FAIRY TALE WOMAN TRANSFORMED, MYTHICAL ARTIST RE-BORN: RECONTEXTUALIZING THE FEMALE ARTIST’S NARRATIVE IN THE SONG OF THE LARK

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THE SONG OF THE LARK

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To Norm

with love and thanks
ABSTRACT

This essay considers Willa Cather’s use of fairy tale, musical, and mythological references within *The Song of the Lark* to rewrite cultural paradigms of patriarchal oppression and create a female-empowered narrative of an artist’s life. Through a complex network of allusions, Cather creates a successful *künstlerroman* by conveying the complicated realities of her female protagonist’s struggle to become an artist. Only by examining the full context of the novel’s allusions can we clearly understand the author’s characterization of her main character, Thea Kronberg.
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Since European fairy tales were first published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they have enchanted children across Europe and the United States. Many of these children—girls in particular—may subconsciously carry the tales’ images and themes with them into adulthood, associating the fairy tale world with the attainment of idealized happiness through romantic relationships and an adherence to culturally prescribed gender roles. If a woman is submissive, nurturing of others and endlessly patient, fairy tales teach us, she will someday be rescued from her mundane existence by a prince, they will marry, and both will live happily ever after.

Perhaps wishing to express the sublime enjoyment she found in writing about a young girl’s development into a successful artist—notably, an enjoyment derived from the creation of art rather than from romance—Willa Cather referred to *The Song of the Lark* as her “own fairy tale” (qtd. in Peck 21). Fairy tale references appear throughout *The Song of the Lark*, and although critics have addressed these fairy tale references, none have acknowledged the extent to which Cather utilizes the structure of the fairy tale to rewrite its patriarchal paradigms. Instead, critics tend to use the novel’s fairy tale references to point out deficiencies in the main character, Thea, that need to be ameliorated by the men in her life. Analyzing Thea’s development, Marilyn Berg Callander argues that “without her male half [Fred], the ‘prince’ who completes her in all ways, including fulfilling her sexually, Thea would remain incomplete, and would never fully assume her own power” (16). Demaree Peck highlights the text’s reversal of common fairy tale gender roles but ultimately determines that Thea would not survive as an artist without the contributions that her male friends make to her development (33). Failing to recognize Cather’s fairy tale references as a re-envisioning of the fairy tale, Peck continues throughout her analysis to view the novel as simply a reflection of the idealistic fairy tale. The critic concludes that we should interpret Thea’s narrative not “as a realistic *bildungsroman*. . .[but] as a fairy tale, or wish-
fulfillment” (21). According to Peck, every person and event in the novel is designed to “miraculously” facilitate Thea’s advancement as an artist (22). Cather, however, does more than merely re-create the fairy tale world in her novel; the author recontextualizes and redefines fairy tale motifs within her text in order to provide a realistic depiction of Thea’s struggle to establish her autonomy as a woman and as an artist. As Thea grows into adulthood, her life becomes complex, and the novel will correspondingly move beyond the fairy tale to include mythological references, which can better convey the complicated life of the artist. The text’s transition from fairy tale to myth is emphasized within Thea’s visit to Panther Canyon, a key turning point in her artistic development. Throughout The Song of the Lark, as Cather communicates the joy, pain, successes and failures of the artist’s life, she draws upon fairy tale, mythological, and musical allusions to convey the artist’s complex development, ultimately creating a successful, though not entirely unproblematic, female künstlerroman, a novel describing the “psychologically complex” development of the artist (Stouck 184).

For the purposes of this study, references to fairy tales will be drawn from the collections of Charles Perrault and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Perrault and the Grimms brothers compiled, edited and transcribed popular stories of their time into the tales we are familiar with today (Opie 21, Zipes, Once xxiv-xxv). In editing the tales, the Grimms brothers in particular ensured that the stories reinforced “the dominant patriarchal code,” which placed all power in the hands of male characters and relegated women to subservient roles (Zipes, Once xxviii) ¹. Consequently, in many fairy tales, the princess has no power to extricate herself from her undesirable circumstances: she must passively wait to be rescued by a prince (Harries 137). Cinderella, for example, cannot escape her wicked stepmother and stepsisters until the prince finds her, tests her authenticity, and takes her away with him.
In *The Second Sex*, a ground-breaking feminist study of cultural norms, Simone de Beauvoir explains that the patriarchal dynamic inherent in fairy tales has a very negative, profound impact on female readers. According to Beauvoir,

[The girl] learns that to be happy she must be loved; to be loved she must await love’s coming. Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow-White, she who receives and submits. In song and story the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, she is chained to a rock, a captive, sound asleep: she waits. (291)

Exposed at a young age to the fairy tale’s male-powered world, young girls internalize the fairy tale’s patterns of passivity and learn to romanticize relationships with men. Jennifer Waelti-Walters confirms Beauvoir’s observation and draws attention to the importance of finding paradigms that might counteract the impact of the fairy tale model:

Fairy tales present girls as objects; they are perceived as objects thereafter by everyone (girl and boy alike) who is not provided with an equally powerful counter-description. Until very recently such a description of woman by women has not been attempted. Both fairy tales and psychology are part of an accepted, male oriented view of the world which has become second nature to us all. . . . (8)

Beauvoir’s and Waelti-Walters’ insights into the fairy tale illuminate the necessity for a careful interpretation of fairy tale references in *The Song of the Lark*. If we understand the ways in which Cather re-envisions the fairy tale’s patriarchal paradigms, *The Song of the Lark* becomes a vital counter-model to the pervasive and invasive male-dominated fairy tale.

Before investigating Cather’s use of the fairy tale in *The Song of the Lark*, it is helpful to consider the author’s familiarity with fairy tales. Cather became well-acquainted with Grimms’ fairy tales and myths as a child (Slote 36) and later even wrote her own fairy tale, “The Princess Baladina—Her Adventure.” In the tale, Princess Baladina’s parents punish her for misbehavior, and the princess embarks on a quest to make her parents pay for their ill treatment of her. She
plans to find a wizard who will enchant her, which will sadden her parents and thus provide the retribution she seeks, and a prince who will be able to break the wizard’s spell once her goal has been accomplished. “The Princess Baladina” illustrates the author’s awareness of fairy tale motifs and structure. Traditional fairy tales often include a hero’s quest, repetition of language, and “golden” imagery (Lüthi 51); these salient features can all be found in Princess Baladina’s story. As Baladina searches for a wizard and a prince, she continually uses the same words when she asks someone for help: she wants to be “enchanted” because her family has been “unkind” to her, and she wants to find a prince who will “free” her. Additionally, Baladina plays with three gold balls, has golden hair, and kicks at the golden door of her bedroom.

Cather’s story reflects the style of the fairy tale, but “The Princess Baladina” also works to revise fairy tale conventions and pokes playful fun at Baladina’s attentiveness to fairy tale traditions. According to Jack Zipes, typical fairy tale princesses are expected to be “passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial…” (Introduction, 3), and Baladina is anything but obedient and passive. She wreaks mischievous havoc on her household by “bit[ing] and scratch[ing] her nurse. . . los[ing] in the moat one of the three beautiful golden balls which her father had bought for her. . . [and] pour[ing] custard in her fairy godmother’s ear-trumpet” (567). Sent to her room by her parents for her misbehavior, Baladina refuses to endure her punishment quietly. Although Grimms’ fairy tale princesses are usually not granted the power to contemplate—let alone change—their circumstances, Baladina devises a plan for getting even with her parents, carefully considering the possibilities. Baladina first thinks of cutting her golden hair but finally decides this is not a viable option because it would diminish her beauty, a quality a princess must possess: “if a young Prince should happen to come that way it would be awkward not to have any golden hair. Princesses are taught to think of these things early” (568).
Cather’s tongue-in-cheek tone suggests that while Baladina is clever, she clings tenaciously, and perhaps inanely, to the rules that traditionally govern a fairy tale princess’s thoughts and actions. She believes that in order to capture the attention of a prince, she must be attractive; furthermore, she will only find happiness when a prince breaks the spell and carries her off to his kingdom. For her, no other options are possible. As Baladina seeks to fulfill her quest, Cather’s sarcastic tone once again serves to question the princess’s attachment to traditional fairy tale patterns.

