



Cather's Beginnings – “Friends of Childhood” in *The Song of the Lark*

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ABSTRACT

Cather is a model of a lovable person. When I read this fiction *The Song of the Lark*, I am inspired by the friends of Thea. This paper explores the characters in Thea's childhood. This fiction is considered as an autobiographical novel. Cather learns everything and she herself moulds her and she reaches her destination. Thea is the representation of Cather. Thea learns everything and she attains her destination. In this paper I try to mark the beauty of the novel which attracts the readers in the first chapter itself.

Key Words: Friends, imagination, growth and development, strength

Introduction

Freud's Virgilian epigraph to 'Interpretation of Dreams in 1900' - "Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebe", which was translated by John N Swift as :

'If I can't move heaven, then I'll raise hell'

This is very appropriate to Willa Cather. *The song of the Lark* brings in front of us that how child hood helps in learning. Willa Cather echoes her strong voice in presenting Thea and her childhood. When any one read *The Song of the Lark*, the character of Ray Kennedy immensely attracts the readers in general. This paper tries to focus on Thea's growth both mentally and physically through her friends. Thea is an extra ordinary girl behaves maturely in her tender age itself. She chooses her career at her early age tells us about her nature. Cather succeeds in painting the characters in psychological and cultural development. Learning is always sweet for Cather. Thea's nature is blended with Cather's imagination.





The Song of the Lark

Between *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, Willa Cather wrote her longest novel. This novel opens in a small town in Colorado, where Thea shows her talent and her early age with her family. Then it moves on to Chicago and with the help of Ray Kennedy's insurance. She is able to continue her study of music in Canyons and then at last it ends in New York where she becomes a great Wagnerian Soprano of the Metropolitan Opera. Her strong ambition and her passion towards music provide her strength to face the challenges even at her early age. In the vast bulk of Cather's writings, *The Song of the Lark* is Cather's most autobiographical novel.

Friends of Childhood

As Cather, Thea in *The Song of the Lark* also, accepts life as it comes to her. In her childhood days, she used to have her younger brother Thor in her hand for the whole day and along with him. She spends her time for dressing beside the cook stove in her house. Her well-wishers, Dr. Howard Archie and Professor Wunsch, Spanish Johnny and his wife Mrs. Tellamantez and the rail road worker Ray Kennedy encourage her to study music. They find her talents and her ability to develop concrete interest in music. Thea doesn't know about herself. For 17 years, she spends her days joyfully in Moonstone with her friends and doesn't give importance to her career.

The chapter I, which is rightly named as "Friends of Childhood", clearly introduces her friends and their relationships. Ray Kennedy is introduced as a lover of Thea. Even at her age of thirty, he is writing for Thea to get old enough to marry him. She is twelve, when he is thirty years. Cather uses this opportunity to describe him by enhancing his professional qualities. Cather says: 'Ray was a big fellow an aggressive idealist, a free thinker and like most rail road ken, deeply sentimental'. As a twelve years old girl she loves to get into sand hill. Ray is the only lovely person who takes her into that hill. Here the affection of Ray is very simple and smart. He is a matured man but he never tries to spoil the name of Thea. Thea accepts his love and their love never embrace the feelings of others. She shares her interest of music to Ray. Cather's interest gives shape to this book. Cather once told a journalist in 1921 as:

"All my stories have been written with the material that was gathered - no, God save us! not gathered but absorbed - before I was fifteen years old. 1913's *O Pioneers!*, the story of Alexandra Bergson's struggle to tame the prairies and build a life on the Nebraska Divide, was followed in 1915 by *The Song of the Lark*, the tale of opera singer Thea Kronborg's rise to fame in the world beyond Moonstone, Colorado"

Cather observes everything and she puts those observations and experiences through her writings. *The Song of the Lark* is a wonderful creative art of her career. It is her third novel. Thea's well-wishers, matured adults and everyone in the small town play a vital role in her life. Ray Kennedy's





affection for her is the prettiest things in this fiction. As a small girl Thea's love for wandering on the hill side, rail road's, and her passion towards music is remarkable. Thea explores whatever comes to her. For her, music is life. Ray Kennedy is died on the rail road accident and he has given a handsome of money as insurance to Thea. Using that money, Thea can reach Chicago and learn music. Ray Kennedy is not portrait as a romantic lover; he is a hard worker, sincere and matured adult. He has a vast knowledge in metals and phrases. His idea of civilization is clear. He confirms his idea by saying the importance of metals and the proper usage of metals by man. He is also bookish and he knows many phrases, but he uses simple words for his colloquial speech. He is very keen in his rail road work. He spends most of his time in rail track. Thea has a great respect for his knowledge and for his stations. Ray Kennedy calls her as 'Thee' to show that he is different from others. Ray is not a usual man. His vision for his future business and his love to marry Thea is more clearly depicted by Cather as a mild and soft thread in the story. Their relationship is not even an important thing in the story, but their affection touch the heart of all kind of readers. Before leaving to Chicago, Thea experiences with Ray is complete.

