



## ***The Song of the Lark*** **High School Curriculum**

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### Standards:

- LA 12.1 Students will learn and apply reading skills and strategies to comprehend text
- LA 12.1.5 Vocabulary: Students will build and use conversational, academic, and content-specific grade-level vocabulary
- LA 12.1.6 Comprehension: Students will construct meaning by applying prior knowledge, using text information, and monitoring comprehension while reading increasingly complex grade-level literary and informational text
- LA 12.2.2 Writing Modes: Student will write in multiple modes for a variety of purposes and audiences across disciplines
- LA 12.3.2 Listening: Students will develop and apply active listening skills across a variety of situations
- LA 12.4.1 Information Fluency: Students will evaluate, create, and communicate information in a variety of media and formats (textual, visual, and digital)

### Resources:

<a href="http://www.virtualcather.org">http://www.virtualcather.org</a>	The Willa Cather Foundation's Virtual Tour
<a href="http://tinyurl.com/kwvf9rw">http://tinyurl.com/kwvf9rw</a>	The Willa Cather Foundation's <i>The Song of the Lark</i> LiveBinder
<a href="http://www.willacather.org">http://www.willacather.org</a>	The Willa Cather Foundation site
<a href="http://www.cather.unl.edu">http://www.cather.unl.edu</a>	The University of Nebraska's Willa Cather Project

### Supplemental material:

<a href="http://tinyurl.com/nu3qp3o">http://tinyurl.com/nu3qp3o</a>	Biography and photos of Olive Fremstad
<a href="http://tinyurl.com/mh3bbkz">http://tinyurl.com/mh3bbkz</a>	Fremstad performs "Du bist der Lenz" from Wagner's <i>Die Walküre</i>
<a href="http://tinyurl.com/ome2ppm">http://tinyurl.com/ome2ppm</a>	Libretto of Wagner's <i>Die Walküre</i>
<a href="http://tinyurl.com/pxsxj4q">http://tinyurl.com/pxsxj4q</a>	Virtual Tour of Walnut Canyon

Pre-Reading Writing Activity (LA 12.2.2)

1. What is art? What are the goals and functions of art? Write a one-page essay on what inspires or defines art.
2. Share a photo of a piece of art—sculpture, painting, photo—or a piece of music or literature that inspires you. Describe what the personal meaning that the work holds for you, or what you think it represents.

Pre-Reading Listening Activity (LA 12.3.2)

1. Listen to the clip of “Du bist der Lenz” (above) and read that portion of the libretto:

Du bist der Lenz,  
nach dem ich verlangte  
in frostigen Winters Frist.  
Dich grüsste mein Herz  
mit heiligem Grau'n,  
als dein Blick zuerst mir erblühte.  
Fremdes nur sah ich von je,  
freudlos war mir das Nahe.  
Als hätt' ich nie es gekannt,  
war, was immer mir kam.  
Doch dich kannt' ich  
deutlich und klar:  
als mein Auge dich sah,  
warst du mein Eigen;  
was im Busen ich barg,  
was ich bin,  
hell wie der Tag  
taucht' es mir auf,  
o wie tönender Schall  
schlug's an mein Ohr,  
als in frostig öder Fremde  
zuerst ich den Freund ersah.

You are the spring  
for which I longed  
in the frosty winter time.  
My heart greeted you  
with holy terror  
when first your glance lighted upon me.  
I had only ever seen strangers;  
my surroundings were friendless.  
As if I had never known it  
was everything that befell me.  
But you I recognized  
plain and clear;  
when my eyes saw you,  
you belonged to me.  
What I hid in my heart,  
what I am,  
bright as day  
it come to me,  
like a resounding echo  
it fell upon my ear,  
when in frosty loney strangeness  
I saw my friend.

3. Pre-Reading Activity: Virtual Tour (LA 12.1.6 and LA 12.3.2)  
Visit the Willa Cather Foundation’s Virtual Tour of Red Cloud, Nebraska ([www.virtualcather.org](http://www.virtualcather.org)) and explore Cather’s Childhood Home, including her room in the attic. Read the portion of the text in which Thea Kronborg describes her room

("Friends of Childhood" section VIII) and ask students to discuss why the creation of Thea Kronborg's room might be important to the book or to the character. Have them compare their feelings about their own bedrooms to those expressed by Thea.

It was at the end room of the wing, and was not plastered, but was snugly lined with soft pine. The ceiling was so low that a grown person could reach it with the palm of the hand, and it sloped down on either side. There was only one window, but it was a double one and went to the floor. In October, while the days were still warm, Thea and Tillie papered the room, walls and ceiling in the same paper, small red and brown roses on a yellowish ground. Thea bought a brown cotton carpet, and her big brother, Gus, put it down for her one Sunday. She made white cheesecloth curtains and hung them on a tape. Her mother gave her an old walnut dresser with a broken mirror, and she had her own dumpy walnut single bed, and a blue washbowl and pitcher which she had drawn at a church fair lottery. At the head of her bed she had a tall round wooden hat-crate, from the clothing store. . . .