When one of the wizards asks what Baladina will do if a prince never comes to break the spell, she replies, “But they always do come” (570). Baladina’s dual rejection and acceptance of the established rules for being a fairy tale princess reflect Cather’s recognition of the pervasive influence of fairy tale paradigms, as well as signify her interest in questioning and revising the fairy tale model. However, Cather seems to finally capitulate to the patriarchal paradigms of the traditional fairy tale by returning power to male hands at the end of her story. Baladina’s father eventually finds his daughter and curtails her efforts to find a wizard and a prince. Though Baladina is in some ways able to reject the fairy tale’s patriarchal paradigms, she cannot completely separate herself from the confines of the role prescribed for her. By juxtaposing Baladina’s freedom from traditional fairy tale modes of passivity and submissiveness with the internal and external restrictions placed on the princess, Cather highlights both the opportunities for re-envisioning the fairy tale woman and the persistence of gender imperatives found within fairy tales.

In comparison to “The Princess Baladina,” *The Song of the Lark* provides a much more extensive and successful re-visualization of the fairy tale woman’s place in the world. Though male characters in the novel attempt to impose the conventional fairy tale woman’s role on Thea, Cather’s protagonist ultimately resists the men’s efforts and emerges as her own fairy tale
woman, independent and self-sufficient. More than offering simply a “subtle twist on the fairy tale” (Callander 18), *The Song of the Lark* significantly recontextualizes and reinvents the fairy-tale woman.

From the beginning of the novel, Thea’s interests and physical appearance correlate directly with descriptions of traditional fairy tale women. Like many fairy tale women, Thea has golden hair and a strong interest in jewels and other shiny objects (Callander 8). Thea’s friend Dr. Archie views Thea as an archetypal fairy tale female, admiring the child’s youthful beauty and associating her with a fairy tale princess who has been blessed by her fairy godmother: “He looked 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 cryptic promise” (12). Although Thea displays common characteristics of the fairy tale female, the protagonist’s selection of “The Snow Queen” as her favorite fairy tale suggests her early interest in finding and absorbing a female narrative that rejects traditional depictions of the fairy tale woman. While the vast majority of classic fairy tales are male-centered and male-empowered, “The Snow Queen” offers a uniquely female-focused perspective. In a reversal of standard fairy tale gender roles, the female main character in “The Snow Queen” actively seeks and rescues a boy. She is helped along the way by various people and animals, but her own strength of character and her resolve propel her journey. Additionally, whereas the futures of many fairy tale heroes and heroines are clearly outlined—and usually feature fulfillment through marriage—the individuals’ futures in “The Snow Queen” are wide open, full of unscripted possibilities. The characters retain the power to decide their futures for themselves. Self-determination and reversal of gender roles, key aspects of Thea’s favorite fairy tale, will become defining factors in Thea’s development.
The reversal of fairy tale male/female roles in *The Song of the Lark* can clearly be seen in Thea’s relationships with her male friends. When fairy tale women play any kind of active role in a story, they usually assume roles as nurturers, taking care of fairy tale men (Zipes, Introduction 3). Snow White, for example, tends to all the needs of the seven dwarves. In Thea’s narrative, however, Dr. Archie, Ray Kennedy, Wunsch, Harsanyi, and Fred Ottenburg assume roles as nurturers, which reverses the fairy tale’s female-to-male nurturing paradigm. Archie gives Thea the individual attention she needs to develop her artistic self and “encourages her ambition” (Huf 84). Ray Kennedy nurtures Thea’s sense of adventure by introducing her to the world outside of Moonstone. Wunsch fosters Thea’s talent, especially by drawing her attention to the fact that she possesses the special inner quality of the true artist. Fred facilitates the artist’s growth by suggesting she take a break and visit Panther Canyon, where she re-connects with her passion for music and re-visualizes her artistic self. Harsanyi, Thea’s teacher in Chicago, helps her begin to cultivate her true gift, her voice. Even after she becomes a successful artist, Thea continues to receive support from the men in her life. She remarks to Archie, “Isn’t it funny, how we travel in circles? Here you are, still getting me clean, and Fred is still feeding me. I would have died of starvation at that boarding-house on Indiana Avenue if he hadn’t taken me out to the Buckingham and filled me up once in a while. . . . I’m still singing on that food” (366). As Fred tells Thea, “It takes a great many people to make one—*Brünhilde*” (386). Through Fred, Wunsch, Ray, and Harsanyi, *The Song of the Lark* thoroughly reverses the fairy tale’s female-nurturing paradigm; though, notably, the nurturing Thea receives does not come entirely from the men in her life—Mrs. Kronberg and Aunt Tillie also support Thea’s development. Mrs. Kronberg makes sure that her daughter has space and privacy to practice the piano, and Aunt
Tillie supplies her niece with unconditional encouragement throughout Thea’s growth into an artist.

Thea receives much nurturing from her male friends and from her family, but, more importantly, Thea turns the very act of feminine nurturing inward, choosing to foster her own talents and develop her own personal success rather than nurture the men in her life. Thea’s self-nurturing first becomes evident in her creation of “private spaces,” such as her childhood attic bedroom, to separate herself from the outside world and focus on the development of her artistic self (Rosowski, Writing 64). As a child, Thea lies on her bedroom floor and dreams about her future as an artist: “She used to drag her mattress beside her low window and lie awake for a long while, vibrating with excitement, as a machine vibrates from speed. . . . It was on such nights that Thea Kronborg learned the thing that old Dumas meant when he told the Romanticists that to make a drama he needed but one passion and four walls” (122). Within the private space of her bedroom, Thea generates and cultivates the artistic passion that will drive her future success. As an adult, when Thea feels that the demands of others threaten her artistic focus, she becomes even more determined to nurture her own interests: “All these things and people 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” (171). Having resolved not to let the interests of others deter her from her own path, Thea continues to cultivate her self-nurturing skills in Panther Canyon, where she begins to juxtapose the histories of other women with her own artistic development. Comparing the pottery created by Indian women to her own voice, Thea realizes that both the pottery and her voice provide a way of containing “life itself” (255). Just as the pottery once carried life-giving water to the Indian women’s families, so the artist’s voice, and
music in general, has the ability to convey the essence of life—memories of the past, hope for the future, a sense of what is best about being alive—to an audience. The capacity of music to express the essence of life is clearly communicated later in the novel when Thea attends her first concert and hears Dvořák’s Symphony in E minor. The music evokes her most pleasurable memories of childhood and self-discovery. Thea reflects, “Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning. . . . There was home in it, too; first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world. . .” (170). Towards the end of the novel, Thea’s own voice rings out with the full essence and power of life: “the voice gave out all that was best in it. Like the spring, indeed, it blossomed into memories and prophecies, it recounted and it foretold. . .” (393). The power of music and of the artist to convey the very essence of life, an appreciation of which Thea first nurtures in Panther Canyon, not only gives Thea an inner sense of strength but also enables her to, in her own way, give something back to the world. Ultimately, as a result of Thea’s connection between the Indian women’s art and her own, Judith Fetterley maintains, the artist “finds herself no longer alone and singular but part of an ancient and deep-rooted pattern. . . . Thea learns how to mother herself, generating the history she needs to support her own development” (230). In coming to identify with the significance of the Indian women’s art, Thea begins to visualize art within a more meaningful, empowering context. Art, Thea learns, is not simply a piece of clay or a beautiful sound—art can speak directly to the recipient’s soul by conveying some sense of the past and by suggesting the richness of future possibilities. Thus, Thea learns to provide her own nurturing through her recognition of the power of art and the development of a personal, supportive history. Throughout Thea’s narrative, Cather reverses traditional gender-related nurturing roles, but more significantly, the author creates a protagonist
with the ability to internalize feminine nurturing and create something that is solely and entirely for herself. Empowered by her self-nurturing, Thea is able, in her own unique way, to nurture others with her art by communicating a sense of what is best about being alive.

Cather further advances a gynocentric world view by addressing the fairy tale’s representation of female fulfillment through marriage. Ray Kennedy seeks to insert Thea directly into the role of fairy tale princess. A fairy tale princess’s ultimate goal is to be married, and her virtues and talents are designed to accomplish this purpose (Waelti-Walters 11). Kennedy embodies the patriarchal-focused fairy tale prince, desiring to someday marry Thea and “keep her like a queen” (49). But Thea clearly has her own plans for the future that do not include fulfilling the fairy tale’s patriarchal directives. When Wunsch asks Thea if she would like to stay in Moonstone, “marry some Jacob. . .and keep house for him,” Thea scorncs the idea in favor of pursuing a career as an artist (68). As he lays dying, Kennedy himself realizes that his plan to marry Thea and keep her as his queen was nothing more than “one grand dream” (128), his own personal fairy tale. Thea, he recognizes, is destined for much more than simply filling the role of a traditional fairy tale princess.

