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An Awakened Sense of Place: Thoreauvian Patterns in Willa Cather's Fiction

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AN AWAKENED SENSE OF PLACE: THOREAUVIAN PATTERNS IN
WILLA CATHER’S FICTION

by
Breanne Grover

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

AN AWAKENED SENSE OF PLACE: THOREAUVIAN PATTERNS IN WILLA CATHER’S FICTION

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Master of Arts

The recent “greening” of Willa Cather Scholarship has initiated new conversations about Cather’s use of and dependence on landscape in her fiction. Scholars have frequently noted Cather’s reliance on landscape imagery, but this thesis suggests parallels between Cather’s and Henry David Thoreau’s use of awakening imagery and examines how such parallels work in Cather’s environmental discussion of wilderness and environmental communities. There is little direct evidence linking the development of Cather to Thoreau, although their similar use of awakening imagery suggests they comment on similar environmental discussions through their writing, indicating that Cather deserves further attention as a nature writer. Because Thoreau is often identified as the father of modern nature writing, recognizing similarities between Cather and Thoreau further solidifies Cather’s place within the canon of American nature writing.

This thesis examines how Cather’s awakening imagery in The Song of the Lark is similar to Thoreau’s ideas of awakening in Walden. The comparison elucidates Cather’s dependence on
landscape that evolves into a deeper ecological discussion in *My Ántonia* where Cather’s characters wrestle with finding a balance between modern industry and land preservation, an issue Thoreau also battled in his time. Preservation becomes an important element in Cather’s fiction and is explored in this thesis through concepts of wilderness. Finally, I will address how *Death Comes for the Archbishop* uses awakening imagery and concepts of wilderness to promote the creation of balanced environmental communities. Cather’s ability to employ elements of nature writing in *Archbishop* makes it her strongest holistic showing as a nature writer.

Reading Cather as a nature writer who recognized similar environmental issues as Thoreau forces critics to broaden the canon of American nature writing. Such a reading also expands previous ideas of the form and style of traditional nature writing. Recognizing Cather’s dependence on landscape gives nature a voice among other social issues Cather addresses in her writing, namely gender, race, and social status. Identifying Cather as an American nature writer issues a greater call to critics and scholars to re-evaluate other texts within and without of the canon for their ecological significance. Focusing on consistent ecological issues and patterns in American literature will broaden our understanding of the nation’s evolving ecological imagination.
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Introduction

The 2003 volume of *Cather Studies*\(^1\) emphasized *Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*. Cather scholar Susan J. Rosowski introduces the collection of essays by situating Cather in “the greening of literary studies” (ix) or ecocriticism. She suggests that Cather needs to be reintroduced as an author “profoundly identified with the places that shaped her and that she wrote about” (x). The authors in the collection reread Cather within an ecocritical framework, focusing on many elements of nature writing common in the environmental discourse. Missing from the collection is a treatment of Cather’s connection to Henry David Thoreau. Critics have looked at Emersonian elements in Cather’s fiction, but few have identified direct parallels to Thoreauvian elements of nature writing in her novels. Because Thoreau is often identified as the father of modern nature writing, recognizing similarities between Thoreau and Cather further solidifies Cather’s place within the canon of American nature writing. My project further positions Cather within ecocritical studies by suggesting parallels in Cather’s and Thoreau’s use of an awakening imagery and examining how those parallels work in Cather’s environmental discussion of wilderness and environmental communities. I do not claim that Cather explicitly grows out of Thoreau’s influence; there is no substantial evidence that she looked to him as a mentor, but their projects are surprisingly similar in many ways, one of those ways being their reliance on landscape as the catalytic center for awakening.

The relatively recent interest in Cather’s greenness is a byproduct of the expanding discourse of ecocriticism. A broad definition of ecocriticism, appearing in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, one of the first collections of ecocritical writings (self-identified as such), claims that

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\(^1\) A biennial forum for Cather Scholarship published by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in cooperation with the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.
“ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (Glotfelty xix). This definition was meant to be broad because ecocritics did not want to limit a movement that was still developing. Of course there were many who sought to assign tentative boundaries for what could be ascribed as nature writing.

In 1995, Lawrence Buell highlighted four elements present in environmental literature. In his book *The Environmental Imagination*, he suggests that one of the following four elements would be evidenced in all environmental writing:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7)

Buell argues that Thoreau’s *Walden* is an archetype of the definitive environmental text, as he defines it. There is little room for texts such as Cather’s within the prescriptive formula outlined by Buell. However, in 2005, he restructured his assessment of environmental literature and ecocriticism to include a broader scope. Buell now prefers the term “environmental criticism” rather than ecocriticism due to the conception that “the environmental turn in literary studies has been more issue-driven than method or paradigm-driven,” which “is one reason why the catchy
but totalizing rubric of ‘ecocriticism’ is less indicative than ‘environmental criticism’ or ‘literary-environmental studies’” (*Future* 12). Although Buell makes a distinction between the two, my study does not. Buell’s differentiation deals more with the theoretical background of ecocriticism and less with the literary application. For the scope of this project, the term ecocriticism is used to identify discussions within the literary-environmental discourse.

A discussion of Cather’s use of Thoreauvian elements fits well within Buell’s “second wave” revisionist approach to environmental criticism. His previous four-part approach to environmental literature falls within the “first wave” of ecocriticism. He emphasizes that “the first-second distinction should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarreling with precursors” (*Future* 17).

At the heart of environmental discourse are conversations that attempt to identify nature. Some argue that nature is everything non-human, while others believe nature includes both natural and human environments. Distinguishing elements of Buell’s first and second waves are located within recurring conversations of the “nature” debate. “For first-wave ecocriticism, ‘environment’ effectively meant ‘natural environment.’ In practice if not in principle, the realms of the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ looked more disjunct than they have come to seem for more recent environmental critics” (*Future* 21). In comparison, “second-wave ecocriticism has tended to question organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism” by looking at natural and human as partners in environmental communities. For example a second-wave approach would consider that “Natural and built environments, revisionists point out, are long since all mixed up. The landscape of the American ‘West’ is increasingly the landscape of metropolitan sprawl rather than the outback of Rocky Mountain ‘wilderness’” (*Future* 22). This
definition redefines previous notions and misconceptions of the divide between natural and human environments. The working definition of nature in this study suggests that nature includes both human and natural environments.

