CHAPTER III

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Next only to her concern for land and its relationship
to early settlers Willa Cather concerns herself with the situation
of the artist in society. *The Song of the Lark* (1915) is her one
novel which is solely devoted to this theme although she takes it
up again in a later novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) which lacks both
the vigor and the fulfillment of the earlier novel. In an oblique
way the hero of *Alexander's Bridge* and the heroine of *A Lost Lady*
(1923) may also be interpreted as artists. Besides, there are
several short stories, especially in her earlier literary career
in which Cather explores this theme. In 1901 Cather wrote:

"The world is weary unto death of stories about
artists and scholars and aesthetic freaks, and of studies
of the 'artistic temperament'."¹

Yet she wrote about artists because she was under the influence
of Henry James and was fascinated by the lives of artists and
musicians. Her stories about them point out the dichotomy between
the facts of everyday life and the pursuit of an ideal. Willa
Cather herself could never resolve this conflict in her life.

Like her early stories during 1892 - 1912 dealing with the problems
of the early settlers on the Nebraska plains - "Lou the Prophet"
(1892), "Peter" (1892), "The Clemency of the Court", "On the Divide"
(1896) - which show their physical, mental and spiritual starvation,
her stories about artists also show rejection of the immediate environment. There are several stories in *The Troll Garden* (1905), *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948), *Collected Short Fiction* (1965) and *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories* (1973) which deal with artists and their predicament in an alien environment.

Willa Cather began her literary career as a short story writer and continued writing short stories throughout her career. *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920) contained her last stories about artists although later collections contained stories about artistic temperaments and reprints of earlier stories about artists.

*The Troll Garden* (1905) belongs to her early phase and its stories reflect her ideas about art and artists that were to mature with time and find fuller expression in *The Song of the Lark*, and *Lucy Gayheart*. At the time she merely felt that the artist's was the right sort of life. She herself was an artist and therefore it was natural for her to justify artists, by way of self-defense. The predominant note was of resoudiation and rejection of the immediate environment. She felt that the true art went unappreciated in the west. Therefore, it was necessary for the potential artist to escape from the midwest and go to the east, to places like New York, Boston and Chicago which she considered as centres of culture. "The Sculptor's Funeral", inspired by her poem "Night Excess" and the funeral of Charles Stanley Rainhart, a local unappreciated artist of Pittsburgh, which she attended in
"a passionate defense of youth and art, which keep from others
"something precious", and a passionate denunciation of American
domesticity and of small-town democracy," according to Howard Mumford
Jones. The Sculptor's body is brought home to a small Kansas Town,
a reflection of Red Cloud, from where he had escaped and pursued his
own ideas about art. The local people consider him a failure in
life. Only a drink-worn lawyer, an old classmate of the sculptor
appreciates his genius and in a long angry speech points out that
he had done right in escaping the provincial life, full of petty
materialism. The story is about the "inability of the Western
barbarians to appreciate true art," and lose a revolt from the
village, according to James Woodress. "A Wagner Matinee" also
points out the drab aspect of Nebraska. Willa Cather was criticized
for disparaging Nebraska in this story. Inspired by the memory of
Aunt Franc whose farm Cather used to frequent at Catherton, Aunt
Georgina expresses this condemnation at the end of a visit to a
concert, when she cries that she does not want to go back to the
drab life of Nebraska. She had been a music teacher in Boston and had
moved to Nebraska during the pioneer period in order to escape criticism
after her elopement with her lover. Thirty years of hard life there
exhausted her and a chance return to Boston made her aware of how
much she had missed in life in terms of refinement and culture. Willa
Cather said she was paying a tribute to the uncomplaining, hardworking
women of the pioneer period. The story also points out her awareness
of Boston as a centre of culture. The lure of the fascinating life
of musical concerts in New York had a pull on her and it ultimately
made her move to New York from Pittsburgh and continue to be with
the McClures even after she was convinced that literature rather than
journalism had a greater claim on her.

Willa Cather saw the lure of art as dangerous as it was
capable of corrupting. This is implied in the epigraphs in The Troll
Garden. One epigraph is from The Roman and the Teuton, a series of
historical lectures by Kingsley at Cambridge, in which he relates a
parable, while introducing a discussion of the invasion of Rome by
the barbarians, about the trolls who live in a fairy palace with a
fairy garden, working at their magic forge, making rare and strange
things. The forest people, symbolizing the barbarians, attacked the
troll garden, symbolizing Rome and overran it. They discovered later
that they had destroyed the marvels they sought. Another epigraph
is from "The Goblin Market" by Christiana Rossetti, warning against
the fruits of Goblinmen. In the story one of the sisters takes the
fruits. Cather felt that these dangerous fruits were like the
magical, rare and strange things made by the trolls in their garden.

"Flavia and her Artists" and "Paul's Case" deal with the
seductive fascination of the troll garden. Willa Cather's memory
of the atmosphere in the homes of patrons of art in Pittsburgh provides
the background of "Flavia and her Artists," laid in West Chester County,
New York. The story is about the pursuit of false art. Flavia
surrounds herself with artists who have only contempt for her and her
husband, appearing an unappreciating philistines saves her from the
knowledge of it.

"Paul's Case" is about a boy she knew at school whose fascination for musical concerts made him neglect Latin and Mathematics classes. Due to his sensitiveness Paul is unable to come to terms with life in Pittsburgh, the tone for which is set by shabby, genteel businessmen, and is marked by evangelical religion and bourgeois aspirations. Paul who reflects this environment is not an artist but he shares with Willa Cather a devotion to Walter Pater's life of beautiful sensation. His defects are lack of talent, assertion and the will to improve his condition and above all he is a victim of self-indulgence. He steals a thousand dollars from his employer, goes to New York, buys new clothes and lives his dream life, if only for a while, in a rented apartment in Waldorf and when his money is spent and his father is about to reach him, he commits suicide by jumping before a railway engine. Randall says that he is more of a decadent rather than an aesthete. Like other Cather protagonists he faces the problem of the aesthetes - the need of money for the enjoyment of the good things of life and the hatred of the means of producing it. Randall points out that the story is based on "a sustained ironic contrast between romantic aspiration and disillusioning reality" like Madame Bovary. She shared Bovary's hatred of the bourgeois civilization. The story is the clearest expression in Cather's fiction of her kinship with the aesthetic movement. It indicates the way a sensitive person is seduced and destroyed by art.
Three different effects of art upon artists are exhibited in "A Death in a Desert," inspired by the premature death of Ethelbert Nevin. Katherine, once a student and lover of Adriance, the great composer, is also loved by Everett Hilgrade his younger brother who closely resembles him. She has been an artist and her death by tuberculosis at the ranch of her brother in Cheyenne, Wyoming is linked with destruction consequent on entering the world of art. The latest score of Adriance, "A tragedy of the Soul," of effort and failure, which is played by Everett just before her death makes him aware of his failure as artist. He decides to stop bating at the doors of art which had not opened to him. Adriance had entered and lived there. It is also pointed out that Adriance is morally inferior to his less brilliant brother.