Although Thea escapes becoming Ray’s queen, the marriage-as-fulfillment paradigm favored by the fairy tale continues to haunt her, even after she has become a successful artist. As discussed previously, the traditional fairy tale embraces the patriarchal dictate “that to be happy [a girl] must be loved” (Beauvoir 291). A woman’s fulfillment must derive from some external source; concomitantly, a woman’s life should culminate in marriage (Beauvoir 298). Thea repeatedly voices her distaste for this patriarchal directive, telling Fred, for example, that she finds the idea of marriage “Perfectly hideous!” and expressing the value of her independence: “It’s waking up every morning with the feeling that your life is your own, and your strength is
your own, and your talent is your own; that you’re all there, and there’s no sag in you” (266).

Thea believes that marriage may not be suitable for every woman, but her friend Archie has a different opinion. Expressing the patriarchal version of how Thea’s life satisfaction should be determined, Archie bemoans what Thea has lost as a result of her artistic journey, and he anxiously asks her about her love life, unable to comprehend how she could possibly be fulfilled without a male partner. He goes on to tell Thea of his great hope that she and Fred would eventually marry, then asks why she abandoned her plans to marry Nordquist (377-378.) The doctor persists in his attempt to hold Thea accountable to the marriage-as-fulfillment paradigm despite his own negative experience with marriage and despite his earlier acknowledgement that marriage can often create more problems than happiness. He declares to Fred, “It depresses me now to buy wedding presents” (331). Though he realizes that marriage does not by any means guarantee happiness, Archie wants Thea to marry so she can finally find the life-satisfaction he is certain she does not already possess. But Thea has already told Archie that for her, life-satisfaction can only come from her art. According to Thea, “it’s silly to live at all for little things. . . .Living’s too much trouble unless one can get something big out of it” (205).

The doctor’s paradoxical view of marriage, which he insists Thea should subscribe to despite her differing opinion, reflects the persistence in our culture of conventional life-fulfillment roles; try as she might to focus on her art, Thea must deal with unrelenting reminders of the conventional role others would thrust upon her. Consequently, as Sherrill Harbison points out, “more than once the idea of marrying and being taken care of tempts [Thea]” (xvii). Conventional gender roles threaten Thea’s artistic journey, suggesting an alluring alternative to the intense, all-consuming life that Thea believes true artistry requires. But Thea knows that she has followed her true path, and she tries to explain to Archie the fulfillment she receives from her
“What one strives for is so far away, so deep, so beautiful...that there’s nothing one can say about it” (381). However, in spite of Thea’s efforts to impart a sense of her artistic fulfillment to Archie, the doctor remains unconvinced and continues to favor his fairy tale princess—the princess who provides him with personal satisfaction—over the powerful, self-fulfilled artist Thea has become. To the end, Archie chooses to see Thea in the role that has the most meaning for him. He tells Thea, “you’ve always been my romance. Those years when you were growing up were my happiest. When I dream about you, I always see you as a little girl” (379). Susan Meyer offers another interesting perspective on Archie’s single-minded perspective of Thea by looking at the ways various characters in the novel, including Archie, admire young Thea’s body. According to Meyer, “[Cather] suggests that Thea’s blossoming development as an artist is, without her conscious involvement, irresistibly attractive, even alluring, to others around her....The glorious, expanding, rounding body, the healthy developing lungs that incarnate Thea’s artistic development makes her, even against her will and desire, an object of admiring, eroticizing attention” (29). Set in the context of Myer’s argument, it is plain to see that Archie can no longer relate to Thea because she is no longer in the bloom of her artistic development. Emphasizing how old Thea looks when he sees her again after many years, Archie wishes only to remember Thea when she was young and in the enticing bloom of her artistic growth. Yet in spite of Archie’s insistence on defining Thea’s value as a woman within the context of marriage and within the context of her contribution to his happiness, Thea successfully articulates her own sense of self-worth and “find[s] a fulfilling alternative to the norm of marriage” (Foster 168). When Thea does finally marry Fred, the marriage receives only the briefest mention in the text. For Thea, marriage simply adds another dimension to her life, a life which has already discovered fulfillment through art.
Thus discarding the conventional princess’s version of life-fulfillment and creating a new role for herself, Thea continues to reject the fairy tale model of female development by refusing to emulate the traditional fairy tale female’s passivity. This passivity is exemplified in Cinderella’s inability to play an active part in fulfilling her destiny. Without the help of her fairy godmother, Cinderella cannot change her circumstances. Cinderella’s fairy godmother must provide her with suitable clothing and transportation—otherwise, Cinderella could not attend the ball and meet her prince. According to Peck, the fairy godmother who assists Cinderella is re-formed in Thea’s narrative through Dr. Archie and Ray Kennedy. Archie and Kennedy supply Thea with attention and money, which help her to develop the strong sense of self and the financial means necessary to beginning her life as an artist. One could also argue that Thea’s mother serves as a godmother figure. Mrs. Kronberg is somewhat distant as a mother, but she takes particular care to nurture her daughter’s artistic self: she ensures that Thea can use the parlor for four hours a day to teach, she supports the burgeoning artist’s need for the privacy of her attic bedroom, and she advises Thea to keep her clothing loose to develop her chest, the source of her talent. While Thea receives much help from those around her, she is not, like Cinderella, entirely dependent on the support of others. Additionally, though Cather acknowledged that “fortunate accidents will always happen” to girls like Thea (qtd. in Huf 88), the protagonist’s active role in shaping her destiny should not be discounted. As first evidenced by Thea’s ability to nurture herself, examples of the artist’s influence over her own destiny can be found throughout her narrative.

Thea’s active role in her development is reflected in her response to Ray Kennedy’s death, a response in which she continues to provide a self-empowered re-envisioning of the fairy tale woman. In traditional fairy tales, the power of mobility usually resides in male hands: the
male characters are free to move about the fairy tale world without difficulty but the female characters are not. Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, and Sleeping Beauty, among others, are only granted freedom of movement by their fairy godmothers or princes. Until a fairy godmother or prince arrives to change their circumstances, the female character remains trapped, unable to undertake her own journey, let alone create her own definition of life-fulfillment. Prior to Ray Kennedy’s death, just as in a fairy tale Thea’s mobility is totally dependent on her male friends. Dr. Archie takes Thea on drives around the area, but it is Ray who takes her to new and exciting places. Thea longs for the world outside of the boundaries of Moonstone, and “Ray Kennedy [is] her only hope of getting there” (43). When Ray dies, Thea has a definite choice to make: she can either accept the traditional model of female passivity, stay in Moonstone, and find herself a prince, or she can decide to pursue her dream of becoming an artist. Once again rejecting the dominant conventional paradigm for female life-fulfillment, Thea leaves for Chicago, thereby actively and powerfully carving her own path into the future. Moreover, Thea’s journey away from Moonstone indicates an important transfer of power from male Ray Kennedy to female Thea Kronberg. Upon Ray’s death, Thea appropriates the fairy tale’s male-centered power of mobility and begins her own female-empowered journey. Once in Chicago, Thea continues to reject the passive role of the conventional fairy tale princess. Harsanyi tells his student that every artist must “[make] himself born,” (150) and Thea rises to her teacher’s challenge, working through her exhaustion and despair, pushing herself to her limits time and again. Though good fortune and supportive friends facilitate Thea’s journey, Thea drives her own success by working hard and dedicating herself to her goals.