The non-prescriptive freedom of second-wave ecocriticism broadens the scope of literary studies by including conversations that identify environmental archetypal patterns (awakening and wilderness imagery) and environmental approaches (the notion of environmental communities) instead of focusing solely on form and style. The current breadth of ecocritical studies still addresses conversations that deal with the question “what is nature?” This project focuses on how Cather defines and incorporates nature in her fiction, within a broader heritage of Thoreauvian nature writing. Understanding conversations regarding nature in light of more recent discussions will better situate this reading of Cather within such a Thoreauvian heritage.

In the summer of 2005, The Boston Public Library housed a Nature Conservancy exhibit titled “In Response to Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy’s Last Great Places.” The pictures ranged from arches in Southern Utah to an Alaskan man holding his toy monkey. Curator Andy Grundberg explained how this exhibit represented the evolution of how nature was painted and photographed, dating back to the nineteenth century when the “Western world was being industrialized and urbanized. Art and aesthetics came to be located in the pastoral countryside and in a return to prelapsarian beauty and simplicity” (par. 2). Central to the nature debate are discussions about industrialization’s role in defining or destroying nature. Grundberg further situates the influence and response of photographers by explaining Ansel Adams’s role in promoting an American landscape where “any evidence of human presence, such as roads or telephone wires, spoiled the beauty of the scene” (par. 2). The 1970s photographers rebelled against Adams’s vision of landscape by including “industrial and domestic buildings and signs of
use and misuse” (par. 3). Grundberg insists that this move was “merely the flip side of the coin of earlier landscape photography: Nature is itself, and completely beautiful, only in the absence of human beings” (par. 3).

However, the 2005 exhibit sought to acknowledge “a more intricate understanding of how human beings can both preserve and decimate the natural world,” conceding “that we ourselves are a part of nature and not outside of it” (par. 4). The Nature Conservancy’s exhibit represents “a new chapter in the ongoing search to describe our place in the natural world. This search is important not only for photography, or for art as a whole, but also for our lives” (par. 5). The exhibit also represents the human need to define nature. Even those who suggest that nature can stand on its own are defining it as an independent “other.” Similar human-driven and ecology-driven definitions of nature exist in the current environmental discourse.

Part of the environmental discourse attempts to delineate between “true nature” (nature in its original state) and “constructed” nature (nature that has been planned and developed). For some, a city park will never be considered true nature because it has been constructed, even though it may elicit transcendental experiences similar to those prompted by a mountain meadow. Some critics, such as deep ecologists, believe that including constructed nature within a broad definition of nature lessens the intrinsic value of the natural environment. Deep ecology hinges on the idea that natural environments exist for their own purposes, having inherent value outside of human recognition. SueEllen Campbell explains that to deep ecologists, “human beings are no longer the center of value or meaning” (133). This view has often been called biocentrism. Other writers refuse to separate natural history from human history, adhering to a stronger anthropocentric view of the world. These discussions elicit a score of questions being asked about nature: Do humans have a place within nature? Has civilization destroyed nature
forever? Are we already within nature and simply refuse to acknowledge our kinship? Is there room for nature to exist outside of human cognition? Cather and Thoreau both grapple with such questions in their nature writing. To understand their views of nature, it is essential to understand the heritage of American concepts of nature.

The Nature Conservancy’s move to redefine nature for our twenty-first century mirrors Ralph Waldo Emerson’s similar move in 1836 when he published his influential essay *Nature*. Lawrence Buell situates *Nature* as “the first canonical work of US literature to unfold a theory of nature with special reference to poetics” (*Future* 13). Emerson defines nature in a “philosophical” and a “common” sense. The philosophical definition suggests that nature is “all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body must be ranked under this name, NATURE” (22). The common sense definition “refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf” (22). For Emerson then, nature might refer to strictly natural environments, but he also designates a place for human environments as well.

Both Cather and Thoreau are acknowledged as being influenced by Emerson. An important element in Emerson’s *Nature* is his description of humans’ capacity to see the natural world, an element that appears in the writing of Cather and Thoreau. Emerson believes “few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. … The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other. … His intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food” (23-24). For Emerson, nature needed to be rediscovered because humans had lost their original connection to the land. Industrialization was changing the American landscape from rural farms to urban business centers. He sought to restore the human ability to interact with nature on its own terms, free from industrial
boundaries. His ideas were furthered by his protégé Henry David Thoreau, who sought to apply the idea of transcendental nature to his daily life. Environmental writer Philip Shabecoff claims that “Emerson appreciated nature largely from the sanctuary of his library; his anti-materialism was most pronounced on the lecture platform” (46), suggesting he spoke more about the theory of appreciating nature than he did about delineating everyday application of such theory.

Thoreau, on the other hand, used the natural world to test Emerson’s theories of nature. Thoreau “went to the woods” to discover life at its core. Shabecoff asserts that “unlike Emerson, Thoreau did not look complacently on the increasing dominance of industrialism and technology. He watched the shadow of the locomotive smoke fall over Walden Pond and knew full well what that shadow portended—nothing less than the death of pastoralism in the United States” (47). His treatment of the threat of industrialism and his desires to preserve nature have since led many to proclaim him as the Father of Environmentalism. Thoreau’s maxims to “simplify, simplify, simplify” and “renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again” have sent thousands of followers to the woods in an attempt to discover the “marrow” in their lives that could be accessed through nature.

Around the same time as the Transcendentalists, a group of painters also etched out a definition of American landscape and nature. In an attempt to recognize and depict nature’s voice, the Hudson River School depicted grandiose land and skylines with minimal attention to people. People were often depicted as so insignificant that the raw forces of nature overpowered their presence, as if they were merely an afterthought to the power of nature. Their paintings give nature a strong voice, but they do not completely remove human existence from natural environments. In Thomas Cole’s series The Course of Empire, nature’s voice proclaims its various roles throughout five paintings. Although Cole asserts the power of nature’s voice, he
consistently includes humanity in the depictions. The series begins in “The Savage State” where nature’s voice dominates the painting, with only a few Native American tee-pees to be seen in the foreground. The next painting depicts “tamed” nature in “The Pastoral State.” Although human activity is much more prominent, nature is still dominant. The third painting, “Consummation,” is almost completely void of a natural environment and instead portrays a fully industrialized city, in Roman style. This state of “nature” does not last long however, as the fourth painting, “Destruction,” depicts nature violently reclaiming its place by destroying the industrialized civilization. The last painting, “Desolation,” portrays the remnants of the city, partially hidden by a calm, subdued nature. This series suggests that nature does have an independent voice, which can never be completely silenced.