Willa Cather believed that marriage with an unappreciating barbarian killed either the artist or his art. Caroline Noble in "The Garden Lodge" brought up in a poor but artistic household gives up her preparation for a concert career for marriage with a rich person and after six years she leads a well-ordered life, having given up art. A chance visit by Raymond, a great Wagnerian tenor makes her feel that the well-ordered life is not enough. She is stirred deeply during the night but next morning resumes her routine. The irony is that the artist goes with an impression that she is a serious artist and the quiet of her place is conducive to artistic activity. On the other hand, Hugh Traffinger in "The Marriage of Phaedra" dies because of his wife, Lady Traffinger, a socialite but a barbarian who never appreciates his
work and decides to sell his finest painting, "The Marriage of Phaedra" in order to finance her second marriage. The story "The Marriage of Phaedra" narrated by James the Valet of the dead artist, to an appreciating visitor, was inspired by Cather's visit to the studio of Burne-Jones in Kensington.

The ambivalent lure of art is implied in the myth of Medusa which replaced Cather's original metaphor of the trolls and the forest children, in Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920), containing four stories from The Troll Garden - "A Wagner Matinee", "Paul's Case", "The Sculptor's Funeral", "A Death in a Desert" and four new stories "Coming Ashadite", "The Diamond Mine", "A Gold Slipper," and "Scandal." The Bright Medusa "represents the fascination of art, or at least of aesthetic experience, as this works its havoc or its charm," according to Howard Mumford Jones and the accent in these stories is on youth. In Alexander's Bridge, Cather's first novel, the ambivalent lure of art is treated. Although it is about an engineer, its theme is the impossibility of harmonizing desire with possibility. It is about effort and failure and thus it is a continuation of the theme of "A Death in a Desert." Alexander is "the victim of the Dionysiac fascination, the Bö Hitchcock appeal, the illusion of Youth, which create in him a new and overwhelming feeling of self, sensed in a series of mystical insights superior to his normal self and eventually controlling it." It was inspired by Ibsen's "The Master Builder" and was written at the time of the collapse of the bridge across the St. Lawrence River in Quebec on August 29, 1907.
The novel was perhaps begun during her visit to Mary Jewett in June 1911, in South Berwick, Maine. At any rate the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett is stamped upon it. It was born out of respect for Jamesian technique and Willa Cather tried in it to cultivate a detachment towards her material. She described the theatre world of London and Boston, her apartment in Chestnut Street and the house of Mrs. Fields on Charles Street.

In a letter to Aunt Franc, about Alexander's Bridge she wrote that Alexander with his flawed character was at this point of her career a person she felt she knew. Whatever is shallow or superficial in the story is overflooded, when the real theme - the moral division in a man's nature - comes up. The novel gathers intensity and power stemming from some deeper level of feeling.⁹

The hero of Alexander's Bridge has several points of similarity with Cather. Both were nearing middle age and both had come East from West. Both were self-made through hard work and had come to realize that they were absorbed in the details of a sort of work they did not like and were being built alive into a social structure they did not care for. Cather put herself into Alexander, as neither could harmonize desire with possibility. Alexander's dissatisfaction with life in the East is similar to Jim's dissatisfaction in My Antonia. Again, he is like Prof. St. Peter in The Professor's House, as both middle-aged persons are aware of their inner conflicts and suffer from a sense of failure. The theme of yearning and quest is reinforced by the moon myth. Alexander quests for his former love,
actress Hilda, like Endymion seeking Diana, the symbol of the object of man's desire. Hilda embodies youth and vitality. The eternal love triangle is there, as in her earlier stories, "Death in the Desert" and "On the Gull's Road." She was to repeat it in "The Bohemian Girl," "O Pioneer!" and "A Lost Lady." Here the love triangle—Alexander—Hilda—Winifred—has a correspondence with Paris—Helen and Oenone which underscores another classical influence besides the moon myth.

As a story of a man killing himself because of the inability to reconcile the contradictions of his nature, it preshadows the tale of Myra Henshawe in "My Mortal Enemy; Claude Wheeler in "One of Ours" and the heroine of "Lucy Gayheart."

Alexander, in spite of worldly success, feels that he has missed his former sense of energy, delight, impetuosity and increasing expectancy of youth. His love affair with Hilda in a return of his awareness of the absolute value of life is revived but his formal patterns of living begin to be destroyed. He suffers from a sense of guilt. The bridge he builds develops a crack and this is linked with the crack in his moral nature. Since he allows himself to go with the crowd he dies with the crowd by being pulled down by panicky laborers into the river while swimming to safety. This links him with Sebastian's death by drowning because of Rockford, a panicky companion, in "Lucy Gayheart." This tragedy is lesser than the one he foresees for himself in case he goes to live with Hilda. While in the train, rushing to the flawed bridge, he has a vision of his future.
He would be doomed to be an outcast and lead a restless existence on the continent. He decides to give up Hilda and lead a life of fidelity to his wife. He is killed by the bridge-collapse and in the process the focus is shifted to the bridge and he is apparently diminished in significance. Raymond Thorberg has pointed out that the end is independent of the choice made by Alexander and is brought about by the world of steel which is independent of his moral world. James Woodress, however, says that the focus remains on the hero throughout. According to Geismar in none of Cather's pioneer novels there is repetition of some of the passages of *Alexander's Bridge* and it is curious that looking back Cather dismissed it as superficial.

James E. Miller, Jr. finds the ending of *Alexander's Bridge* melodramatic. His explanation is that "Cather began the novel seeing his flaw as his yearning for a different life, and ended up seeing the flaw as his inability to break away from the old dead ties. In any event, the novel seems to blur at the very moment that seems prepared for clarity."

Regarding the fall of the bridge he says that it "seemed arbitrarily yoked to the moral-spiritual fall of Alexander, builder of the bridge."

In the preface to the 1922 edition Cather expressed her dissatisfaction with the novel and attributed its imperfection to the fact that it was written at a time when she was a novice and thought that knowledge of life could be gained by going out to look at it. After another nine years she described it as a 'Studio Picture', in which
she tried to describe some interesting people she met in London, during her trips to the U.K. in 1909 and 1911.\textsuperscript{16}

James Woodress finds it well organized but a product of the head, rather than the heart and remembered only because of Cather's other more perfect works. It was "the last product of her old life"\textsuperscript{17} and a "sort of higher journalism"\textsuperscript{18} marking the "end of her beginning."\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Alexander's Bridge} dwells upon the destructive powers of the Bright Medusa. Cather's next novel about her view of the artist followed \textit{A Pioneers}. In \textit{The Song of the Lark} she reversed the legend of the Bright Medusa and wrote a profound and subtle study of the growth into selfhood of a great artist.