Although fairy tale references in Song of the Lark serve to re-write traditional gender conventions and thereby undermine traditional patriarchal images of oppression, the fairy tale
ultimately cannot function as a vehicle for Cather’s portrayal of the life of the artist. Thea’s childhood teacher, Wunsch, provides the first insight into the fairy tale’s inability to convey the complex nature of the true artist. In the fairy tale, characters are one-dimensional; as a rule, they do not exhibit emotions and their personalities remain largely undeveloped (Lüthi 24, 49-50). Wunsch correlates the simplicity of fairy tale characters with the lack of depth exhibited by those who are not true artists. Comparing American singers to characters in Märchen (fairy tales), Wunsch tells Thea,

‘They have nothing inside them. . . .They are like the ones in the Märchen, a grinning face and hollow in the insides. Something they can learn, oh yes, maybe! But the secret — what makes the rose to red, the sky to blue, the man to love — in der Brust, in der Brust it is, und ohne dieses gibt es keine Kunst, giebt es keine Kunst!’ (71)

Wunsch delineates the limitations of the fairy tale and clarifies the reasons why the fairy tale cannot accurately reflect Thea’s artistic development. Quite unlike a fairy tale character, Thea carries something substantial inside of her, a passionate quality essential to the creation of the artist. Much later in the novel, another character observes the special quality inside of Thea. In describing this quality, he notably does not reference the fairy tale: “‘But the important thing is that she was born full of color, with a rich personality. That’s a gift of the gods, like a fine nose. You have it or you haven’t. Against it, intelligence and musicianship and habits of industry don’t count at all’” (372). The “gods,” not a fairy tale godmother, bestowed Thea with her gift. In this description we see a turn away from fairy tale references in relation to Thea and perhaps some suggestion of the mythological associations which Thea as an artist will eventually inhabit.

Just as the fairy tale’s vague delineations of characters do not correspond with the complex nature of the artist, the simplicity of the fairy tale’s themes also do not correlate with the overall complexities of the artist’s life. Fairy tales present idealistic representations of life:
magical forces aid the hero in his or her journey; forces of good and evil are clearly delineated; people who are evil receive punishment and people who do good deeds are rewarded; heroes and heroines may face obstacles, but they always find complete success and happiness at the end of their journeys. In comparison, as we learn from Thea’s narrative, the life of the artist is filled with successes, failures, hardships and doubts. And although Thea seems to derive a certain amount of life-satisfaction from her art, we are never sure whether she finds happiness.

The text’s undermining of the fairy tale in relation to the artist’s life is furthered when Wunsch eventually cuts down the Kohlers’ dove-house in a fit of drunken rage. As Callander discusses, Wunsch’s attack on the dove-house strongly echoes the chopping down of a dovecote in *Cinderella* (10). In various tellings of the fairy tale, either Cinderella’s father or the prince cuts down a dovecote while searching for Cinderella, who is attempting to hide from them. According to Callander, Wunsch’s destruction of the dovehouse represents the teacher’s belief that Thea should not hide from her future: instead, Thea “must begin to take charge of her own life” (10). Interpreting Wunsch’s actions within the context of his prior reference to the fairy tale imbues his destructiveness with a more profound meaning. From Wunsch’s perspective, fairy tales illustrate what the artist is not. Wunsch’s attack on the dove-house represents a metaphorical attack on the fairy tale, a reiteration of his belief that the simplistic fairy tale does not have a place in the complex life of the artist.

Within a discussion of how Cather re-envisions the fairy tale in order to place power into female rather than male hands, it may seem disconcerting that a male character supplies the force that undermines the significance of the fairy tale in the artist’s life. But it is helpful to recognize that the power driving Wunsch’s actions derives not from a position of male authority but from his authority as an experienced artist. Only Wunsch, who spent years struggling to become a
successful artist, can comprehend and react to the fairy tale’s inability to convey the life of the artist. While she learns something from her teacher’s explication of the simplicity of the fairy tale, Thea will not fully understand the complexities of an artist’s life until she leaves her childhood world of Moonstone and faces the harsh realities of artistic development in Chicago. Not yet completely aware of what being a successful artist entails, Thea does not have the experience necessary to respond to the fairy tale’s inadequacy for encapsulating and reflecting the life of the artist. It is not that her childhood in Moonstone has been simplistic in itself—indeed, her childhood has been rich and colorful, providing her with a diverse foundation for her artistic development. Compared to the complex artist’s life she will grow into in Chicago, however, her childhood has been relatively uncomplicated, providing just enough difficulty to foster her ambition but not so many obstacles as to break her spirit. At this point in the novel, Wunsch alone, who is well-versed in the complex struggles of an artist’s life, has the ability to recognize and metaphorically attack the simplicity of the fairy tale as a model for the artist’s development.

Thus, the fairy tale cannot provide either a true representation of or a model for an artist’s life. Instead, the fairy tale in *The Song of the Lark* becomes a vehicle for expressing the dissonance between the reality of Thea’s development into an artist and other characters’ perceptions of Thea’s accomplishments. Once Thea becomes an artist, fairy tale references and paradigms serve to reflect not the absolute truth of Thea’s inner world but rather other characters’ interpretations of her life. While those people in her life who are artists—or who like Fred have lived within the artistic world—possess insight into her life, those who have little or no real connection to the artistic world have great difficulty understanding the full implications of Thea’s life as an artist.
For Thea’s Aunt Tillie, the idealized world of the fairy tale accurately reflects Thea’s success as an artist: “[Tillie] had always insisted, against all evidence, that life was full of fairy tales, and it was!” (406). From Tillie’s perspective, the fairy tale represents the unequivocal perfection of Thea’s success: Tillie seems to have no understanding of the struggle and sacrifice which have continually disrupted and complicated Thea’s artistic journey. The perfection of the fairy tale is an illusion, not an indication of the artist’s reality. Yet, even though Tillie’s fairy tale perspective of Thea’s accomplishments represents an idealistic illusion, her viewpoint does provide her with some sense of self-empowerment. Thinking of Thea’s achievements improves Tillie’s spirits and restores the aunt’s optimistic outlook on life: “[Tillie] had been feeling a little down, perhaps, and Thea had answered her, from so far. . . . If our dream comes true, we are almost afraid to believe it; for that is the best of all good fortune, and nothing better can happen to any of us” (406). Cather’s use of the fairy tale in Tillie’s reaction to Thea’s success once again offers a vision of female empowerment quite contrary to images of male empowerment commonly found in traditional tales. While many women associated with fairy tales have no power to change their circumstances or to shape their own happiness, Tillie is empowered and finds joy by reveling in her niece’s accomplishments.

Like Aunt Tillie, Dr. Archie has difficulty separating the artist Thea from his fairy tale image of her. Archie attends one of Thea’s performances and is dismayed that she no longer seems to be his fairy tale princess. Put off by the harshness of Thea’s artistic persona, Archie compares Thea to “the wolf [who] ate up Red Ridinghood” (343). Laura Dubek insightfully articulates Dr. Archie’s inability to understand Thea outside of the fairy tale role he has constructed for her:

Archie was so intent on seeing the Thea who was his fairy princess, that when ‘Kronberg’ the opera star appeared, he could see only ‘this new woman’ who had
‘devoured his little friend’ (500). Unable to integrate culture and nature as Thea has done, Archie remains the spectator firmly entrenched in a society which objectifies, separates, and mystifies human relations. (299)

As a result of his inability to revise his fairy tale vision of Thea in anything but a distorted way, Archie remains an outsider in Thea’s life, incapable of fully comprehending the person she has become. For Thea, the “consumption” of her childhood self by her artistic self has been a necessary part of her development. But Archie, understandably, has difficulty comprehending Thea’s decision to give herself entirely to her art. Within the doctor’s reaction to Thea’s artistic self, the fairy tale again illuminates the text’s distinction between Thea’s point of view and that of other characters. Archie’s interpretation of Thea’s life is not the artist’s reality.

If, then, the fairy tale denotes other characters’ external views of Thea’s life as an artist, something besides the fairy tale must convey the internal life of the artist, as well as impart a model for the artist’s development. According to Fay Marion, “Cather [often] relies on music... to suggest the relationship between inner and outer worlds [of the artist]” (27). Evidence of Cather’s method can be found in The Song of the Lark; particular themes within the music Thea performs suggest that the music itself provides a vehicle for her life as an artist. Allusions to Greek and Nordic mythology in Thea’s music, as well as to German folklore, prove particularly reflective of her artistic life. Notably, while fairy tale-like qualities and storylines exist within the novel’s referenced songs and operas, the significance of the musical references lies not in superficial aspects of the works but within the references’ underlying themes. Cather extensively studied Greek, Roman, and Germanic-Nordic mythology and was well-versed in the music she incorporated into her writing (Slote 37; Giannone 4). She was particularly familiar with opera, especially Wagner: as a student at the University of Nebraska, she wrote reviews of Lohengrin, Tannhauser, and Die Walkure (Marion 32). Her familiarity with fairy tales, myth, and music
enabled her to create deeply rooted allusions within Thea’s narrative, allusions that not only define the artist’s life but also further the novel’s subversion of patriarchal paradigms. While Mary Ryder argues that “Thea accepts the part of the mythic artist, which can only lead to perfection and the loss of self” (133), I believe that references to myth within Thea’s narrative serve to acknowledge her imperfections, as well as to confirm the validation of self that Thea finds within her art. Within the novel’s mythical allusions, we find an affirmation of the realities of Thea’s artistic life, which includes the recognition of her faults and her discovery—not loss—of self through her music.