Another vein of thought in the nineteenth century looked at nature as being inherently silent. Alfred Austin, Britain’s poet laureate in 1896, situates nature far from Emerson’s ideal. Austin argues that “Nature is a dumb oracle, who, of herself, says nothing, but will most obligingly emit any voice the poet chooses to put inside her” (54). According to Austin, nature cannot speak to men: “It is Man, therefore, and not Nature, as I said at starting, who is the real voice—the real oracle” (69). Instead of nature offering wisdom or beauty, humans interpret nature, making nature fully dependent on humankind for existence.

Both Thoreau and Cather rely on a version of nature that is neither dominating nor silent. In 1949, Aldo Leopold contributed an American “land ethic” that once again redefined the relationship between humans and nature from separate entities to one environment. His land ethic represents ideas of nature similar to those found in the writing of Thoreau and Cather. Leopold wrote “The Land Ethic” because he felt, “there is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and the animals and plants which grow upon it” (203). If an ethic could be
created, Leopold believed “modes of co-operation” (202) would result. These co-operations would consider the human and natural plight in the same context, without separating or differentiating between them or positioning one above the other. For Leopold, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land,” or in other terms, “a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for its fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (204). Leopold revolutionized the human-land conflict by clearly defining nature as the combination of natural and human environments.

Revisiting Cather’s fiction through an explication of Thoreauvian parallels of awakening imagery works from foundational conversations in ecocriticism. Leopold defined issues of landscape that Cather grappled with and hinted at in her fiction. My study relies on theoretical environmental conversations that have taken place since the early 1900s in order to further elucidate issues Cather and Thoreau worked out in their writing. In the type of cooperative existence Leopold had in mind, science and the humanities would have to work side by side to create a community dedicated to achieving a state of conservation, which Leopold defines as “a state of harmony between men and land” (207). The road to defining nature or to establishing a place for nature, whether that be apart from human history or akin to it, is still confronting environmental studies today. Nature is not simple, nor will it be easily categorized. Some of the current trends in environmental studies include concerns of environmental sustainability, economics, sense of place, national parks, wildness and wilderness, and awareness. Two of these will be the basis for further explanation and explication of nature for this project: awareness and wildness/wilderness, both of which lead to the ethical creation of environmental communities.
Henry David Thoreau and Willa Cather both addressed issues of awareness and wildness/wilderness in their writing, although ecocriticism has since provided the theory behind their discussions.

**Awareness**

One of Thoreau’s quotable expressions, “To be awake is to be alive” (*Walden* 172), does not merely allude to answering the alarm clock to get up and go to work each day, but it also suggests an awareness of “self” and “other.” He goes on to say “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn” (*Walden* 172). Thoreau uses awakening imagery to describe the result of transcendental experiences in nature. Those who venture into nature and are willing to be taught by it will become aware of themselves and of their relation to the world. Thoreau’s imperative task is to make the “masses” aware that there is more to life than investing in industrial advancements through discovering what nature can teach about living a deliberate life. A sustained state of awareness is the ultimate goal for Thoreau. Ecocritic Scott Slovic distinguishes nature writers as being on a “quest not only of consciousness itself, but of an understanding of consciousness” (3). He suggests that Thoreau is the beginning of a long line of nature writers who have made such a quest in their writing. According to Slovic, describing the process leading to awareness is an essential element in nature writing. The presence of awareness imagery in nature writing often presents itself in different descriptions of awakening or consciousness.

My project uses awareness not only refers to the “self’s” cognizant state of being, but also to that same self’s existence within a community. Awareness is facilitated by place, and for Thoreau that place is nature. The idea of becoming awake to the world and to life was not just a
Romantic impulse, but also the solution to increasingly complicated moral and social issues. Thoreau is not promoting a mad rush of civilization to return to the woods to have transcendent experiences; instead, his project involves investing principles of awareness into communities and individual lives. He uses nature as his working metaphor for how humans should live: deliberately. If humans could understand nature, then they might be able to better understand themselves. Thoreau locates the bulk of his observations in a specific place, Walden Pond. He explores the area around Walden Pond while simultaneously exploring his mind and his soul. His writings create the template of his larger project: making humankind aware of life and their role in it.

Thoreau’s reliance on awakening imagery works as a cornerstone in American nature writing. Nature becomes an observation lounge for watching industrialization spread across the American landscape, a checkpoint for determining where civilization has come and where it is going. Describing a “standard” form of nature writing, Peter Fritzell maintains that “American nature writing contains, then, the early and classic American’s quest both for a coherent sense of self and a coherent sense of place” (154). The quest for both a sense of self and a sense of place is expressed in a variety of ways. Some writers focus on place or landscape. Others write travel writing. Still others focus on ecological issues in nature. Ecologist Lawrence B. Slobodkin argues that to be “ecologically aware we must understand that there are real ecological problems that require solutions. We must also have some sense of the kind of people who are concerned with defining and solving real ecological problems” (17), but he also adds that in order to “go beyond awareness we must understand the scientific, political, and social contexts of possible solutions to the problems (18). His understanding of ecological awareness resembles Leopold’s
idea of land co-operation. Ecological awareness leads to creating environmental communities that support issues of nature in all arenas of thought, not just in environmental corners.

Ecologist David Abram talks about awareness in terms of “sense.” He observes that “to return to our senses is to renew our bond with this wider life, to feel the soil beneath the pavement, to sense—even when indoors—the moon’s gaze upon the roof” (273). Within his definition of awareness lies a deeper commentary on the idea that nature is not an entity apart from the human condition, but encompasses humans within it. He remarks,

We can experience things—can touch, hear, and taste things—only because, as bodies, we are ourselves included in the sensible field, and have our own textures, sounds, and tastes. We can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us. (68)

His ideas of ecological communities seem far too anthropocentric to satisfy a deep ecologist because they do not designate a place for nature that is apart from humans, but Abram goes on to explain that “we can know the needs of any particular region only by participating in its specificity—by becoming familiar with its cycles and styles, awake and attentive to its inhabitants” (268). In this statement, Abram aligns principles of place and awareness with anthropocentric ideas of nature, although his view does not privilege humans over nature. It falls more within Leopold’s ideas of a community land ethic. Thoreau’s writing began to shape such conversations of awareness and this study discusses the ways in which Cather’s fiction promotes awareness and establishes concepts of environmental communities.
A result of becoming aware, in environmental terms, is an established sense of place. Some nature writers argue that seeking a sense of place cannot be removed from personal experience in nature. In “The Sense of Place” Wallace Stegner asserts, “The deep ecologists warn us not to be anthropocentric, but I know no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes” (201). He then offers an explanation of his position: “I know that [nature] wasn’t created especially for my use, and I share the guilt for what members of my species, especially the migratory ones, have done to it. But I am the only instrument that I have access to by which I can enjoy the world and try to understand it” (201). Stegner’s argument finds the balance between arguments of deep ecology and potential anthropocentric abuse. We observe the world through our experiences in it, but we must be keenly aware of the impact our experiences in the natural world can have. Part of this understanding requires our ability to think of ourselves as part of nature or members of a larger community, instead of a mere consumer of nature.