Cather introduces Ray in the I chapter and he died in that chapter itself, The remaining chapters deal with Thea's future. Thea's love for music and her strength help her to face any kind of challenges to learn music. Cather paints Thea as an adventurous girl. Her nature to explore the land and to expose herself with her voice is still amazing. Cather separates Thea from all the ordinary girls by providing her more responsibilities. She becomes a teacher in her tender age. This nature which is different from all the other girls and boys attracts Ray and he admires her excellence. Ray is dreaming about his marriage journey and he expresses his view to Thea, he is interested in watching her dreams through her eyes. Ray's expectations and his feelings are admirable. Everyone in Moonstone knows this and they have shared beautiful days. Thea feels so comfortable along with him. In this story, Thea never expresses her interest or her feelings to Ray. But Ray has the ability to understand her nature. He understands that if there is no music Thea could not live. Her life without music becomes dull. Because of his identification Thea can enter into this world of music. The famous saying is 'every man has a woman behind him', but in *The Song of the Lark*, Thea has Ray behind her to shine in her future. Thea's well-wishers motivate her to become an artist. Cather is born to become an artist and she reaches her destination as Thea touches her destination through lot of struggle and her strong passion towards learning music.

Cather's friends helped her lot to identify herself as a writer. Thea is also identified as a singer by her friends. Mrs.Kronborg encourages her to be a part in church music concert. Though Thea does not want to participate, but she involves herself to fulfil her mother's wish. Thea is an extraordinary girl. As a mother Mrs.Kronborg finds her and encourages her to fix her own path which suits her life. Thea praises Ray for his steady habits and his blameless life. But when he expresses his views towards God, Thea regrets for his feelings. Thea's vision of life is different and she is always ready to accept any kind of risks. She is very pure hearted girl. She has an inward courage and faces any kind of situation lonely. Her vision of human courage is said by David Stouck as:





Thea's vision of human courage soaring above the world like the eagles over the Laramie tableland culminates an excursion into the sand hills with Ray Kennedy and Spanish Johnny which has a kind of mythic shape and purpose. The whole sequence is like a ritual of initiation into the world of the imagination: the journey out to the desert (a flight into the world of eedom), the warning from the mentor (Wunsch) against commitment to the ordinary world, the amphitheatre in the richly – colored hills, the story telling, the music and singing, the play – acting of the children, and the final vision of the indomitable human spirit coursing westward.

Thea is introduced as a sick eleven years old girl in this chapter. In her little age, her face is scarlet and her eyes are blazing. At the age of fifteen, her eyes are kindled by the ideals of Ray. Thea's nature grows and Cather succeeds in presenting her growth from childhood to adolescent with good episodes. From her childhood itself she begins to learn the humans from her friends. Cather succeeds in presenting Thea as a representation of both the society in Moonstone and also in the town. Cather shares her own idealism through Ray.

When you look at it another way, there are a lot of halfway people in this world who help the winners win, and the failures fail, Ray Kennedy was thinking of the future, dreaming the large western dream of easy money, of a fortune kicked up somewhere in the hills, - an oil well, a gold mine, a ledge of copper... and that by the time she was old enough to marry, he would be able to keep her like a queen.

Before completing her school, Thea begins to teach and she begins to take care of herself. She takes part in the church choir and plays in services. Her independent nature that she receives in her childhood is helpful in designing her future. Childhood experiences and her friends and their relationships teach her a lot. She is a learner from the beginning. The chapter I function as the backbone of the novel. Thea's character of loving the nature is appreciable. Even without company she can enjoy. It is possible only with the beauty of nature. She passes her time by enjoying the nature through the isinglass sides of the hard-coal burner in her house.