Carl Van Doren said that its heroine Thea Kronborg has "all the fierce energy of a pioneer who happens to be an instinctive artist rather than an instinctive manager, like Alexandra,"\textsuperscript{20} she had the stubborn self-assertion and the determination to succeed which marked Alexandra and Antonia. The pioneer period was brief and the spirit of the pioneers was transmitted to the artists who were their legitimate successors and who took up the old struggle in a new guise. As in other early novels of Cather, the artist-heroine of this novel is an elect individual who struggles to out-grow the restrictions laid upon her by numbing circumstances.

David Daiches has said that it "is full of impressive insights into the life of the musical artist and shows a wealth of musical intelligence adroitly put at the service of character study."\textsuperscript{21}
Praising Cather for writing about a singer Maxwell Geismar wrote "It is no mean feat, incidentally, to choose an opera singer for one's heroine, as she does in the case of Thea Kronberg, and to establish an artist's love for music as the central passion of a novel."22

The heroine is marked by a singleness of purpose and the novel shows Cather's conception of the true artist's dedicated life. Thea knew that every art demands singleness of aim if one strives after excellence rather than material success.

The novel was the result of Cather's meeting with Olive Fremstad, a Swedish-born immigrant and Wagnerian Soprano at the Metropolitan Opera, in connection with an assignment with the McClures' Magazine. She was struck by her energy and "suspicious, defiant, far-seeing eyes,"23 and felt that with her the idea was so intensely experienced that it became emotion. To her Olive Fremstad appeared Alexandra with a voice, drive, perception and creative force. If Alexandra had created a new country out of an idea, Olive Fremstad had created her roles "out of her mind and personality."24 The Song of the Lark was Cather's tribute to her. The heroine, Thea Kronberg, the daughter of a Swedish Methodist pastor in Moonstone, Colorado, outgrew the provincial restrictions and became a great opera singer. Like Willa Cather herself, Olive Fremstad and Alexander, in Alexander's Bridge she moved from West to East and achieved success. The resemblance between Thea and Olive Fremstad was such that Olive Fremstad said that she did not know "where Thea left off and she begin."25
also said that "it was the only book she ever had read about an artist in which she had felt there was something doing in the artist." The novel was a combination of Olive Fremstad and Willa Cather herself.

The title of the novel was inspired by a painting by Jules Breton, Cather saw at the Chicago Art Institute in which a little peasant girl on her way to work in the fields at early morning stops and looks up to listen to a lark. The title, "The Song of the Lark" was meant to suggest a young girl's awakening to something beautiful. According to James Woodress: "The singing lark is a motif that recurs many times in Willa Cather's life and fiction and always symbolizes desire, aspiration, and longing."27

Willa Cather's visit to the Southwest had brought about a similar awakening in her and on her return she decided to give up her magazine career and devote herself whole-heartedly to literature. The experience is described in Part IV of the novel which deals with Thea Kronborg's awakening to the meaning of art. Through her Cather expressed all her experience of struggle leading to her rebirth as an artist.

The novel concentrates on the process by which an artist finds herself and illustrates the development of the heroine's potentialities under the impact both of circumstances and the drive of her own character. There are two groups of characters in conflict. One group has its limitations of perception and ambition, which result from the conventions of provincial complacency. The other group
instinctively feels the need to escape from such limitations. This is a variation of the conflict between Lou and Oscar on one hand and their sister Alexandra, on the other in *Pioneers*.

According to H. M. Jones "there exists a secret community of persons capable of discovering and accepting instinctive values - a mystery cult of art, a fraternity of the initiate." These form what he calls the League of David against the Philistines. A section of the novel is entitled "stupid faces", against which Thea revolts and her acquiring a room of her own in the attic in the crowded household symbolizes her birthright in the company of the Mexicans in whose company she finds harmony. They form a natural league against the Philistines. Professor Wunsch, Ray Kennedy, Dr. Archie, Harsanyi, Fred Ottenburg are her helpers and blind chance also plays its role in helping her escape, receive training and find fulfillment. This deus ex machina is justified as she points out in the preface:

"what I cared about and still care about, was the girl's escape; the play of blind chance, the way in which commonplace occurrences fall together to liberate her from commonness. She seemed wholly at the mercy of accident, but to persons of her vitality and honesty, fortunate accidents will always happen."

Willa Cather like Henry James, believes that the artist is possessed of a secret and superior truth but there is a difference of treatment between the two.
"For James the problem is one of culture; for Miss Cather it is a problem of energy. The one pays homage to Apollo, the other to Dionysius, and though both agree that the artist is possessed of a secret and superior truth, for James the problem is Platonic, whereas Miss Cather narrates the unfolding of her singer in terms of Orphic initiation. Culture, it is James's hope, will eventually lead into that study of perfection which is art; but in Miss Cather's world the initiates already recognize each other by signs too subtle for the multitude. Art for the one is wisdom; for the other it is radiance."

Agreeing with this view Leon Edel added that "this fascination for art, and the art world, on the part of Miss Cather's heroes and heroines was a fascination essentially with success; the energy represented is not aesthetic, it is that of conquest; of overcoming nature and competition and standing firm and free among the Philistines and resisting their inevitable demands that talent become as mediocre as themselves."

Even Thea's father was apologetic about her talent which distinguished her from the participants in the annual Sunday School concert belonging to the respectable people of Moonstone.

As Ray Kennedy tells Thea it is a natural law that half-way people, who are themselves failures, are bound to help the winner win. Such people discover the talent of Thea at a stage when she herself
is only half aware of it. Professor Wunsch, a broken-down, professionally embittered, German musician, who drifted into Moonstone from somewhere was the first to sense Thea's exceptional talent which consisted in responding to the essentials, which he did not find in a life-time of teaching to the daughters of the rich in big cities. He was struck by her youth, energy, ruggedness, capacity for hardwork, perseverance and above all the inborn genius which no amount of talent and training could instil if it was not already there. The secret could not be taught. She reminded him of "standards, ambitions, a society long forgot," that is, the mellow tradition of European art and standards of artistic integrity, from which he had been cut-off. He and the Kohlers, a German couple, formed a group representing the old world culture and Thea learned the German language and acquired a taste for German music and songs from them, which beside being an escape from a hostile environment symbolized "a reaching out of the European culture to fulfill the potentialities of the American character." 