Sense of place is essential to both Thoreau and Cather. Thoreau depends on the area around Concord while Cather grounds her fiction in the American frontier. Buell qualifies a sense of place by stating that “space” and “place” “are not simple antonyms. Space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction, whereas place” (Future 63) can be defined as “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Carter, Donald, and Squires xii). Stegner suggests that “a place is not a place until people have been born to it—have both experienced and shaped it, as individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities, over more than one generation” (201). Seen in this light, Abram’s concept of “becoming familiar” with an environment is actually part of establishing a sense of place; awareness propels the “self” into the discovery of place.
A prominent element in various forms of nature writing is awareness of self and community. Thoreau saw the need for awareness in the mid-nineteenth century just as Stegner saw it in 2002. To talk of nature, land, ecology, or environmentalism includes a discussion of awareness and an accompanying sense of place. Cather’s dependence on place has often been discussed, but positioning her sense of place as part of an awareness process connects her project to Thoreau’s project.

**Wilderness: Reclaiming Wildness**

A place that has come under attack in the last twenty years is “wilderness.” Part of the debate rests on definitions of “wildness,” since images of wilderness encapsulate the wildness of nature. Being aware of nature includes recognizing its physicality. Many feel that awareness of nature includes viewing “wilderness” as a constructed place. The question of what “wilderness” is might be answered in defining the old adage “getting back to nature.” Does “wilderness” mean a place free from industrial advancements and technological breakthroughs? Can true “wilderness” only be accessed by foot? Even in saying “true wilderness,” the meaning breaks down, as if to say a “true” and a “false” version of wilderness exist. Applying Buell’s explanation of space and place to a definition of wilderness suggests that the places we call wilderness are really places to which civilization has ascribed boundaries of wildness untouched by human activity. This move suggests that all natural environments are constructed because they exist in relation to civilization. Within this idea, primordial, untouched wilderness no longer exists. Understanding nature as constructed does not lessen its value; instead, it leads to an awareness of local, everyday wilderness. By recognizing the wildness of civilization, responsible
environmental communities can be created. Constructed ideas of wilderness are addressed in Thoreau’s writing and are also important elements of Cather’s project.

“In Wildness is the preservation of the World” is a statement by Thoreau that begins my discussion of wilderness. Thoreau suggests that in order to preserve the world, both human and natural environments, wildness must be present. Wildness is the sensation of living “life near the bone where it is the sweetest” (*Walden* 347), and living a meaningful life. The wildness of nature connotes change and uncertainty, which are attitudes Thoreau associated with living a deliberate life. Thoreau’s statement about wildness is often misquoted by substituting “wilderness” for “wildness.” Laura Walls suggests that the substitution changes the root idea of the statement: “Thoreau clearly identifies ‘wildness’ not as a distant place but as a quality, something ineffable and strange and raw at the heart of the most common experience” that would not necessarily need to “be housed in a ‘wilderness’—yet it is hard to dissociate the two concepts, to accept one without the other”(15). Indeed, “wildness” often accompanies discussion of “wilderness,” perhaps because the main element of wilderness is the wildness of the nature found there.

Thoreau’s statement, although often used by environmentalist groups to promote preservation of land, also suggests the larger scope of his project, which includes recognizing wildness in the ordinary, civilized world. Within miles of the bustle of Concord, Thoreau discovered a place “wild” enough to explore and to perform extensive studies of nature throughout his life. His message is to not only “go to the woods” of the large national park hundreds of miles away, but also to discover “the woods” in your own backyard. If that could be accomplished, then wildness would be preserving the natural world.

Building an image of wilderness as an untouched place where humans can experience the rawness of nature merely denies our presence in our own habitat, further privileging one form of
nature above another. If we continue to assume that wilderness is antithetical to cities and civilization, we are constructing wilderness into an unsustainable object and thereby removing wildness from it. Refusing to limit wilderness to the scope of large vistas and plateaus allows nature to present its various forms of wildness, which may include the trees and flowers in our individual places. Environmental historian William Cronin agrees that wilderness “is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made” (69). Cronin concludes that the core problem in America’s need to preserve wilderness stems from “the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world” (80). However, realizing that our concepts of nature start the moment we began to put our mark on the world will change how we view wilderness. Such ideas of wilderness are seen in Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, as she offers a more aware version of wilderness on the Southwestern frontier.

Industrial and technological scars have been the most prominent in the last 150 years. Tensions are created when industrial and technological advancements change landscapes. “Emerson … could never successfully resolve within himself the debate between Nature and civilization, solitude and society, rusticity and manner” (Miller 327), and neither could Thoreau. The legacy of their work is their holistic view of nature, which does not need to be wilderness or civilization; it can be both. Thoreau’s statement “In Wildness is the preservation of the World” teaches us to recognize nature in our front yards, in the parks where our children play, and in ourselves.
Highlighting consistent land issues and tracing parallel imagery through various nature writers offers a richer understanding of how land is represented in American literature. Thoreauvian styles of nature writing are often used as foundational elements of environmental discourse. There are various forms, styles, and approaches to the broad genre of nature writing. Just as environmentalists are often misrepresented, so is nature writing. Many nature writers follow similar styles of expository prose and science-based observations, although these are not the only characteristic elements in the genre of writing. Grounding Cather’s use of awakening imagery and her discussions of wilderness in a Thoreauvian heritage of nature writing solidifies her place as a nature writer in her own right. She uses elements of Thoreauvian discourse to further establish her own version of an ethical environmental community.
Chapter 1: Thoreau’s Awakening

*Walden* and other writings by Henry David Thoreau are replete with awakening imagery. Such imagery provides the foundation for discussing larger issues of environmental awareness. In his forthcoming book, George Handley, a humanities professor at Brigham Young University, describes the intersections of human and natural history that surround and infuse the Provo River. He relates an experience when he and his family were at the *edge* of a rainstorm. He views that moment as a point of heightened awareness to nature. The rainstorm presented an edge to Handley’s human world, but his experience explained how the edges of natural environments often press against our human edges. Living on the edge usually denotes taking risks and embracing the radical of every norm, but “living on the edge” can be recast to mean rubbing human environments against natural environments. When this rubbing takes place, we more fully understand intersections of human and natural history. We are humans with human edges, living in a natural world, with its own edges. We are always trying to penetrate others’ edges for the sake of science and understanding; we must understand that the best we can do is press our edge against another. An environmental community then, is a place where the edges of natural and human environments are pressed against each other with equal weight, without privileging one or the other.