While reading "Friends of Childhood" in The *Song of the Lark*, the reader cannot judge the growth of the story. It is Cather with her writings, draws the attention of the readers by choosing the characters around Thea. Because Cather considers Thea as a central character. The story is designed in moulding and making the central character. Throughout the novel, we cannot find any negative thoughts or negative character. This chapter which is the spinal cord of this novel holds, tightly in confirming this. Dr. Archie, M r. Wunsch, and Mrs.Kronbrog hold their hands together in the improvement of Thea. Ray Kennedy though he died in the rail truck accident, he also helps her by his insurance. Cather can bring out tears in everyone eyes by describing the incident of the Ray Kennedy's accident on the rail truck. Ray touches the heart of all kind of readers.





Ray who understands her completely calls her in his dead bed. His rail was wrecked and he was broke down completely. Cather creates a sense of seriousness at this scene. Cather describes the wrecked scene and she jumps into the Kronbrog's family. The train was wrecked at Saxony. The operator from there calls the Kronbrogs and requests him to meet Ray along with her daughter Thea. Cather doesn't work hard in throwing her words in describing the scene of Ray's death. Her flow of words draws the attention of the readers. After his death, Thea's life becomes dull. Dr. Archie and Mr. Wunsch advises her. Dr. Archie says: "If you decide what is you want most, you can get it", On hearing these words from Dr. Archie, Thea recalls Mr. Wunsch advice "there is only one big thing- desire" .

Cather kills the character of Ray and she marks his death as a life to Thea. After Ray Kennedy's funeral, Dr. Archie's role is highly appreciable. He calls Mr. Kronbrog and he says about Ray's wish. By his words and his voice, he convinces the Kronbrogs for sending Thea to Chicago to study music. Ray's insurance is helpful to enter into the town, but for her further development, Thea has to work hard. Cather's intention of filling the mind of Thea is fulfilled here. Thea becomes an icon here. Everyone in Moonstone takes Thea in their hands and all are waiting to see Thea's future. Cather introduces Thea at the age of eleven in 'Friends of Childhood', she leaves from Moonstone to Chicago at the age of seventeen. From the next chapter Thea marks her as a hard worker. Philip Gerber notes it and he says:

Hard work is no obstacle, for Thea quiet fully understands what will be demanded, for her fierce self-assertion points her always towards that single final goal: "a great many trains... carried young people who meant to have things. But difference was that she was going to get them! As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it work for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, and height after height.

In spite of all the characters, Ray's affection is remarkable. He lives after his death through Thea's future. Through Ray's eyes, Cather stresses her positive thoughts of her view on life: Life is as pleasant as never dreams about. God is behind us to make our dreams true. It may be in any path. Cather believes in representing the sensible character through her writings. Ray becomes the stand mark in the mind of Thea through Cather's pen.

Conclusion

Cather in her stories, she inspires and attracts the readers by giving some kind of positive advice to the readers. Every breeze is dusty with the pollen of learning. Thea in this The Song of the Lark learns to modify her life in her childhood days. The I chapter of The Song of the Lark is clearly endowed by thoughts, feelings, imagination, genius of Cather's art and it supplies energy to Thea to take her future decision. At the end of this chapter "Friends of Childhood" she begins to stand on her own leg. She is enjoyed with the blessings of internal peace. She loves music than anything in this world. Her matured friends and their advices and her own thoughts are combined with the spirit of living. Cather being the





greatest novelist find this genre as her expression to prove her genius. Cather portrays Thea as a small girl in the beginning of the novel and at the end of this story, she attains maturity both physically and mentally. She begins her career as a teacher of music and she shows her as a popular singer. "Friends of Childhood" is playing a vital role. By all her friends and her experiences, this early period ranks as one of the best introductions to Cather's writings. Thea's achievement is the result of many causes, which are happened in her childhood days. Cather produces novel in the beginning of the twentieth century, according to her Thea is the reflection of her own lie. Cather learns everything in her childhood and it helps her a lot in designing her future. Thea is also the same. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather produces more men characters breaking the traditional gender expectation. In this novel, the male characters are merely playing sub-ordinate roles. But without them Thea will not be there to achieve her goals. By creating Thea Kronbrog, Cather figures out memorable heroine with all special qualities and personalities. Cather sets Thea's friends to fulfil the demands of her music. Thea's romance with Ray is not the principal object in this story. Even then Cather brings all the characters to be acknowledged by the readers. Willa Cather possesses the powerful nature of male to succeed in her career. Thea is such a powerful character and she never wishes to miss the opportunity of her life at any cost. "Friends of Childhood" will definitely create happiness not only for the readers but also Thea in her life.

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