Prof. Wunsch emphasized desire, passion and total devotion to art, which underscored Cather's faith in art as an expression of spontaneity and passion. This attitude is at the core of the novel. It implies that art is merely a projection of the artist's personality. Later on, when Thea is a successful artist, Hursany says that passion is every artist's open secret and like, heroism, it is inimitable in cheap materials. He tells his wife, in
the early stages that Thea would never achieve anything common.
The passion of "will, strength, an unquenchable vitality" creates
the self and Thea has it. Its nourishment depends upon intermingling
of the senses and the soul. The sensuous renewal comes to her at
intervals.

The comment that passion is inimitable in cheap materials
is Cather's commentary on her art of fiction. As Carl Van Doren
points out:

"Fiction habitually strives to reproduce passion
and heroism and in all but chosen instances falls below
the realities because it has not truly comprehended them
or because it tries to copy them in cheap materials."

Prof. Wunsch's outbursts confirmed Thea's own as yet
only half-understood artistic instinct, described as an intuition
or ecstasy, linked with her voice and inner well-being, which
awaited like an appointment in future. Prof. Wunsch told her that
every artist makes himself born which is harder and longer than
the physical birth. In Thea's case it takes place at Panther Canyon
but earlier, too, in Chicago, there is a moment of conversion to art,
implies rejection of sex. Her musical education in Chicago was
financed by the insurance money of Ray Kennedy amounting six hundred
dollars. He was a freight train conductor and had planned to marry
her when she was grown up. The fact that she began her career with
the price of a man's life, made her very careful about money in the
rest of her life. Her life in Chicago is described in convincing
detail and refers to the activities in musical circles at the time,
during the early years of Theodore Thomas' leadership.

This period of Thea's struggle is the most crucial, and
should have been the most interesting because Cather insisted that
"the life of a talented young girl 'fighting her way' is more
interesting than the life of a successful artist,"37 but her
Moonstone days are more interesting.

While in Chicago Thea is 'converted to art' and her dark
night of the soul preceding the rebirth is associated with being
accosted sexually, which is important in the context of Cather's
treatment of the relations of the sexes in this novel as well as
in her entire career. This takes place after her first visit to
an opera and it transforms her. She decides to hate everything that
drags her down and "keep her from becoming the great artist she
wants to be."38 According to Randall "she is "born again" into
a state in which art means everything and human ties nothing."39

He compares this conversion to art with St. Augustine's conversion to
Christianity, Rousseau's conversion to feeling and Teufelsdrockh's
(in Sartor Resartus) 'passionate self-assertion and defiance of
the devil."40

Her teacher Harsanyi discovers that piano is not for Thea
and asks her to go to a superior teacher who can train her exceptional
voice, although it involves a professional sacrifice. He explains to his wife that one of the things which sustains him is the satisfaction he thus derives in waving his hands to a bird taking to flight. He hopes some day he would be able to look her in the face and laugh because he did what he could for her. He is one of Thea's helpers, not very successful, though comfortable, because of his wife's care in saving him from pending bills.

Through Harasyni she is introduced to Fred Ottenburg, son of a beer-king, a patron of artists, married to an insane wife, who is always in a sanatorium but would not divorce him and hence he cannot marry her. These details are withheld from Thea until Fred has played an important role in Thea's career. In order to help her get over her exhaustion in Chicago he arranges a holiday for her at his ranch at Panther Canyon where she comes in contact with the sun, the brilliant sand, the sky, the night, the earliest sources of gladness and slowly music comes to her as sensuous form rather than something to be struggled with. She feels possessed of an idea or a sensation that thrills her all day long and transforms her personality enabling her to respond to sensations in a new way. She becomes aware of the hard struggle of the primitive savages who lived there in the ancient past with the elements, the Spanish and Indian inquisitors, barbarism and irreverence. Culturally they were not inferior to the modern people. They sought a moral good which was made possible because of their proximity of nature. The clay vessels, Thea saw were the remnants of their cultural achievements symbolizing the victory of good over evil. She recalled Ray Kennedy's description of
caves as reminders of the eternal struggle of man which made
genius feel responsible to do their utmost as a duty towards those
who had struggled hard in the past. She considered it her duty
to help fulfill "some desire of the dust that slept there." She
committed herself to the message of the cliff dwellers
"the inevitable hardness of human life," she was to tell Fred
afterwards as a successful artist, "No artist gets far, who
does not know that." This could not be known with mind alone.
One had to realize it deep down within oneself.

In spite of their hard life the savages had dreamed a
dream, an ideal and their clay vessels were fragments of their
desires. "Their pottery was their most direct appeal to water,
the envelope and sheath of the precious element itself." Thea
realized that all art was "an effort to make a sheath, a
mold in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive
element which is life itself, - life hurrying past us and running
away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? ..... Caught in
a flash of arrested motion. 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." Here Thea
learns the meaning of tradition to art. She finds an indigenous
American civilization as culturally rich as any Europe has to
offer and much older. For a young American artist coming from
the west, it is an exciting discovery. Her artistic insight
concerns the intimate connection between "the artistic process
and every day living, between art and life." Thea learns
that art is an order "imposed upon the chaos of human experience in an attempt to render it meaningful." The particular form in which it is expressed suggests the "Platonic notion of the fleeting evanescence of appearances and the desire to stop time from running away - something which was to become more and more important as Willa Cather grew older." This view is maturer than the idea of art as spontaneity but it applies more to Cather the novelist rather than Thea the opera singer. Towards the end of the novel Cather again reverts to her older opinion which is indicated by the comment of Thea's accompanist that her success is a matter of personality, a gift of the gods, which has nothing to do with intelligence, hard work and training. In *My Antonia*, the description of the blind child of Martha who grows to be the pianist de'Arnault, looking like "some glistening God of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood," approaching the piano, suggests the beginning of the union of instinct and instrument that leads to the perfection of the personality of the artist. Besides instinct and passion he has the essential thing, the idea, as in the case of Thea Kronborg and therefore as music his piano playing was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses.

Thea's realization of the meaning of art at Panther Canyon is a sudden reaching "The Enchanted Bluff". The dream is realized in this novel while in the story it is never realized, although it inspires people to search for it and leads them astray. In
My Antonia there is a reference to the story of Coronado's search of the Seven Golden Cities and of his dying of a broken heart. The waste begun by that search ultimately culminated in the ravages of the modern white man whose civilized diseases were the real cause of the shrinkage of The Pecos Tribe. Cather believed that the sophisticated modern civilization was so materialistic that it led to negation and destruction and finally dissipated a noble dream. Art was a striving after an ideal and all striving conflicted with materialism. The historical past was relevant to the present as a reminder of the validity of ideals. Only those who have intuition, inward perception or transcendent imagination can understand this message. Thea is not alone in this perception. There are other visionaries like Tom Outland in The Professor's House and Latour in Death comes for the Archbishop who respond to the mystic associations of a buried past and serve as tools for the development of Cather's symbolism. They all search for a sanctuary - for respite and not for romantic escape, in order to derive strength and a justification for being. After My Antonia, land gradually slid into background and became a shelter, a cave, a rock and was no more the playground of man. And water took on a religious significance.