Creating environmental communities is associated with discovering a sense of place. Wendell Berry says that if you don’t know where you are you don’t know who you are. Wallace Stegner uses this statement in his essay “The Sense of Place” to explore the process and need of becoming what Berry calls a “placed person.” To be a placed person means to know about and be involved in your local environment. The concept hinges on establishing a sense of place, which involves awareness of how human activity works within natural environments, meaning
that being a placed person has more to do with edges than it does with street addresses. Stegner aligns Berry’s Kentucky River to Thoreau’s Walden Pond to show the literary effect of place on modern nature writing, as well as on traditional nature writing (199). To be aware of our edges and the edges of life around us is to establish our place in the world. Becoming so close to nature that the edge of its tree presses against the edge of my arm reinforces the idea that my being human means I can’t dissolve into nature but I can move through it, breathe it, and rub against it. In the process of rubbing our edges against nature’s edges, we begin to understand the need to preserve edges of our world. However, these places are only some of the edges we must press against in order to understand our individual place. In pressing against our edges, the somewhat sharp, sleek, sophisticated edge of modern industry often makes us more aware of its existence compared to the primeval, pliable, porous edge of nature.

Thoreau understood that industry’s edge had the potential to leave permanent scars on the malleable, uncharted land of nineteenth-century America. Although Thoreau taught that the masses must awake, the economic advantages in promoting an industrial edge continued to threaten the preservation of nature. Thoreau felt the threat of industrial advancements, but he also felt that a balance between industry and landscape could be met. Lawrence Buell explains this balance: “What we require, then, is neither disparagement nor celebration of place-sense but an account of those specific conditions under which it significantly furthers what Relph calls environmental humility, an awakened place-awareness that is also mindful of its limitations and respectful that place molds us as well as vice versa” (Environmental 253). Thoreau sought such a state of existence: environmental awareness of self and progress.

At the age of 16 I began to be aware of my edges and the edges of nature, although I have never found a voice for them until now. My Junior English class was studying American writers
and I quickly discovered my love for the Transcendental movement. I am not the first, nor will I be the last, to feel a soul-quickening when reading Emerson and Thoreau. The very fact that people keep returning to the woods to uncover meaning in their lives proves that the mass of men have not stopped needing a way out of quiet desperation. The continual prominence of Thoreau and Emerson attest to their relevance in our twenty-first-century world.

With my own copy of *Walden*, I set out to spend a summer at the edge of my own lake to see if I could not learn about myself from nature. Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* uses the term “Thoreauvian Pilgrimage” (311) to describe my action, which has become a ritual for thousands of Thoreauvian followers. I attempted to live as deliberately as a 16-year-old girl could, working at a Boy Scout Camp for eight summer weeks. I wrote horrible poetry, collected flowers, and tried to learn the names of plants along my familiar paths. I tried to create transcendental experiences in nature. In hindsight, my experiences helped me develop a sense of place that enabled me to see and value nature in all of my environments, whether in the mountains or at my university campus.

Our twenty-first-century mentality depends on the alluring edge of technology and industry. As much as I love simplifying my life for a camping trip, leaving behind blow dryers, cell phones, and microwaves, I cherish my ability to email my friends in Boston and Bulgaria, and I look forward to flying to new places to see more of the world I have only read about. We live in a world supported by resources. Industry and technology press against us just as the beauty of an Aspen meadow in the Uintah Mountains presses against our sensibilities. To awaken means to understand how our human edges work with and against the realities of nature and industry.
This chapter establishes awakening as an essential element in Thoreau’s writing and as a continuing theme in nature writing. Thoreau understood very well the growing tensions between modern industry and landscape. His suggested approach to life sought to press the edges of industry and landscape against each other, without one dominating the other. In so doing, Thoreau created an environmental edge, an environmentally aware place that continues to press against industry, landscape, and academia.

**Establishing Thoreau’s Place**

A sense of place is central to Thoreau’s writing and to his ideas of nature. He writes about a place, Walden Pond, but he writes about that place from his own observations and scientific deductions. He recognizes nature’s voice, but he can only talk about it with his own. Richard J. Schneider explains that “To recognize the ambivalence about place in Thoreau’s thinking is certainly nothing new. It is simply the epistemological split between subject and object that scholars have long made a central issue in Thoreau studies and that Thoreau himself emphatically recognizes” (2). Schneider pulls from Thoreau’s journal for the latter’s question “Who placed us with eyes between a microscopic and a telescopic world?” (2). His question deals with his personal observations and his scientific descriptions. Thoreau is a poet and a scientist. His writing is a blending of what those two roles say about nature, in an effort to bring the two together. Schneider suggests that “Thoreau is a literary artist and philosopher whose interest in nature provided him with a set of symbols for dealing with human concerns; Thoreau, in writing about nature, is really writing about the human mind.” (2). However, Thoreau is also writing about scientific concerns regarding nature. Thoreau sees nature through a double lens of science and humanities. Both elements are at once present in his writing, a characteristic that
contributes to his legacy in nature writing. His canonical presence in nature writing is in part due to his quest to create a place where scientific and humanistic concerns interconnect. He is dealing with issues that other scholars would not address until the twenty-first century.

Thoreau employs awakening imagery to bridge his poetic and scientific observations. Thoreau established the need for the “self” to become aware (conscious or awake). Part of the process towards consciousness includes recognizing the self’s relation to land and industry. Industry often lulled men to a sleep-like state or unconsciousness, but it also enabled them to be awakened to nature as never before. Industry provided access to nature throughout the United States, which furthered scientific studies of nature. Scientific knowledge advanced as technology developed. Even though Thoreau often complained about the industrial presence in his life, his own observations were enhanced by his study of new theories and experiments made available through that same presence.

Bound in Thoreau’s love of nature was his quest to understand it. Literary scholar Robert C. Richardson, Jr. describes Thoreau’s interest in science and observation as “combining the accuracy of Darwin with the descriptive flair of a Pliny and the eye of a Ruskin” (381). Thoreau studied contemporary and traditional academic achievements ranging from Aristotle to Darwin. Even though nature was a transcendental catalyst for waking the mass of men, Thoreau knew that nature served other purposes besides being a mere alarm clock. He sought to the strict binary of nature viewed as either poetic potential or scientific study. His writings describe a way to balance a society dependent on industrial advancements but yearning for a more “natural” existence. The way to achieve such a balance starts by understanding his reliance on awakening imagery.
Discussing Thoreau’s reliance on awakening imagery clarifies Willa Cather’s role in this study. Cather scholarship has connected her fiction to Emerson’s writing, but not directly to Thoreau’s. By illuminating subtle differences between Emerson’s seeing imagery and Thoreau’s awakening imagery, it is clear that Cather’s use of awakening imagery is better situated in a Thoreauvian heritage.