Bruno Bettelheim’s analysis of the differences between fairy tales and myths elucidates the appropriateness of mythology for expressing the artist’s life. Fairy tales present stories of everyman; because the characters have “generic” names, readers can easily see their own lives reflected in the heroes’ journeys. Cinderella, for example, is never given a proper name: her name is merely a reflection of her physical appearance—she works among cinders and always appears dirty, so everyone calls her Cinderella. Since Cinderella is so vaguely defined, the reader can readily place herself in the character’s shoes (40). In contrast, “the dominant feeling a myth conveys is: this is absolutely unique; it could not have happened to any other person, or in any other setting. . .” (37). Thea’s narrative makes clear the unique features of Thea’s personality and life history that define her artistic journey. Harsanyi recognizes a special quality within Thea that will enable her success and declares to his wife, “[Thea] will do nothing common. She is uncommon, in a common, common world” (181). Fred Ottenburg echoes Harsanyi’s pronouncement, highlighting the inner drive within Thea that pushes her to strive for something more than the ordinary in her life. Fred tells Thea,

You will never sit alone with a pacifier and a novel. You won’t subsist on what the old ladies have put into the bottle for you. You will always break through into
the realities. That was the first thing Harsanyi found out about you; that you couldn’t be kept on the outside. If you’d lived in Moonstone all your life and got on with the discreet brakeman, you’d have had just the same nature. Your children would have been the realities then, probably. If they’d been commonplace, you’d have killed them with driving. You’d have managed some way to live twenty times as much as the people around you. (298)

What satisfies many people in life, Fred explains, cannot satisfy Thea; a unique aspect of Thea’s personality compels her to strive for more than what contents other people. But Thea’s personality is not the only defining, unique factor that enables her success. Throughout her life as an artist, Thea draws strength from memories of her childhood. When she feels disappointed in herself and exhausted from her efforts, she imagines the sweet contentment of her warm childhood bed and her spirits are restored. In addition to serving as a source of strength, Thea’s childhood provides her with inspiration for her art. She informs Archie,

They save me: the old things, things like the Kohlers’ garden. They are in everything I do... Not in any direct way... the light, the color, the feeling. Most of all the feeling. It comes in when I’m working on a part, like the smell of a garden coming in at the window... When I went with you to Chicago that first time, I carried with me the essentials, the foundation of all I do now... when I set out from Moonstone with you, I had had a rich, romantic past. I had lived a long, eventful life, and an artist’s life, every hour of it. Wagner says, in his most beautiful opera, that art is only a way of remembering youth. And the older we grow the more precious it seems to us, and the more richly we can present that memory. (381)

Thea’s distinctive ability to use her own personal history to enhance her artistic life further emphasizes the highly individual nature of her journey, a journey that becomes even more individualized by her absorption of nature during her visit to Panther Canyon. Thea’s visit to the canyon serves as a key turning point in her artistic development and emphasizes the text’s transition from the simplistic, generic fairy tale to a more complicated, individuated narrative, which will eventually find expression in mythical allusions. Lying in the sun at the Panther Canyon ranch, Thea re-defines her artistic self. Reflecting on her previous artistic experiences
and her artistic focus, Thea concludes, “She had always been a little drudge, hurrying from one task to another—as if it mattered! And now her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation” (251). Ann Moseley further clarifies the impact of the canyon on Thea’s growth. Moseley posits, “A significant part of Thea’s growth as a singer in Panther Canyon results from experiencing the rhythmic and often symphonic voices of nature’s singers—the chirping of the ‘little brown birds’ (314), the constant, rhythmic tapping of the woodpecker (307, 320), and the repetitious sounds of the cicadas (301) or locusts (319)” (226). Synthesizing her own personal history with the landscape of Panther Canyon, Thea creates a one-of-a-kind template for her life as an artist. Unlike the relatively simplistic fairy tale, we will learn, myth has the potential to communicate the complex exceptionality of Thea’s journey. In communicating the unique qualities of the artist’s life, mythological references emphasize the distinction between Thea’s perspective of her artistic life and the perspectives of those around her who do not understand her artistic journey. Although others may question the sacrifices Thea makes, Thea embraces the totality of her art, sacrifices and all.

References to the mythological-based opera Orpheus and Eurydice, which Thea studies under Wunsch, illuminate the text’s distinctions between external and internal views of Thea’s life. As her connection with the myth illustrates, although the outside world accentuates Thea’s sacrifices to her art, the artist herself views her life much differently. In the myth, Orpheus’ wife Eurydice dies, and Orpheus goes to the underworld to try and bring her back to the world of the living. Through his skills as a singer and lyre-player, Orpheus wins Eurydice’s release. There is only one condition: as Orpheus leaves the underworld he must not look back—he must trust that Eurydice is following him, even though he cannot see her. Unfortunately, Orpheus looks back, and Eurydice is lost to him forever (Buxton 172). According to Richard Giannone, the Orpheus
and Eurydice myth highlights the redemptive power of art: “For Orpheus, the supreme lyric artist, the emergency of life determines the emergency of art. Only through art can he retrieve his beloved. Art can redeem life for the singer. If he can articulate his grief, hell can be won over to his need” (90). However, Giannone continues, the redemptive power of art becomes lost to Orpheus when he cannot control his need to look back for Eurydice. “Art gives meaning, emotion in communicable shape,” Giannone explains, “but does not necessarily provide a way of meeting its demands” (90). In other words, the “demands” of art continually threaten the capacity of art to provide the artist with true life-fulfillment. To further complicate matters, artists must find ways of reconciling their personal lives with their artistic dedication. Caught between a need to fulfill her individualistic desires and the possibility of creating and maintaining meaningful relationships, Thea decides to give herself completely to her art: “The marriage between life and art is brought about through the sublimation of life into art. Art for Thea Kronborg solves the crisis of life by absorbing it” (90). Whereas other characters in the novel such as Dr. Archie fret over Thea’s non-existent personal life, the artist recognizes and accepts the sacrifices she makes. Thea tells Dr. Archie, “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” (378). Although she acknowledges the price she has paid for her art—lack of a love life, disappointment at having to cater to the needs of her audience, emotional detachment from family and friends—Thea is willing to pay this price for what she perceives to be the greater reward. As she sees it, her sacrifices enable her to stretch herself completely towards the one thing an artist desires the most—artistic fulfillment. Early in her career, Thea feels that people are interfering with her
artistic focus, and she resolves to let nothing and no one stand in the way of her goals: “They might trample her death, but they should never have it. As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height” (171). Unwilling or perhaps unable to figure out how to balance her personal life with her career—a conflict not uncommon in women’s lives—Thea makes the decision to commit herself entirely to her art. The Orpheus and Eurydice myth provides a lens through which to view the complex world of the artist; by exploring Thea’s world through this lens, we recognize that while Thea believes she must absorb her life into her art, her single-minded dedication may not be a template by which every artist can live.

Even so, Thea’s reconciliation between life and art reflects David Stouck’s definition of a successful künstlerroman: “The optimistic assumption upon which the künstlerroman stands is that the coherence of art redeems life’s failures, and that such negative experiences are both necessary and creative; but the incontrovertible truth of every such story is that art is achieved at the expense of life, that only through isolation and failure does the artist acquire the motive and perspective essential to his art” (184). Though Thea’s personal and professional lives remain unbalanced, her attempt to reconcile life with art, along with her successes and failures and her dedication to her art, ultimately create a successful künstlerroman.

In Thea’s quest for the “ecstasy” of artistic fulfillment, which she is determined to have “time after time, height after height” (171), we can see additional evidence of the suitability of myth for expressing the artist’s life. Northrop Frye observes that “myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire” (136). Immortal and all-powerful, mythical gods have the ability to pursue even their wildest desires. Thea endeavors to attain the “top level of
human desire” (Frye 136) reflected in myth by pushing herself to reach the summits of artistic fulfillment.