The cliff dwellers' message lengthened Thea's past and she decided to outgrow the retarding influence of the complacent people of Moonstone who were hostile to her talent. At the same time Willa Cather emphasizes the significance of the
influence of childhood on Thea's career. As she tells Dr. Archie later on, the point to which she could go as an artist was scratched in her childhood and all her dreams were about Moonstone.

The importance of the element of chance is also made clear in Thea's rejuvenating experience at Panther Canyon after which she decides not to waste her time anymore and go to Germany for her musical education. She refuses financial help from Fred since he cannot marry her and instead asks Dr. Archie, an unhappily married Moonstone physician, who borrows money in order to help her.

The rest of the novel comprising a major bulk, deals with descriptions of Thea's success as a great opera artist which is achieved through hardwork. She has to protect herself from the conspiracy of the crowd, temptations of sex, marriage, family-life and to stick to ideas avoiding easy compromises. She cultivates a creative hatred - a contempt for everything that can be had cheap. The author's comment is - "Artistic growth is, more than anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness," which is difficult to achieve. The completed act of art is a completed act of truth. It is not explained by either the heroine or the novelist as to how the artist comes to truth. Merely the fact of its possession is mentioned. Howard Mumford Jones says in this connection:

"The story of her musical education - that is, of the development of the artist into maturity - is a chronicle of the inadequacy of words to communicate
meaning... whether this organicism, this non-rational
approach be sound or socially right - it has embarrassing
relations to the doctrine of thinking with one's blood -
there is an eternal contradiction between artistic truth
arrived at by instinct and revelation, and the truth of
a world in which analysis and computation... are
paramount."52

As a successful artist Thasa Kronborg lives with ideas, can
identify herself with the basic idea behind the song and has the
carrying power. Her work becomes her personal life to the
exclusion of normal human ties. On her return from Germany
she gets an unlooked for opportunity, at short notice, to take
over the part of Sieglinde in Die Walküre because the principal
soprano is taken ill after the first act. This establishes her
position. Thasa is unable to see her ailing mother because of
an unexpected chance of appearing in an important role as
Elizabeth in Tannhäuser, which proves a turning point in her
career. This indicates Cather's view that in addition to chance,
total devotion to vocation is very important in the life of an
artist. Randall says that this indicates 'the extent to which
Cather wanted to drive the point of renunciation home.'53 Olive
Fremstad had also sacrificed every human relation and Cather
herself had believed that the god of art accepts only human
sacrifices. James Woodress says that Willa Cather and Thasa
experienced the same tug of opposing forces "The artist being
human and yet propelled by the inner knowledge of his special
election cannot help being at the start something of a split personality.  
Cather does not try to make Thea amiable perhaps because Olive Fremstad, according to E. K. Brown had grown during the days of her decline, unperceptive, overbearing, rough and merciless and usually withdrawn and cold. 
Since Cather believed that "art could be and should be used as a substitute for a continued physical relationship," her artistes do not have more than casual relations with men. It is only in the Epilogue that Thea's marriage with Fred is reported, after his wife's death. In the course of the novel none of the four men interested in her can marry her. Dr. Archie is already married, Ray Kennedy dies, Fred's wife would not divorce him while Thea would not pay a big amount to Nordequist in order that he might pay his wife the price of a divorce, in order to marry her.

Thea never loses the sense of proper direction. As Carl Van Doren puts it "Ambition with her is hardly more than the passion of self-preservation in a potent spirit." Cather lays greater emphasis on her "hard, unspeculative daemonic integrity" than on her escape from Moonstone. Cather knew that a great singer had to be an athlete as well as an actor undergoing long training for the sake of a few hours of triumph before a throbbing audience and therefore there was lesser privacy in the case of a poet or a painter. Sometimes she has to be involved in non-essentials or play a role inspite of illness. But that is the price she has to pay for success. A time comes when she remains interesting as an artist rather than as a person. Towards the end, however, the
impression is created that she must eventually lose her precious possession. T. K. Whipple has noted that her success is achieved at the cost of "hardening of the spiritual arteries," but at least she has maintained her integrity. She represents the poetic temper and upholds it against practicality. There are signs of strain and gradually the artist's identity undergoes a change and it is difficult to discover the young aspiring person behind the successful person. Only during periods of exhaustion the artist can mentally travel back to the moments of inspiration buried in the past and be himself again. Thea realizes that it is not possible for her to be her old self in relation to Dr. Archie, however she wished it, and all things he stands for are better as memories. Harsanyi had once told her that someday she would need understanding and then she could go to him. She can understand the need for understanding as a successful artist, without a moment of her own and alienated from everyone. There are scenes showing her moments of exaltation and exhaustion.

The final paragraph of the novel points out the meaning of the relation between those who, like Thea, go out into the world and make a name for themselves and the routine lives of those who stay at home. Tidings of what the former are doing in the world bring refreshment: "bring to the old memories, and to the young, dreams."

Willa Cather herself did not feel satisfied with The Song of the Lark. It was her last novel in which she followed "the full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody." She wrote
in 1931 that "too much detail is apt, like any other form of extravagance, to become slightly vulgar; and it quite destroys in a book a very satisfying element analogous to what painters call "composition".\textsuperscript{63} David Duches has pointed out that the element of "composition" in this novel is not altogether satisfactory, though it is the abundance of detail which gives the novel its peculiar strength and richness. The major part of the novel deals with the successes of Thea and that is the least significant part of the novel.\textsuperscript{64} But according to Edward Wagenknecht, the last part is "by no means entirely unsuccessful; like George Moore's Evelyn Innes, it remains one of the best studies we have in fiction of the artistic life of a great stage artist. Where it fails, as in Thea's affair with Fred Ottenburg, the trouble is not that Thea has "arrived" but that Willa Cather is writing outside her range."\textsuperscript{65}

According to Louis Auchincloss the trouble with the second part of The Song of the Lark is that it "ceases to be a book about an opera singer and becomes a book about opera. And opera lovers, even Miss Cather, have a tendency to be fulsome in writing of their love. There are bits of The Song of the Lark that sound like intermission notes on a Saturday afternoon broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera,"\textsuperscript{66} One does not see Thea as an opera star at all. She is too noble, too dedicated, too pure, she has no men, no temperament, no ego. She cares more about being Sieglinde than being applauded as Sieglinde. She is too much of an artist, too little a woman, too much a musical instrument, too little a diva."\textsuperscript{66}
He thinks that the young Thea has more of Cather than of Olive Fremstad and Thea the great star is Cather's fantasy of herself, with Fremstad's looks and voice, singing Siaulinge.