Thoreau’s reliance on awakening imagery grows out of Emerson’s seeing imagery and demonstrates the transfer if action from Emerson’s transcendental eye to the entire body’s ability to respond to and understand nature by becoming awake. Emerson issues a call to become a “transparent eyeball” (24), which signifies a state of awareness of the self’s personal connection with the Universe. He emphasizes seeing as a necessary step towards reaching any level of transcendence. He advocates a higher kind of seeing that represents a rebirth of the soul. Thoreau’s writing is also rich with sight imagery, but he extends this imagery to suggest an awakening of the soul. The difference between seeing and awakening lies in the amount of action involved. To see, one needs only to sit and observe. To awaken requires effort from the entire body, including the eyes. Thoreau more clearly defines what is involved in triggering a transcendental moment than Emerson. *Walden* becomes the place for Thoreau to trace this procedure and to weigh out the direct results of being awake.

Emerson’s seeing imagery and Thoreau’s awakening imagery represent the process leading to transcendence. In an issue of the *The Dial*, a transcendentalist publication, J.A. Saxton defines the transcendental objective as “the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively, or of attaining a scientific knowledge of an order of existence transcending the reach of the senses, and of which we can have no sensible experience” (Gray 9). The application of transcendental theory is different, however. “Seeing” is the catalyst image for Emerson and
“awakening” is the catalyst for Thoreau. At the core of Emerson’s version of awareness is the notion of the innocent eye. This eye is found in each person who has become aware and has allowed her eye to see more than just the ordinary.

To live an aware life is also a Transcendental goal; it is not enough to merely exist, but one must be aware of existing. Emerson’s belief in this goal is symbolized in his conception of “Man Thinking,” a term from “The American Scholar” that embodies Emerson’s transcendental man. To Man Thinking, “Nature solicits with all her placid, all her monitory pictures; him the past instructs; him the future invites” and he is not a “victim of society” or “the parrot of other men’s thinking” (65). Man Thinking is alive and aware of the potential to transcend and commune with the divine and live harmoniously with nature. In the introduction to “Nature” he poses the question, “Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (21). He addresses the specifics of that relation later in the essay when he writes, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. …Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in the harmony of both” (24). Man can only ascend to a higher level of thinking with the help of nature.

Nature is the setting for men to begin to think and to see because it is the place where men realize their connection with the infinite. In “Nature,” Emerson suggests, “The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood” (23). We take for granted that most people can see just because they have eyes, but Emerson’s explanation of human responses to nature divides men with eyes from men who can see. His premise is that men who can see are men who “enjoy an original relation to the universe” (21). These men have been changed by nature by including in their daily food
“intercourse with heaven and earth” (23) not just potatoes and bread. Emerson saw nature as being the means through which men could elevate their lives and personally receive knowledge and inspiration from God.

Even Emerson admitted to the difference between his imagery and that of Thoreau. Thoreau takes Emerson’s ideas and attaches physical depth to them. Emerson writes of this transitioning in his journal,

In reading him, I find the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond, and illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generality. ‘Tis as if I went into a gymnasium, and saw youths leap, climb, and swing with a force unapproachable, —though their feats are only continuations of my initial grappling and jumps. (402)

Although Thoreau builds upon Emerson’s ideas, the themes did not stay exactly as Emerson had introduced them. By emphasizing awakening, Thoreau assumes an even greater power in the ability of man to transcend. Emerson does take steps towards an awakening, but his writing places the action on the eye alone. It sits in its socket observing, while the rest of the body is idle. His eye would dwell upon the greatness of the Universe and man’s place in it. Thoreau arises, and goes out in nature to see what it has to teach.

Thoreau also intensifies the need to be awakened and to see on a daily basis. He beckons readers to simplify their lives. His writings present a simplified approach to transcending. He brings readers down from airy abstractions to ants and night walks. He deals with bean fields and woodcutters. These images facilitate his description of becoming awake to the world. The ordinary world does not change, but the way in which we see it does. Thoreau brings our eyes back down to earth, to the woods in front of us, and to the plants on the side of the path. In “A
Natural History of Massachusetts” he says, “Nature will bear the closest inspection; she invites us to lay our eye level with the smallest leaf, and take an insect view of it plain” (35). The awakening shows what has always been before us, seen within the context of the infinite divine.

For Thoreau, the man who sees has become awakened. Thoreau takes Emerson’s eye and beckons it to excite the entire body to a more purposeful existence. His dependence on awakening imagery is evident in “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” which acts as an introduction to his overall project at Walden Pond. He welcomes his readers to his world, but he helps them understand the conditions that enable its existence. It is crucial that men realize they must awaken in order to take the journey of experiencing Walden Pond. Thoreau knows this is a crucial step towards reaching a transcendental life or even a transcendental moment. He says that “By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations” (Walden 176). Personal responsibility is part of the process of awakening. The readers must choose to begin the process of awakening, or they can live a mere illusory life. If men are to build a life worth living, they must wake up by transcending their mundane routines.

Thoreau’s words act as an alarm clock for the slumbering human soul. Men are to find their potential by becoming aware of their divinity, which according to Thoreau can happen most readily in nature. However, to remain awake is a tall task, even for Thoreau, who acknowledges that he has “never yet met a man who was quite awake.” He then adds, “How could I have looked him in the face?” (Walden 172). He recognizes that the process of awakening happens again and again. The distinction between being awake and the asleep is action. Thoreau says of the mass of men, “If they had not been overcome with drowsiness they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor, but only one in a million is awake
enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life” 
(Walden 172). Yet, he remains hopeful that awareness is an achievable state. Thoreau
acknowledges that many will continue to slumber, but his words are also meant to inspire readers
to be aware of when they are napping.