Thea’s search for ultimate artistic fulfillment is inherently connected to her pursuit of the artist ideal. The music Die Lorelei, which Harsanyi offers as a challenge to Thea, reflects Thea’s pursuit. The musical piece Die Lorelei originated from a poem by German writer Heinrich Heine, who drew upon German mythology to create his work (appendix B). In the poem, a maiden’s sweet song from a mountaintop so distracts boatmen in the water below that the men crash against the rocky shore and perish in the waves. Composer Franz Liszt’s identification with the poem gives us an idea of how an artist might find a mirror for his own experience within the work. Liszt writes,

Yesterday I passed the foot of the Lorelei’s Rock. She has disappeared, that wonderful fairy creature who combed her golden hair in the sunshine and sang such a powerful, enticing song that the fascinated river pilot, raising his eyes to her, forgot his tiller and was wrecked on the reefs….And yet, oh beautiful Lorelei, you still return they say to this old world of ours. You are the ideal! . . . But you disappear, and reality, that reef where all enthusiasm is dashed, displays its naked face and fleshless flanks to him. (198-199)

With her golden hair, the “fairy creature” Liszt describes could be a character from a fairy tale. However, the significance of the Lorelei for Liszt lies not in her fairy tale-like attributes but in her metaphorical relevance. Metaphors are generally not found in simple fairy tales; the poem’s mythological roots supply the necessary complexity for the artist’s interpretation. Liszt viewed Lorelei as the artist’s ideal, which is ever-alluring and ever-fleeting. The artist’s perspective on Die Lorelei provides a strong visual representation of Thea’s own elusive search for true artistic fulfillment. Striving for the “ecstasy” of the artistic ideal, Thea struggles with the ramifications of her pursuit. After a performance Thea reflects,

The first thing that came was always the sense of the futility of such endeavor, and of the absurdity of trying too hard. Up to a certain point, say eighty degrees,
artistic endeavor could be fat and comfortable, methodical and prudent. But if you went further than that, if you drew yourself up toward ninety degrees, you parted with your defenses and left yourself exposed to mischance. The legend was that in those upper reaches you might be divine; but you were much likelier to be ridiculous. . .Certainly very little of that superfluous ardor, which cost so dear, ever got across the footlights. (354)

Caught within the artist’s internal conflict of desiring to reach the pinnacle of the artistic ideal, knowing the risks of such an endeavor, and realizing the improbability that her extra efforts will ever reach the audience, Thea feels disappointed and deflated by her efforts. Yet as Liszt’s rendering of *Die Lorelei* suggests, the cost of the artist’s efforts does not diminish the power or wonder of the artist’s quest. Though the ideal may be almost impossible to attain, it is worth the artist’s struggle. Overcoming her disillusionment through self-nurturing, Thea uses her childhood memories as a source of strength and reactivates her determination. By the end of the novel, Thea’s efforts pay off and she appears to connect with at least a glimmer of the ideal she has been reaching for all along:

That afternoon nothing new came to Thea Kronberg, no enlightenment, no inspiration. She merely came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long. Her inhibitions chanced to be lower than usual, and, within herself, she entered into the inheritance that she herself had laid up, into the fullness of the faith she had kept before she knew its name or its meaning. Often when she sang, the best she had was unavailable; she could not break through to it, and every sort of distraction and mischance came between it and her. But this afternoon the closed roads opened, the gates dropped. What she had so often tried to reach, lay under her hand. She had only to touch an idea to make it live. (395)

Empowered by her efforts, Thea does not even need to verbally articulate her achievement; her performance alone communicates her triumph. Liszt’s interpretation of *Dei Lorelei* gives us a glimpse into the artist’s world and helps us to understand the artist’s complex connection to the artistic ideal. Though Thea may experience self-doubts and disappointments, her quest for the ideal inspires and motivates her artistic journey.
In addition to providing insight into the world of the artist, mythical references serve to further the text’s critique of patriarchal paradigms. Consideration of the flaws within Thea’s character offer insight into this aspect of the text. Certainly, Thea is not perfect; like any character from mythology, she has imperfections—imperfections that may have negative consequences for the people in her life. Mythical Orpheus, flawed and only human, is not strong enough to resist the forbidden: he looks back to make sure Eurydice is following him, and as a result he destroys any hope she has of being freed from death. Similarly imperfect, Thea possesses a cold-heartedness that has the potential to negatively impact those around her. Unwilling to be sidetracked from her artistic pursuits, once again making a choice between her career and her relationships, Thea refuses to grant her dying mother’s last wish that her daughter visit her once more. Art for Thea represents everything, and her placement of art above love and human connection may be interpreted as her greatest flaw. Though flawed, however, Thea also possesses very admirable qualities—dedication, perseverance, formidable inner strength, and passion. Yet, according to John Randall, Cather’s characterization of the the artist demonstrates “little psychological insight” because Thea “is not [. . .] a charmer but [. . .] an aggressive, domineering, and infuriatingly self-absorbed woman” (47). Responding to Randall’s analysis of Thea’s character, Sharon Hoover offers an explanation for Randall’s sweepingly negative interpretation of Thea. Hoover contends that Randall’s misreading of Thea derives from the critic’s insistence on applying an andocentric point of view to the artist’s life. According to the andocentric model, a girl who follows a male pattern of development and places personal success above relationships “is seen as unsuccessful, and often as abnormally aggressive. . . . [She is also] considered inferior, for she is considered ‘unnatural”’ (258, 260). As Hoover posits, *The Song of the Lark* both acknowledges the existence of the andocentric model in our culture and
rejects the idea that andocentricism provides an accurate view of women. Thea’s interpretation of her operatic role of the Nordic goddess Fricka illuminates the problem of the andocentric model and supplies an opportunity for Thea to rewrite the male-focused paradigm. The Nordic goddess Fricka offers great wisdom and insight, but she is generally portrayed as a nagging wife because she does not fit into the andocentric view, which dictates that women should be submissive and meek. Like Thea, Fricka is consequently “stripped of attractiveness” (Hoover 260). But Thea offers an opposing version of Fricka, the transformative power of which Fred Ottenburg recognizes and articulates:

_Fricka had been a jealous spouse to him for so long that he had forgot she meant wisdom before she meant domestic order, and that, in any event, she was always a goddess. The Fricka of that afternoon was so clear and sunny, so nobly conceived, that she made a whole atmosphere about herself and quite redeemed from shabbiness the helplessness and unscrupulousness of the gods._ (371)

Thea’s conversion of Fricka into a positive vision of woman shatters the andocentric image commonly assigned to the goddess, thereby suggesting that an andocentric reading of the text as a whole may not take into consideration the full scope of Cather’s depiction of women in the novel. Highlighting the significance of Thea’s re-definition of Fricka, Giannone writes, “in Kronberg’s interpretation Fricka emerges as the personification of wisdom she originally had been, glittering with a gold quality. She becomes a goddess again, her divine status restored by ‘a beautiful idea’ (583) in the singer’s mind” (98). As Thea’s interpretation of Fricka demonstrates, art provides a means for transforming patriarchal-centered views of women into something entirely new, hopeful, and positive. Just as Cather re-envisions the fairy tale woman in her novel, so Thea re-envisions the popular andocentric interpretation of Fricka into a representation of female strength and empowerment.
Looking once again at Thea’s experiences in Panther Canyon, we find additional evidence of Cather’s use of mythical references to subvert expected cultural patterns of female development. Through Thea’s visit to the canyon, the author questions the idea that a woman’s development or maturation depends upon a male influence. Critics Callander and Rosowski connect Thea’s creative awakening to her sexual awakening, arguing that sexual passion stimulates Thea’s artistic passion. This awakening, the critics argue, takes place at Panther Canyon when Fred Ottenburg arrives and provides the male component for the “vessel” Thea has made of her throat (Callander 16; Rosowski, *Willa* 236). From this perspective, Thea cannot be artistically awakened without her male counterpart. However, consideration of allusions to mythology within Thea’s experiences at Panther Canyon enhances our understanding of the female—not male—source of inspiration that engenders Thea’s artistic vision. Furthermore, I believe mythological references within the canyon scenes and within one of Thea’s operatic performances later in the novel create a distinction between the rebirth of Thea’s artistic self and the artist’s full awakening into her artistic self: while the artist Thea is metaphorically reborn in Panther Canyon, she does not awaken into her full artistic potential until much later in the novel. Mythological references within Thea’s time in Panther Canyon offer insight into this aspect of the novel. According to Nancy Wurzel, Thea’s visit to the canyon evokes Great Mother Goddess mythology. Wurzel provides a synopsis of “woman-centered” Great Mother Goddess myth:

the goddesses of the Greeks, Romans, and Norse derived from the Great Mother Goddess of the Paleolithic age, and repeat the mythic patterns despite variations in attribute over the millennia. . . By the Neolithic age, the Great Mother Goddess was not imagined as a person or heroic figure, but the principle of life exemplified in the observable birth/death/rebirth cycle of the seasons and agriculture. The Great Goddess’s divinity was immanent in the pattern of regeneration she represented: she was imagined as the earth, the mother from which all life seems to emerge and return, and she was envisioned as female because her powers are repeated in the female body, the ability to nurture and
produce life. (Apparently, early people did not recognize the male role in reproduction.) (63)