Like all the important novelists of the period Willa Cather also sought an emotional vitality great enough to break through stiffening conventions and repel the ideas of materialistic success and presented the theme of the artist, the emotions and the life of the spirit as against materialism, with the variation that her protagonists are "intensely, often rapturously devoted to the experiences of deep living itself." This is true of Alexandra taming the land for future; of Marie Shabata, the essence of being alive, the very pulse of the blood personified, doomed to be the victim of illnature; of Antonia determined upon succeeding in achieving fruition; of Thea Kronborg as an artist. Mrs. Forrester in A Lost Lady is not lost because of her adulteries but because her incomparable gift of charm cannot sustain itself by its own worth but must feed on the gross sensualities of gross men. "In his strength, his integrity, and his appreciation of beauty, Captain Forrester is a symbolic representative of the pioneer era." When his protection is removed by bankruptcy, stroke and death, she is at the mercy of an unworthy generation. Mrs. Forrester is not an artist in any specific sense but an artist in living. J.W. Krutch has pointed out that she is a conscious artist, consciously a lady, who applies her vitality to the creation of a person who is more than a person, who is The Lady as a type and as a work or art, so that
when, she fails she fails as an artist. Her guilt is aesthetic rather than moral. "In a completer civilization she might have found lovers worthy of her who would not have spoiled her creation," she fails because she is "not artist enough to refuse to do all what she could not do worthily..... the artist must sacrifice himself for his work." The lost lady is guilty and lost because "she put her own happiness before her art and betrayed an ideal to snatch at the joy of life." She made the mistake of confusing sexual pleasures with happiness.

Willa Cather's *Youth and the Bright Medusa* contained four new stories - "Coming Aphrodite", "The Diamond Mine", "A Gold Slipper" and "Scandal" in addition to "Paul's Case", "A Wagner Matinee", "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "A Death in a Desert" from *The Troll Garden*. The theme of the new stories is the juxtaposition of the artist and the philistine world, a continuation of the theme of *The Song of the Lark*. "The conflict between the desire of the artist to pursue beauty and the necessity of the craftsman, if he is to live, to make practical adjustments to the workaday world," The artist has to fight for preserving his integrity. Two types of artists are shown in "Coming Aphrodite" who reject each other, go their ways, pursuing their ideals. The breaking of their love affair does not hinder their careers. Jon Hedger, the painter works only to please himself. He paints for the future painters and does not cater to the public taste and ultimately becomes a great name and an influence on the moderns, baffling the experts who cannot classify him, as he never repeats himself, is always experimenting and changing. He is
original, erratic and a creative artist. He does not get material success. On the other hand, Eden Bower, who resembles Thea, as a girl in revolt from the village, determined to go east and succeed as a singer, breaks from Don Hedger because she cannot understand his ideals of art. She succeeds in achieving a different kind of success. She becomes a great opera artist, is financially successful but has to pay a big price. She has to go on playing roles which are demanded by the public and in the process becomes a willing plaything of the philistine world, a mere performer and not a creative artist. The viewing public however can have no idea of her exhaustion off the stage. Her case illustrates the frustration and exhaustion experienced by Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark at the peak of success. Since the breaking of their love affair does not hinder their careers, it shows Cather’s belief in the denial of human relations by artists.

Although financial security is essential for artists, it can also destroy the artist. For example, Blasius Bouchalke, the third husband of Cressida, the heroine of "A Diamond Mine", is spoiled by her riches. He could be an excellent artist only when poor and longing for his homeland. Cressida is a generous, credulous opera artist who uses money only to help others and make them happy. She is exploited by her husbands and greedy relations who would not work on their own initiative but sponge upon her. She does not reject human relationships with the result that she is used as a diamond mine. Thus here the artist lives in a parasitic world.
Cather believed that money either destroys all sense of value or it exposes one to the greed of others. Except her first husband who dies of tuberculosis at an early age, all the other husbands of Cressida interfere with her career as an artist. Only her accompanist, a Jew, Miletus Pappas, bridges the bourgeois and the artistic worlds. He takes her money but builds her career. Money becomes a curse of her life. She is drowned while on a tour to help her fourth husband's finances in spite of her illhealth, when the Titan wrecks during its maiden voyage in the Atlantic.

"The Gold Slipper" and "Scandal" are also about an opera artist Kitty Ayrshire. In "The Gold Slipper" during an overnight journey, she travels in a compartment adjacent to that of Marshall McKann, is a hard-headed businessman, engaged in mining and transport of coal. They represent the artist's and the philistine world. McKann thinks that art is frivulous and artists are a light people. She tells him about her own early struggles and present philanthropic activities and also that ideals are at variance with our appetites and give us a new craving which can be satisfied only by sacrificing all other hungers:

"Happiness lies in ceasing to be and to cause being, because the thing revealed to us is dearer than any existence our appetites can ever get for us." 73

She succeeds in vindicating the artists and when he goes to sleep she promises to haunt him. As a practical joke she leaves her gold slipper on his berth, which becomes a symbol of life and
youth for him and he keeps it among his insurance policies.

The story like "The Sculptor's Funeral" points out the difference between the bourgeois way of life and that of the artist but her eloquence is superior to the angry speech of the drunk-worn lawyer in "The Sculptor's Funeral."

In "Scandal" Kitty Ayrshire is a prey to Stein, a big businessman in the trade of readymade garments for children. He has a publicity sense and Kitty has a publicity value. Stein picks up a model who resembles Kitty and gives out that he is having an affair with Kitty. The point of the story is that in a philistine world, artists with a publicity value are likely to fall a prey to persons with a publicity sense.

Thus *Youth and the Bright Medusa* contained stories about the impact of the philistine world upon the artists leading to frustration and even death, the results of both, acceptance and rejection of human relations; and the two types of success open to artists. It continued the theme of *The Song of the Lark*. She did not, however, write about artists in the stories collected in *Obcure Destinies* probably because she realized that there is something inbred about writers choosing fellow artists as themes.