Thoreau juxtaposes the life of sleeping men and waking men. Sleeping men meet the
world where “surface meets surface” (“Life” 645). To be awake means to recognize the surface
or edge of human existence and define it against the surfaces or edges of adjoining natural
environments. Slumbering suggests that the edges of life meet, but no interaction takes place.
Thoreau’s practical application is again exemplified here. He says that such a sleeping man who
walks away from the post office “with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive
correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while” (“Life” 645). On the other hand, the
men who are awake are able to “Read not the Times” but to “Read the Eternities” with “flashes
of light from heaven” that “deepen the ruts” (“Life” 649) of the soul. To “read the Eternities” is
to look at the edges of life and see how they are working together for a larger purpose. It is not
enough to only read letters if men are not reading their own souls. To “deepening the ruts”
implies continuously examining seemingly understood avenues of understanding in order to
discover new levels and edges of awareness in an attempt to “envince how much [the mind] has
been used” (“Life” 649).

Thoreau’s writings exemplify the real possibilities of transcendental moments by
focusing on everyday applications instead of cumbersome theories. He invites his readers to join
him in finding the transcendental in the ordinary. For Thoreau, an ordinary pond elicited volumes
of writing and insight because he became aware that it was not an ordinary pond but a place full
of experience. He saw the pond as a symbol of a waking man: “The pond began to boom about
an hour after sunrise, when it felt the influence of the sun’s rays slanted upon it from over the hills; it stretched itself and yawned like a waking man with a gradually increasing tumult” (Walden 327). Thoreau orients landscape as the catalytic center for awakening imagery.

Because landscape is the origin for awakening imagery, Thoreau deals with the complications of industry on natural environments. He recognized that landscape must be preserved to ensure the possibility of future awakening moments. He promotes a life that would have to be aware of the need to balance progress and conservation. One way he describes such a balance is through his notion of living a noble life, which is conditional upon men waking to their own geniuses: “the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make” (Walden 171). The scope of Thoreau’s awakening hinges on men becoming awake to themselves and then aware of the need to reverence and value nature.

As Thoreau studied the scholarly writings of his day, he relied on a noble or moral approach to nature. Richardson elucidates this approach: “Thoreau still calls himself a transcendentalist, but … a transcendentalist is now … one who follows Kant’s categorical imperative in matters of ethical conduct. ‘Act so that you can will that all persons should act under the same maxim you do’” (374). Thoreau makes transcendentalism ethical in nature. It is not just to love nature, but to build a noble life that includes respect for man and nature. He writes, “It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve or paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts” (Walden 172). Of course, the ability to paint the atmosphere of the day is proportional to an understanding of the natural world. How can a person paint the atmosphere
of the day if it were so completely filled with the smoke and soot of industrial progress?
Awakening a nobler life consists of understanding the balance of nature and industry.

Balancing nature and industry was a complicated task even for Thoreau. His descriptions
of Walden Pond often leave readers with the feeling that he was in complete solitude. His
descriptions of the surrounding area have led many travelers to the pond since his own stay there.
Buell devotes an entire chapter of *The Environmental Imagination* to what he entitles the
Thoreauvian Pilgrimage.

I am such a pilgrim. I went with two friends, who live in the Boston area. We set out on a
Sunday morning, reaching Walden Woods only to discover a lack of parking. I began to wonder
just how many people would be sharing my introduction to Walden Pond. Although my friends
had warned me that the pond was usually crowded, especially on a Sunday morning, I figured
that it couldn’t be *that* crowded. I was wrong. I had anticipated solitude at the pond’s edge.
Instead of the company of trees, I was in the company of hundreds of other people. Some people
seemed to be experiencing the end to their own pilgrimages, tracing sights and paths from the
shore to the upper woods. Others were there to suntan, play in the water, or just read the Sunday
paper away from the kitchen table.

I did not want my memories of Walden to be tainted with the presence of people. In my
mind, I wanted Walden to be a secluded place, much as Thoreau had painted it. So, I framed the
people out. I took pictures of the pond when the swimmers went underneath the water, and I
managed to capture the trees in areas where there were no signs or people. I felt the need to keep
Walden peopleless, as I had always imagined it. The images Thoreau created needed to remain
pure. We decided to walk around the pond, and I figured there would be fewer people on the
other side of the pond. Although there were fewer large gatherings of people, they never really
went away. In every little alcove and path to the pond’s edge, there were people. I wondered how many of them had even read *Walden*, or really knew what Thoreau was all about. I was a little irritated that I had to share my moment with the masses.

I knew in my heart I was being silly. Just because people were using and loving the woods did not make Walden any less spiritual or vibrant. However, I needed to let the woods be mine for a morning. When I look back at the pictures, I almost forget how populated the shores and woods of the pond were. Thoreau suffered from the same solitary bug I did. He promotes his solitary state by admitting little reference to his human interactions while at Walden Pond. His move is similar to that of the Hudson River School, which prominently displayed nature’s voice in landscape while diminishing the human voice. Readers are introduced to some of the pond’s inhabitants and visitors, such as in “Former Inhabitants” where readers learn of Thoreau’s neighbors and also of the true state of Walden Pond. He mentions his neighbors, “by the very near corner of my field, still nearer to town, Zilpha, a colored woman, had her little house,” and “down the road, on the right hand, on Brister’s Hill, lived Brister Freeman, ‘a handy Negro.’” Still, “farther down the hill, on the left, on the old road in the woods, are marks of some homestead of the Stratten family” among others (Walden 295). Although this section of the book is not often emphasized when discussing Thoreau’s seclusion, adding the human history of Walden at Thoreau’s time discloses how poignant Thoreau’s pleas to awake from the mass of men are since he wasn’t just writing in a little hut in the middle of nowhere, but in a place occupied by people and industrial progress. He was confronted with the effects of sleepiness and indifference towards nature as he interacted with his neighbors.

Thoreau was aware of the threat of industry on Walden Pond and the surrounding area in the mid-1900s. Robert Sattelmeyer suggests that “like all natural environments, it was and is a
dynamic and not a static system. It has been used for more than two hundred years by the
descendants of European settlers, and before that for thousands of years by Native Americans,
perhaps as long ago as its emergence from the retreating ice sheet” (242). We like to believe, and
rightfully so by Thoreau’s descriptions, that Walden Pond was the much-sought-after Edenic
state of America, but Sattelymeyer describes the true state of the pond and surrounding area as
Thoreau would have seen it. This lengthy description is important because it situates Thoreau’s
place in terms of the land and industry in the area. Pristine Walden becomes well-worn Walden.