The acquisition of this room was the beginning of a new era in Thea's life. It was one of the most important things that ever happened to her. Hitherto, except in summer, when she could be out of doors, she had lived in constant turmoil; the family, the day school, the Sunday-School. The clamor about her drowned the voice within herself. In the end of the wing, separated from the other upstairs sleeping-rooms by a long, cold, unfinished lumber room, her mind worked better. She thought things out more clearly. Pleasant plans and ideas occurred to her which had never come before. She had certain thoughts which were like companions, ideas which were like older and wiser friends. She left them there in the morning, when she finished dressing in the cold, and at night, when she came up with her lantern and shut the door after a busy day, she found them awaiting her. There was no possible way of heating the room, but that was fortunate, for otherwise it would have been occupied by one of her older brothers.

From the time when she moved up into the wing, Thea began to live a double life. During the day, when the hours were full of tasks, she was one of the Kronborg children, but at night she was a different person.

Classroom activities, discussion questions, and essay prompts:

1. Read the following excerpted letter from Willa Cather to her friend and American author Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Note that Cather refers to her “own fairy tale.” Why do you believe she called it that? What are some similarities and differences between Willa Cather’s life and Thea Kronborg’s? Why is Moonstone important to Thea even after she leaves? How does Red Cloud figure into Cather’s later life? (LA 12.1, LA 12.1.6)

March 15 [1916]

New York City

Dear Dorothy:

I’m so glad you fun with it [*The Song of the Lark*], and so grateful to you for telling me so. It is a carelessly written book because I had so much fun writing it I could not be careful. Even in the proofs I fooled myself into my own fairy tale and raced ahead. The year and a half I spent writing it—about six months of the time vacation but with the story more or less in mind—went by like a dream. I never had a dull hour with her—if I’d had to work harder I’d have taken more pains and the book would be a better one. I had a lot of the chapters of the German part written, but they seemed to destroy the composition; for of course it’s all really done from the Moonstone point of view. The German part had to be so different in tone, even in language, that it destroyed my point, though it made a more consistent book. For, of course, my point was not the development of a genius—my point is always Moonstone, what she got from it, what she gave back to it. It is really written in the speech of Moonstone . . .

The book is done in two manners—one intimate, one remote. She goes on, but I stand still in Moonstone with Tillie, and I write from Moonstone. That change in presentation was the very germ of the idea, and my doubt as to whether it would be convincing kept me back from writing the book for several years. But it’s not because the early experience is more real than the later. It’s because the heroine’s life became less and less personal. The early years are the most interesting—they were to her, too. The personal life of singers like [Milka] Ternina and Fremstad arrives at the vanishing point. . . . The last chapters were written not so much for Thea as for Moonstone and Dr. Archie. She had to make good to them. And a singer is the only artist who makes good to Moonstone. Red Cloud people go to Kansas City to hear [Geraldine] Farrar and Mary Garden [famous opera singers]. It’s half art and half natural phenomenon; it’s personal, concrete, a living woman, a living voice there before them.

2. A metaphor is defined as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable, such as “falling through a trapdoor of depression.” Likewise, a symbol is a thing that represents something else (usually something abstract), such as a limousine being a symbol of wealth. Throughout

the book, art and creativity are represented symbolically or metaphorically; write down three passages demonstrating these techniques and explain Cather's meaning. (LA. 12.1, LA 12.1.5, LA 12.1.6)

*Option:* Create a chart that maps the novel's symbolism as a class project. (LA 12.4.1)

3. As you read the section "Kronborg," listen to some YouTube videos of Olive Fremstad's performances, especially Wagnerian roles described by Cather (Isolde, Sieglinde). If you were authoring a review of the role, describing the singing voice you hear, what words would you use? (LA 12.1.5, LA 12.2.2, LA 12.3.2)

Compare your review to Cather's, below:

Links: Isolde (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CotkiBeB030>)

Sieglinde (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHqXyGpKeTA>)

*Mme. Fremstad has developed these heroic rôles in the heroic spirit. A great tragic actress, she is, of course, able to give these Wagnerian heroines color and passion and personality and immediateness. An actress with such power to create life and personality might well forget the great ideas which lie behind these women, in realizing and releasing their rich humanity. But with Mme. Fremstad one feels that the idea is always more living than the emotion; perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that the idea is so intensely experienced that it becomes emotion.*

*However definite and full her conception of a character, her portrayal of it is always austere, marked by a very parsimony of elaboration and gesture. After you have heard her sing Isolde, for instance, you are unable to say by what means she communicated to you the conception that is all too-present with you. You can not recall any carefully contrived stage business by which she took advantage of the composer. You can not say, "By such and such a thing she accomplished so and so." You are driven back to the conclusion that whatever happened during the performance, happened in Mme. Fremstad; that the fateful drama actually went on behind her brow.*

4. Discuss the novel's epilogue. What has Cather done with perspective—through whose eyes do we see the action of the story? Why? Does the epilogue change how you feel about Thea Kronborg? Do Tillie's opinions and recollections of Thea align with your opinion of Thea at the end of "Kronborg"?