In *Lucy Gayheart* (1931) Willa Cather returned to the midwest and to the themes of her early novels. She was dissatisfied with *The Song of the Lark* and in place of rewriting it she used its material in this novel. If the earlier novel had too much detail
Lucy Gayheart proved to be most demeuble of her novels and
An illustration of the canons of composition and evocation as
detailed in her  song, "The Novel Demeeuble." It was written
after her visit to Red Cloud, Nebraska, during which the memory of
a buoyant girl, Sadie Baker, who had died very much, Lucy while
skating on thin ice, teased her mind and in creating a fictional
character out of her, she returned to the theme of the artist and
his environment and explored certain aspects which were just
hinted at in The Song of the Lark. In this novel she definitely
resolves the question of artistic creativity versus human involve-
ment in favour of creativity, and thus announces the triumph of
art, or at least the triumph of the artist. Lucy is capable of the
responses which are the real secret of Cather's woman and her case
is an example of Cather's view of love relationship as a "return to
the primitive experiences of the individual." 74 She is similar to
Thea in her interest in music; awareness of something fugitive;
going to Chicago for learning music; feeling a sense of escape
while on the train; recognition of Chicago as a centre of culture and
preference of her own room as a refuge. She is different from Thea
in her lack of ambition and not thinking of a career in music. She
is the antithesis of Thea because unlucky accidents happen to her.
Like Alexandra in O Pioneers! and Antonia in My Antonia, her energy
and buoyancy are associated with nature and her beauty is compared
with the early morning freshness in flower-gardens. She is "the
incarnation of youth itself." 75 The flashing eyes comparable
with the Colorado stone, tiger eye, associate her with the impulsive
but unlucky, Marie Shabata in O Pioneers! and like her again her
love affair is blighted by death. In Marie's case, however, there
is hope for future but in Lucy's case there is no such hope. Like
Thea, who could lift a weight greater than herself and Alexandra and Antonia, who accepted the challenges of their environment, Lucy always believed in endurance and effort, and had a faith that she could get anything if she wanted it. Like Antonia she realized that moments of joy were rare, and had to be snatched, whenever possible, and she was also aware of the close association of joy and pain. Like Alexandra, Antonia and Thea, she was capable of transcendent intuition, as is clear from her salute to the star, while going sleigh-riding with Gordon. This salute to something beyond her and a momentary identification with it, causing understanding, is comparable to Alexandra's and Thea's salutes to the larks. She becomes an accompanist to a middle-aged singer Sebastian and they fall in love. In a rash moment she exaggerates her relationship with him while talking to Gordon who presses her for marriage. Out of pique Gordon marries Miss Arkwright and afterwards he realizes that it is a life-sentence for him. Sebastian dies an accidental death in Lake Como during a storm while trying to save his friend and subordinate, Mockford. Lucy, too, dies an accidental death, while skating on thin ice, not knowing the change in the course of the river, after having been refused a lift on his sleigh by Gordon. It ends at a sad and perhaps sentimental note as Gordon preserves the footprints of Lucy on wet cement when she was an adolescent, which may also be interpreted as an effort to imprison 'life hurrying past' for a moment.

Lucy Gayheart has been described as "a mournful dirge for the passing of youth and hope." In Lucy’s imagination...
of love is associated with the dark waters that can drown one. Sebastian, unhappy in spite of worldly as well as artistic success feels alienated. His death by drowning looks contrived and a repetition of Alexander's fate in *Alexander's Bridge*. Lucy, too, is drowned and this repetition of her lover's fate seems too artificial. David Daiches said, that her death by drowning so that she might follow her lover is "too obviously contrived." He finds the novel feminine, sentimental, lacking in Cather's characteristic vitality and unworthy of her. He also notes the sadness at the close of the novel.

Lionel Trilling felt that in this novel the characters do not have any involvement either with each other or with their environment because there is no environment. They are attached only to their dreams and fate springs only from chance. "The novel has been demeubled indeed; but life without its furniture is strangely bare." The characters appear improbably good and impossibly sweet, lacking in vitality. The relationship of Lucy and Sebastian according to Randall is pessimistic and Cather shies away from showing its physical basis. Lucy's emotions are vague, as Cather was recollecting her childish objectless emotions which could lead only to emptiness and frustration. Willa Cather seems to be expressing her pessimism and self-doubt, because of the realization that everything she valued was bound to be destroyed by a cruel cosmos. An unknown girl and a famous artist both are overtaken by accidental death and the impossibility of fulfilment of desire is
BO emphasized. Perhaps Willa Cather was in a hurry to finish
the novel and, therefore, she made its heroine die an accidental
death. Leon Edel has related this to her unconscious mind as
she had already expressed her despair in A Lost Lady and The
Professor's House.

However the novel is not just a story of a love-affair
of a young provincial girl seeking an artistic career and the
sophisticated city-man representing all the glamour of artistic
success. It is as much about Sebastian as about Lucy. He belongs
to the category of Harsanyi and Professor Wunsch in The Song of the
Lark. He has the kind of artistic success which Prof. Wunsch at
the pinnacle of his career might have achieved. Financially,
he is above cares, unlike Harsanyi, yet he is a split personality.
He is a sad person. He is what Harsanyi had expected Thea to
become in course of time as a famous, successful artist. Harsanyi
was happy that he had shown the right direction to Thea's talent.
He had told her that some day she would need understanding and
then she could go to him. The Song of the Lark had ended after
showing the artist at the height of success, yet feeling alienated
and absorbed in non-essential aspects of her profession. In Lucy
Gayheart this theme is taken up. Sebastian needs the kind of
understanding, which Harsanyi had promised to Thea and he gets it from
Lucy. He could not get it from his wife. They were happy only
with the Atlantic Ocean between them. She used to have an occasional
fling at one of his pianists. She was a sterile wife, illiterating
their adopted son who had to be sent to Paris and she objected to Sebastian going to see him. Sebastian went to Chicago, never to return; yet he was always haunted by her ever increasing demands of money which compelled him to earn more and more involving still harder work. His wife is the antithesis of Mrs. Harsanyi who knew that the artist-husband should be protected from financial worries.

Like Thea, Sebastian also is a pioneer working in a different medium. Like Tom Outland in The Professor's House he is always at ease and equal to any situation in the world. His simplicity is the result of having lived a great deal and mastered a great deal. He is like "a deep bell" that conveys a feeling, yet unheard.

He expresses a feeling of rootlessness, for having missed a relationship with the earth, which is the deepest of all relationships. He feels friendless and is frustrated because of the realization that youth is irrecoverably lost, as in the case of Jim in My Antonia.