Key aspects of Thea’s artistic journey are evocative of the Great Mother Goddess myth: the artist’s metaphorical death and rebirth; the regenerative power of the canyon, which enables Thea’s rebirth; and, more indirectly, the lack of necessity within Thea’s artistic rebirth for a male contributor. Reflections of the Great Mother Goddess myth—specifically the myth’s patterns of death and rebirth—can first be seen in Thea’s move from Chicago to Panther Canyon. As a student in Chicago, Thea struggles to keep her artistic spirit alive. Exhausted and filled with disappointment, her artistic spirit deadened, she seeks renewal in Panther Canyon: “Her faith in herself and humanity at low ebb, she experiences the dark night of the soul before her pilgrimage to Panther Canyon. However, once she surrenders to the regenerative embrace of nature in the pine forests of the Navajos, her spirit begins to heal. . . .Her failures and aspirations diminish in the sun and sand. . .” (Wurzel 64). Reveling in the natural world of Panther Canyon, Thea experiences a renewal of her artistic passion. Yet she experiences more than simply a reclamation of her artistic ambition during this time. As Wurzel indicates, the canyon has distinctly female attributes, and I would argue that the canyon becomes the very embodiment of the Great Mother Goddess, which enables the genesis of Thea’s redefined artistic self.

Illustrating the femininity of the canyon, Wurzel references Ellen Moers’ description of Panther Canyon “as the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature” (258) and draws our attention to the “V-shaped inner gorge” of the canyon and the canyon’s womb-like qualities. Wurzel contends that “through identification with nature as another female self. . . Thea finds inspiration for her art, and fulfillment for her body and soul” (64). But as the womb-like qualities of Thea’s rock cave suggest, the canyon offers more than a reflection of another female self: the canyon represents the Great Mother Goddess and actually births Thea’s newly defined
artistic self. This distinction enhances our understanding of the autonomy of Thea’s rebirth. The canyon itself provides everything Thea needs to become reborn. Just as believers in the Great Mother Goddess myth “did not recognize the male role in reproduction” (Wurzel 63), no male influence is required in Panther Canyon to produce Thea’s newly defined artistic self. Significantly, Thea’s relationship to the canyon serves to free her from oppressive, culturally defined connections between women and nature. As Mary Mellor explains, females have traditionally been identified with nature in order to enhance male power and freedom. Women are associated with “Mother Earth” and, just as Mother Earth produces and nurtures life, so must women become mothers and nurturers. Because they must be mothers, women are relegated to the domestic sphere of society, while men are free to participate in cultural/public spheres (72).

In Thea’s relationship with the canyon, however, we see an important shift in this male-empowering paradigm. The canyon, not Thea herself, assumes the role of the Great Mother Goddess, which generates the artist’s rebirth: a distinction is made within the text between Mother Nature and Thea, separating the image of woman as mother/nurturer from the artist herself. Furthermore, through Thea’s rebirth, she gains strength as an artist, enabling her to participate more effectively in the male-powered public/cultural world to which she will return.

Cather does not merely emphasize the importance of the natural world to the exclusion of the cultural world. Rather, the author explores her female character’s connection with nature in order to create a position for Thea that would normally be reserved for males—the position of taking from nature in order to create culture. In this way, a positive, strengthening association is made between a woman and nature, which thereby revises cultural definitions of woman and her relationship to nature and motherhood.
Having been re-born in Panther Canyon, Thea’s artistic self continues to develop and does not become fully awakened until Thea performs the role of Sieglinde, from Wagner’s *Die Walkure*. In this mythical reference, we find further indications of Thea’s autonomy. In the scene presented in *The Song of the Lark*, characters Sieglinde and Siegmund express their love for each other. However, as Katherine Boutry explains, “The sexual imagery Cather uses to depict the love scene makes music the soprano’s dominant lover and deletes Siegmund from the equation entirely. As a lover, music is invasive, possessive, and dominant. . .” (191). Music, not an actual person, complements the female artist. A close look at the scene clarifies the female artist’s appropriation of maleness through her music. In the opera, Sieglinde realizes that Siegmund is her long lost twin brother, and she tells him that his sword has been waiting for him. As Sieglinde, Thea seizes the sword for Siegmund: “Her impatience for the sword swelled with her anticipation of his act, and throwing her arms above her head, she fairly tore a sword out of the empty air for him. . .” (393). As Sieglinde unites herself with Siegmund through the sword, Thea unites herself with the phallic symbol of the sword, a representation of her union with her music. Having now fully awakened to her artistic potential—entirely through her own, personal interaction with her music—Thea “[comes] into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long” (395). As her role as Sieglinde illustrates, Thea’s fulfillment of her potential ultimately derives not from an external source, but from within herself and from her relationship with her art. As mythical allusions elucidate, Thea discovers the vessel of her voice in Panther Canyon, but she does not need someone else in order to fulfill her artistic vision.

A closer look at Thea’s development of her “vessel” in Panther Canyon further clarifies the role of art as Thea’s true companion. Before we can fully understand the significance of Thea’s activities in the canyon, however, we need to consider the full context of the novel’s
allusions to Thea’s art. Throughout the novel, Thea’s art is often associated with the image of a river or stream. Harsanyi encourages Thea to think of her music as a river, flowing and constant. When Thea attends her first concert, she has difficulty absorbing all of “that troubled music, ever-darkening, ever-brightening, which was to flow through so many years of her life” (170). The “flow” of the music recalls the flowing river of sound evoked in Harsanyi’s instruction. In Panther Canyon, Thea makes an additional connection between the stream and her art: “The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself. . . In singing, one made a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals” (254-55). As evidenced by other references in the text, the stream is a metaphor for Thea’s art. From Thea’s perspective, the vessel of her voice is designed to be filled by one essential element—the river of sound inherent to her music. By juxtaposing Thea’s “vessel” with the river, which represents the vocalist’s art, Cather makes clear that art serves the true counterpart for Thea’s voice.

A defining experience in Thea’s development, Thea’s time in Panther Canyon ultimately helps her to create a narrative that is entirely her own. Although mythology functions as a window into Thea’s life as an artist, Thea does not actually become a goddess, and she does not escape (in her imagination) to the fictional mythological world when she needs a break from her artistic struggles. Although Callander and Ryder insist that Thea rises above the mundane, everyday world and achieves goddess-like strength and success, Cather’s portrayal of the artist remains grounded in the artist’s reality. Cather clearly conveys the price Thea pays for choosing to dedicate herself completely to her art: the exhaustion and disappointment Thea sometimes contends with after a performance are well-delineated. Furthermore, when the demands of her
life as an artist threaten to overwhelm her, Thea responds by accessing some part of her own, very real, experiences. In order to cope with the difficulties of her artistic life, Thea creates a self-supporting narrative out of her Panther Canyon and childhood experiences that she will call upon when her strength falters. Thea’s creation of this narrative can be seen in her Panther Canyon bathing rituals. One of Thea’s greatest pleasures in Panther Canyon—and the source of her revelation about her art—is bathing in the canyon’s stream. During her baths in the canyon, she re-connects with a sense of history, life and art that heals her physical and emotional exhaustion. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Thea’s identification with the ancient women and natural setting of Panther Canyon enables her to nurture her vision of the voice as an artistic vessel by creating a larger, more supportive historical context for her artistic development. In developing this enhanced context for her artistic self, Thea begins to create a self-supporting narrative based on her personal experiences—a story of the inter-connectedness of history, human life and nature that sustains her throughout her artistic career. Dreading an impending visit from Dr. Archie because she knows he will question the sacrifices she has made, Thea re-enacts her Panther Canyon bathing ritual and emerges from her bath fully restored:

