cather interviewed the opera star Olive Fremstad, who had been born in Sweden and raised in Minnesota. By coincidence, the night of their first meeting, Cather went to see a production at the Met; right before the performance was to begin, the director learned that the lead singer had fallen into a dead faint. With only minutes to prepare for the role, Fremstad agreed to fill in, and Cather was amazed that the tired, faded, unapproachable star she interviewed earlier in the day had somehow transformed herself into "a vision of dazzling youth and beauty." From this kernel grew the story of Thea Kronborg, the heroine of "The Song of the Lark," which is Cather's portrait of the diva as a young woman. The early sections of the book are pure Cather: a strong-headed yet friendly young girl surrounded by a colorful cast of multi-ethnic characters, from the anonymous tramp who drowns himself in the water tank to her alcohol-fueled German music teacher to the lively free-spirits living in the Mexican section of town. Nearly a novel unto itself, this opening section sketches the entire town of Moonstone with a multiplicity of tragicomic details. When Thea moves to Chicago, however, both her character and the book's tone changes. Initially her studies go well, but she finds her artistic growth chained by the expectations of the folks back home. Her awakening occurs when she travels to the American Southwest and stays near the ancient dwellings of the cave-dwellers; her removal from the influence of her Moonstone family and the stress of her Chicago education results in her emotional breakthrough. Thea realizes she will find success only after she has stripped away the vestiges of her countrified upbringing and forfeited her life, her friends, even her self to her art. Thea offers explains this sacrifice in terms similar to what the real-life Olive Fremstad told Cather: "It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life. Not much else can happen to you." "The Song of the Lark" melds two seemingly disparate literary traditions: the Western realism of the book's first half recalls Sinclair Lewis and the drawing-room sophistication of the later sections evokes Edith Wharton. The disparity was intentional: Cather's premise is that the artist must completely transform herself if she expects to shake the dust off her childhood moccasins and step into the heels of an artiste. Similarly, that very transformation is what makes Cather's novel so difficult for many readers: in order to become a star, Thea turns into a self-centered prima donna, a character who may be admirable but who is not always very likeable. An interesting read, "The Song of the Lark" has been noted for its "sharp bits of observation, sly touches of humor, and gestures of that gentle pity which is the fruit of understanding."

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