## *The Song of the Lark* Character Matching Quiz

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Choices:

- |                  |                   |                    |
|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| A. Thea Kronborg | B. Dr. Archie     | C. Mrs. Kronborg   |
| D. Herr Wunsch   | E. Fred Ottenburg | F. Madison Bowers  |
| G. Mr. Kronborg  | H. Spanish Johnny | I. Tillie Kronborg |
| J. Lily Fisher   | K. Andor Harsanyi | L. Ray Kennedy     |

N/A (didn't happen or doesn't describe one of the listed characters)

- \_\_\_ A rather pretentious minister
- \_\_\_ In an unhappy marriage to a demanding woman
- \_\_\_ Dies shortly after asking for and getting to see Thea one last time
- \_\_\_ Wanted/wants to become a nun
- \_\_\_ Dies before Thea can come back to Moonstone
- \_\_\_ Drinks too much due to a mysterious, but painful, past
- \_\_\_ A Native American medicine man
- \_\_\_ A voice teacher who instructs Thea
- \_\_\_ Heir to a thriving brewery
- \_\_\_ Falls in love with his secretary
- \_\_\_ Leaves a small inheritance for Thea so she can study music
- \_\_\_ Plans to be a piano teacher, until told that his/her talent lies elsewhere
- \_\_\_ Gives birth to a baby during the novel's opening
- \_\_\_ Commits suicide by hanging
- \_\_\_ Periodically goes a bit crazy and runs off for days
- \_\_\_ Married to a patient in an asylum
- \_\_\_ First told Thea about Cliff Dwellers
- \_\_\_ Makes a fortune with a mining company
- \_\_\_ Introduces Thea to Fred
- \_\_\_ Visits the Chicago Art Institute
- \_\_\_ Deceives Thea by withholding information
- \_\_\_ Outperforms Thea at a Sunday School program
- \_\_\_ Tells Thea that every artist must make themselves born
- \_\_\_ Works as a funeral singer
- \_\_\_ Tells a story about stealing a handkerchief

Answer key: G, B, L, NA, C, D, NA, K, E, NA, L, A, C, NA, H, E, L, B, F, A, E, J, K, A, NA

## Assessments

### 1. Map-Making

Cather wrote: “The children in the primary grades were sometimes required to make relief maps of Moonstone in sand. Had they used colored sands, as the Navajo medicine men do in their sand mosaics, they could easily have indicated the social classifications of Moonstone, since these conformed to certain topographical boundaries, and every child understood them perfectly.” Using colored pencils, papier-mâché, or colored sand, create a map of Moonstone that reflects the social classifications and topography Cather writes of. Include Mexican Town, the Kohler’s house, the railroad and depot, the boardwalk, and the downtown business district, as well as the sand hills and the ravine. Write a brief explanation of why this quotation is significant. Why was (LA 12.4.1)

### 2. Comparison / Contrast

Research Willa Cather’s own life ([www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org) is a great resource!) and compare it to Thea Kronborg’s. Fully explain three similarities and three differences in an essay. (LA 12.2.2, LA 12.4.1)

### 3. *The Song of the Lark* and *The Song of the Lark* and Bill Murray

During recent promotion for one of his movies, comedy legend Bill Murray noted that, during a low point in his life, his chance encounter with the Jules Breton painting caused him to decide against suicide. (Clip here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eOlcWB7jSA>) Watch the clip and write a comparison of Murray’s experience to Thea’s experience. Research into Jules Breton’s own story and Willa Cather’s life might also inform your essay (Jules Breton’s biography here: [http://www.rehs.com/Jules\\_Breton\\_Bio.html](http://www.rehs.com/Jules_Breton_Bio.html)). What would cause Cather to name her novel after this painting? (LA 12.2.2, LA 12.3.2, LA 12.4.1)

### 4. My Own Personal *Song of the Lark* Moment

Take some time to visit an art museum in your community, or to explore the online collection of a major museum (The Metropolitan Art Museum in New York is a good one, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)). Take your own photos or use online photos with proper citations to create a slideshow, YouTube video, or film showing the works of art that speak to you. Narrate the video or slideshow, or overlay with text, to name the works of art and briefly describe what the image means to you. How has art affected your life? What is the first piece of art you remember really seeing? What piece of art have you always wanted to see?

### 5. Visit Red Cloud

If you’re within visiting distance, the Willa Cather Foundation offers student tour rates to

see seven historic sites related to the life and works of Willa Cather, including the Childhood Home, where students can see Willa Cather's own bedroom (and compare it to Thea's). If you are from further away, please utilize the Willa Cather's Red Cloud Virtual Tour ([www.VirtualCather.org](http://www.VirtualCather.org)).

***The Song of the Lark*, Jules Breton, Art Institute of Chicago**





Olive Fremstad as Sieglinde, Project Gutenberg



## Willa Cather's Childhood Room