Her bath usually cheered her, even on low mornings like this. Her white bathroom, almost as large as her sleeping-room, she regarded as a refuge. When she turned the key behind her, she left care and vexation on the other side of the door. Neither her maid nor the management nor her letters nor her accompanist could get at her now. When she pinned her braids about her head, dropped her nightgown and stepped out to begin her Swedish movements, she was a natural creature again, and it was so that she liked herself best. (355)

The artist once again finds comfort in her bathing ritual after performing the role of Sieglinde. Discouraged by a fellow female vocalist’s “chilly and disapproving” treatment of her (389)—Thea has taken a role that traditionally belonged to the other artist—Cather’s protagonist escapes to her bath. The warm water “penetrate[s] to her bones, induc[ing] pleasant reflections and a
feeling of well-being” (391). Emerging from the bath, the artist crawls into bed and soothes herself further by recalling her childhood in Moonstone:

She turned her side, closed her eyes, and tried an old device. She entered her father’s front door, hung her hat and coat on the rack, and stopped in the parlor to warm her hands at the stove. . . .she went to bed. . . .Once between the red blankets there was a short, fierce battle with the cold; then, warmer—warmer. . . .The bed grew softer and warmer. Everybody was warm and well downstairs. The sprawling old house had gathered them all in, like a hen, and had settled down over its brood. . . .Softer and softer. She was asleep. She slept ten hours without turning over. From sleep like that, one awakes in shining armor. (391)

Thea continually draws upon her recuperative experiences in Panther Canyon and her memories of childhood contentment as a means of renewing her inner resources, which enables to continue her artistic journey. The personal narrative she has created fosters her artistic survival.

Yet, despite empowering her protagonist through the artist’s creation of her own personal, restorative narrative, Cather seems to remain uncomfortable with the idea of a female as a truly great artist. In one of her non-fictional writings, Cather questioned whether “any woman every really had the art instinct, the art necessity” (Slote 158), and although Fetterley insists that “Thea’s voice. . .rises above the chorus of Cather’s doubts” (223), some aspects of Thea’s development remain problematic. As Rosowski observes, Cather’s final descriptions of Thea depict the artist as androgynous. According to Rosowski, Cather titles her last chapter with the patronymic Kronberg, dropping the feminine surname, ‘Thea,’ and she presents the middle-aged singer as hard, drained of youthful vitality. One wonders whether Cather would include her character among the ‘few women who really did anything worthwhile’—the Great Georges, George Eliot and George Sand—only with the same condition she applied to them, ‘and they were anything but women.’ (Willa, 237)

In The Song of the Lark, Cather presents a powerful counter-model to the patriarchal-focused fairy tale and creates a female artist with the ability to transform conventional images of women
through her art, but the author’s final gender-ambiguous representation of the artist somewhat diminishes the female-empowered aspect of Thea’s narrative.

While Cather created a successful künstlerroman in *The Song of the Lark*, accurately depicting the struggles, triumphs, failures and joys of an artist’s life, the gender-ambivalent final images of Thea, as well as Thea’s ill treatment of other women, raise questions about the overall success of the novel as a female-centered künstlerroman. Through fairy tale and myth, the author subverts common cultural gender paradigms, but *The Song of the Lark* is not entirely female-empowering. Thea is not helped in her artistic development by any women, and she absolutely refuses to help any other women with their artistic efforts; she even goes so far as to “terrorize” other female students, who nickname her “die Wolfin” because of her ill-treatment of them (Fetterley 233). There seem to be no consequences for Thea’s ill-treatment of the women she encounters; Thea rises to the heights of operatic stardom even though she has made other women’s lives miserable in the process. Thea’s trampling of other women in the process of achieving her dreams leaves us questioning the strength of her narrative as a female-centered text. While the success of her narrative should not be based solely upon the quality of her relationships, Thea’s treatment of other women does seem to weaken the novel’s narrative of female-empowerment. Still, Thea’s poor relationships with other women—specifically, female artists—may be designed to further underscore the conflict between the artist’s intense desire to fulfill her individual needs and society’s expectations that she serve as a nurturer for other members of her community. These issues engender several questions: Should Thea really be expected to consider the needs or interests of other people as she pursues her dream? How does a female artist maintain relationships, especially with competitors, and still attain her goals?
How does a woman find balance between her career and her personal life? There are, obviously, no easy answers for these questions.

The fact that these questions cannot be easily answered suggests that attempts to categorically define Thea’s character can lead to an oversimplification of Cather’s depiction of the artist. Critics have a tendency to characterize Thea through positive and negative extremes: she is generally categorized as either irreparably flawed or inhumanly powerful. Contrary to these opinions, “Thea is not a witch, a goddess, nor an abstraction in a paradigm of development” (Hoover 271). True to the complexities of human existence, Cather creates a character in Thea Kronberg who cannot easily be labeled or explained. By understanding how fairy tale, musical, and mythological references elucidate Thea’s female and artistic development, and the ways in which Thea creates her own self-supporting narrative out of her experiences, we can fully appreciate the complex intricacies of Cather’s characterization of the artist. Yet, despite Cather’s complex characterization of Thea, the ending of the novel seems oddly to return to the simplicity of fairy tale paradigms. Just as the fairy tale single-mindedly emphasizes an individual’s lone journey to success, so The Song of the Lark ultimately emphasizes the individualism of Thea’s journey. Thea expresses hostility towards an artistic community, and she never truly re-connects with her old friends Dr. Archie, Harsanyi, and Spanish Johnny. Her isolation is accentuated by Spanish Johnny’s distant observation of the artist after her last concert in the novel. Similar to a fairy tale, the female character’s only final companion is suggested to be her husband: Thea leaves the theater with Fred Ottenburg, unable to re-establish her relationship with Spanish Johnny. Thus the ending seems to reiterate the tenacity of fairy tale paradigms established previously in Thea’s narrative. By understanding how fairy tale, musical, and mythological references elucidate Thea’s female and artistic
development, and the ways in which Thea creates her own self-supporting narrative out of her experiences, we can fully appreciate the complex intricacies of Cather’s portrayal of the artist. Although fairy tale and mythological references reflect Thea’s development as an artist and as a woman, Thea’s true embodiment of self is completely her own, shaped by the stream of life in Panther Canyon and carried with her throughout her artistic journey.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Notes

Jack Zipes provides an insightful overview of the history of feminist reactions to the fairy tale in his introduction to *Don’t Bet on the Prince*.

2 It is interesting to note Dr. Archie’s association between Thea and her deceased mother, who represents an excellent nurturer of others: “When he last looked at [Mrs. Kronberg], she was so serene and queenly that he went back to Denver feeling almost as if he had helped to bury Thea Kronberg herself. The handsome head in the coffin seemed to him much more really Thea than did the radiant young woman in the picture…” (*Song* 339). Archie’s association seems to reflect his inability to let go of traditional gender roles—he favors the calm image of deceased nurturer Mrs. Kronberg to the live, self-nurturing, artistic Thea. Archie’s attachment to traditional gender roles informs his entire relationship with Thea and ultimately prevents him from ever understanding Thea’s artistic journey.

3 For example, in *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye*, Madonna Kolbenschlag discusses parallels to the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale within Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung*. According to Kolbenschlag, Wotan puts a sleep-like spell on his daughter Brünhilde and encircles her with fire, which is very similar to what happens to Sleeping Beauty. Only when the “prince,” Siegried, enters the circle of fire and kisses Brunhilde is Wotan’s spell broken.
I do not know what it means that I am so sadly inclined; 
There is an old tale and its scenes that 
Will not depart from my mind.

The air is cool and darkling, 
And peaceful flows the Rhine, 
The mountain top is sparkling, 
The setting sunbeams shine.

The fairest maid is reclining 
In wondrous beauty there; 
Her golden jewels are shining, 
She combs her golden hair.

With a golden comb she is combing, 
And sings a song so free, 
It casts a spell on the gloaming, 
A magical melody.

The boatman listens, and o’er him 
Wild-aching passions roll; 
He sees but the maiden before him, 
He sees not reef or shoal.

I think, at last the wave swallows 
The boat and the boatman’s cry; 
And this is the fate that follows 
The song of the Lorelei.