As in "The Old Beauty", the death of an artist in a foreign country is hinted as part of the tragedy of artists in general. Sebastian goes to attend the funeral service of Madame Renee de Vignon, a French singer returning from California, who dies in her hotel room after a brief illness. Sebastian feels that something similar could happen to him also. When the church is empty, Sebastian again goes there and kneels before the altar. His sense of isolation is enhanced further when he reads of the death of an old friend, Larry, from whom he has been estranged for quite some time. He feels that the obituary could serve for both of them. At least it was the
obituary of their shared past. He recalls their visit to the French Alps and then wake Lucy to dreams of both of them, aged twenty, touring the French Alps. It is like Prof. St. Peter in The Professor's House, reliving his lost youth while editing Tom Outland's diary and feel rejuvenated. Tom is the second youth of St. Peter. As a son he could have continued the dreams of St. Peter. Similarly, Sebastian turns to Lucy for sympathy and her youth and ardour pull him out of his dark night of the soul. He tells her "I love young ardour, young fire. I had a nice boy in my house once, but he had to go away to school. What a difference you have made in my life here! When you knocked, it was like spring time coming in at the door. I want to work with more spirit because things were new and wonderful to you."84 She reminds him of Montaigne who said that in the early youth joy of life lies in the feet. Together they share a faith in the old and lovely dreams of man, like Thea. Lucy takes the place of Sebastian's son and that is why their relationship does not take on a sexual dimension. Through her he feels linked with the earth. Even if they had married their relationship would have been rather asexual. Leaning against him she is compared with a sleeping child...."After a while it began to smell of trees and new cut grass."85 Friends and music were a sanctuary to Sebastian and Lucy's embrace supplemented the feeling of freshness he had derived on meeting old friends in Wisconsin.

To Lucy he was the door and the way to the fugitive gleam she sought. He lived with the "idea itself and not with the interpretation of the idea"86 and in his presence all her conflicts were
resolved.

Their embraces bring them in complete understanding. The emphasis is on desire and not its physical culmination: "if only one could lose one's life and one's body and be nothing but one's desire." Whatever happens to her feelings and thoughts is more important than what happens to her body. Sebastian plays Byron's "When we two parted" and it lingers in her memory as an ill-omen. In his music she discovers love as a tragic force and it is compared with "moonlight pouring down on the narrow street of an old German Town" which is associated with desire, the ideal impossible of achievement. The moon-myth reinforces the endless seeking as in Alexander's Bridge and A Lost Lady. Sebastian's song is "a religious observance in the classical spirit." This emphasizes the association of art with religion, as in The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop. Like Professor St. Peter he also moves towards Catholicism which sustains him after the feeling of nearness of death. This Catholic backdrop again links the novel with O Pioneers! where the church service serves as a backdrop against which the accidental deaths of Amedea, Marie and Frank take place and which provides a note of hope at the end. This is related with Willa Cather's own Catholic convictions and conversion.

Sebastian is acutely aware that 'sailing dates come soon enough' and when they part he knows that by the time he returns her youth and devotion would not be the same, yet, he emphasizes that one should go on. If only the Hardyesque fate had not prevented it Sebastian and Lucy would have achieved an ideal life conceived by
Auerbach "A nice house and a garden in a little town with money enough not to worry, a family... that's the best life." The house with a garden in a town is the embodiment of an urbanized countryside with order, a quiet hearth and freedom from monetary problems implying a relation with land. In The Song of the Lark Wunsch did not get it while Harsanyi with a little luck would have got it. Fate denied it to Sebastian in Lucy Gayheart. It is ironical that Mockford described by Sebastian as a friend becomes the cause of his death in a foreign country.

It is significant that in spite of feeling crushed by the report of Sebastian's death Lucy is lifted out of her deep desolation by some resemblance in quality between his music and a vagrant singer's music. It is a repetition of the process and a kind of reward to Lucy, whose ardour had pulled Sebastian out of his sadness. She decides to seek all those things which made Sebastian what he was, as those things were still upon the earth. He had once sung to her "If with all your heart you truly seek Him, you shall ever surely find Him" and its meaning dawned on her inspiring her to plunge into life again, return to Chicago and try harder. Sebastian had told her that one should snatch at whatever joy could be had in life. Mrs. Ramsay a neighbour also had told her that "Nothing really matters but living.....everything rights itself in time." In The Song of the Lark, Dr. Archia had advised Thea to go on living in spite of disappointments. Just as music served as an escape for Sebastian it awakened Lucy to the realization of possibilities in spite of her deep gloom; during which she sought sanctuary in the orchard. Thus this novel is linked with the early prairie novels.
It is important that just before the unlucky accident at the end she had awakened to the possibilities of life, and had decided to exert harder than ever and endure. There is a conviction that death is not the end of life and one should pursue ideals as they were pursued by one's idols and thus participate in life. This has ritualistic value which is supported by the Church image in the background and the religious connotations of songs and prayers echoed in the novel.

When Lucy decides to return to Chicago, to her work and to life itself "we get that sense of a final Catharsis, of a human rebirth" ..."it is only here that she has achieved a true as against a ceremonial "resurrection" of the spirit - a celebration of life in the midst of death, rather than a glorification of life without end." In her Catholic novels the resurrection was only ceremonial, according to Maxwell Geismar. Willa Cather had achieved "a spiritual equilibrium through a formal mode of religious conversion" and within its security her original emotions found full aesthetic expression. In the later sections of Lucy Gayheart Cather expresses the element of mystery in the ordinary life.

Edward Wagenknecht says that Lucy's discovery about the meaning of life is the meaning or moral of the novel. Her death caused by chance aided by a bit of temper is the bitterest kind of irony because it occurs just after she learns the secret of life. "That so many people should have had to ask what it "meant" was a lamentable commentary on how far our criticism had descended."
There is affirmation in the novel and it is erroneous to take it as a novel of gloom and defeat. If it is a less intense novel than The Song of the Lark the reason may be the fact that the original of Lucy Gayheart, Sadie Baker, was a mere acquaintance of Willa Cather while the original of Thea Kronborg, Olive Fremstad, was her close friend.

The key to the novel's meaning does not lie in what happens to Lucy but in what she means to Sebastian and in affirmation even in the face of an excruciating experience that seems to blot out existence. According to Howard Mumford Jones the disparate elements of the story are held together "through the unity of the heroine's life" and through Cather's "experienced and disciplined prose." There is no denunciation, nostalgia or sentimentality in the novel according to him.

Lucy's renewed interest in life is indicated by her curiosity about the pink glow long before sunset. Her courage does not fail her even when she sinks up to the waist in the icy water and she tries to come out but this proves vain. She has the potentialities of Thea without her luck. Through her and Sebastian Willa Cather has explored those problems of successful artists which were just hinted at in The Song of the Lark. She also explores the psychological reasons why middle-aged people, successful and unsuccessful alike, help young aspiring artists. In The Song of the Lark these were merely reported. Thus Lucy Gayheart carries the theme of the artist and his environment further. However, the artist represents only one aspect of Willa Cather's larger theme - the physical, intellectual and spiritual influence of Europe on America.