The landscape of Concord in the 1840s and 1850s was an agricultural one,
dominated by tillage and pastures and cutover areas, with only about 10 percent of
the area in forest. In fact, 1850 was the historic low point of forest coverage in
Concord: it has been steadily decreasing since initial settlement, and has been
increasing steadily ever since, as agricultural lands were abandoned and
gradually reverted to forest. This decline was also true, although to a lesser extent,
of the area around Walden Pond. Here and there the text of Walden provides clues
to this fact, though the overwhelming impression one is left with is of a lake
surrounded by forest. But increasingly the actual landscape consisted largely of
fields, such as the eleven-acre plot that Thoreau used a part of to grow his beans
on, and woodlots, utilized and managed by the farmers and the townspeople for
firewood, both for their own consumption and as a cash crop to sell on the Boston
market (241).

The land surrounding Walden was being used and consumed for economic needs and growth.
Readers can imagine a very different Walden Pond than exists today. Currently, trees and paths
surround the pond, which represents a much different state than the Walden Pond of 1845 where
Thoreau had his 11-acre lot allotted to bean plants. The juxtaposition between Thoreau’s depiction of Walden and its real state in 1845 suggests the tensions he felt between industry and preservation. Thoreau recognized the beauty of a natural environment that was slowly being diminished by economics.

Recognizing Thoreau’s circumstances at Walden, does not weaken his message, but allows for a more realistic application of his project. He teaches how to create ethical relationships with land. Because he sees the mass of men from his window each day, he better understands the real need to awaken and become alive to the possibilities of life. Sattelmeyer describes the areas around Walden Pond as “the current site of rather intense commercial and agricultural activity. For example, we learn that during the winter of 1846-47 the pond was harvested for ice, not just by local landlords but in a large-scale operation that involved more than a hundred men and heavy equipment who arrived daily by train from Cambridge” (240). Thoreau writes that “no wanderer ventured near my house for a week or a fortnight for a time” (Walden 264) although Sattelmeyer suggests “the fact that more than a hundred men with heavy equipment were at work every day in front of his house suggests a somewhat different reality [from his “portrait of self-sufficient isolation”], and reinforce the notion that Thoreau’s isolation was a virtual and an imaginative rather than an actual one” (240).

Thoreau envisioned what could nature be; he realized that nature could still be discovered and understood even if it was under attack from development and industry. He saw wildness in his industrially threatened home. When he said he went to the woods to live deliberately, he was speaking to a society that faced the tension of increasing industry and disappearing land. His situation reveals more about our current situation than we might assume. Our modern Waldens will also have neighbors and deforestation, but that does not mean that our ability to become
awake diminishes. Thoreau was working with what he had, as we must. His awakening call is all the more relevant in the actual setting than his imagined one. If he was working in the shadows of industry and comodification, then his call is still relevant today, as we are faced with even less land and more industry than Thoreau.

Scholarship that uses Thoreau to espouse a re-creation of Eden must reorient its scope to see that he was really working within an already scarred landscape. He was creating a place that could be used as a template for future generations to begin their awakening processes. Sattelymeyer explains: “Finally, the Walden Pond of the book, it must be said, is a carefully constructed literary site, less Thoreau’s home than his home page, a virtual space he designed to represent himself and to promote his business, even if was only listening to what was in the wind” (243). Walden Pond of 2006 more closely resembles its literary depiction than the pond of 1845 did. In this way, Thoreau’s idealized depiction of Walden helped to save it, much as the Hudson River School painters helped to save and restore the Hudson River Valley through there idealized nature paintings. Thoreau helped awaken the citizens of the Concord area to the beauty and power of their local nature. Understanding the battles he was facing strengthens his message. He not only wrote about awakening to the encroachments of industry, he lived them.

Revisiting Thoreau as an environmental author who understands the balance needed between industry and preservation links his writing to Cather’s fiction more closely than they are often seen to be. Cather also uses land to create a space to work out her own business. Her home page establishes place through the plains of Nebraska and the frontiers of Santa Fe, but they function in a similar way to Thoreau’s Eastern countryside. Both authors rely on awakening imagery to support and connect their ideas to a sense of place.
Chapter 2: Cather’s Awakening

Examining Willa Cather’s fiction for awakening imagery suggests her place within the canon of American nature writing. Revisiting Willa Cather’s fiction to examine evident patterns of traditional nature writing does more than give her another title; it broadens the framework of nature writing. Showing that Cather depends on similar imagery as Thoreau indicates that nature writing is not restricted to form or style. Thoreau identified major issues concerning nature in America. His life and his writing reveal the beginnings of established nature writing in the United States. Linking Cather to this history shows the fluidity of American thought, while delineating common tensions and challenges found in the American landscape. It also illuminates a greater depth to Cather’s fiction. Recognizing Cather’s dependence on landscape gives nature a voice among other social issues Cather addresses in her writing, namely gender, race, and social status. Cather relies on awakening imagery as a tool to illuminate society’s need for balance between the tensions of landscape preservation and industrial progress.

The process of awakening pivots on one’s ability to obtain consciousness of self and the self’s relation to the world. This quest for consciousness underlies the project of nature writing in the American experience. Nature writers sought and seek to make their audience aware of themselves and their relation to nature. In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, ecocritic Scott Slovic argues that Thoreau’s “awakening” represents a beginning in traditional nature writing patterns. Slovic refers to awakening as a general “awareness,” although he notes that nature writers following Thoreau use various forms of the word for the same end: consciousness. Thoreau uses “awaken”; Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey prefer “awareness”; Wendell Berry suggests a “watchfulness”; while Berry Lopez leans towards “‘understanding,’ ‘mathematical’ and especially the ‘particularized’ or ‘experiential’” (3). Whether the word of
choice is “awareness,” “awakening,” or “consciousness,” the meaning is essentially the same and will be used interchangeably in this study. The process of becoming aware is often triggered by personal experiences in nature. Slovic cites Dillard, Abbey, Berry, and Lopez as representative descendants of Thoreau’s awakening because they use personal experience to obtain a state of awareness, and their writing closely resembles the style and form of Thoreau. However, within Slovic’s definitions of awareness there is room to examine the fiction of Willa Cather as a literary descendant of Thoreau rather than of Emerson. One of the key elements in shifting Cather’s awareness from Emerson to Thoreau lies in Emerson’s own assessment of Thoreau’s project. Emerson remarked that Thoreau’s images had a force unapproachable; likewise, Cather’s characters leap and climb with such a force. Cather’s application of awakening imagery is discussed in this chapter.

This study draws from Slovic’s discussion of awareness in American nature writing to frame a discussion of Cather’s use of awakening in *The Song of the Lark* and associate her with other descendants of Thoreau. This chapter situates Cather’s use of awakening within a Thoreauvian heritage by first explicating *The Song of the Lark* and second by revisiting *My Ántonia* as an environmental text that deals with preserving landscape in the industrial-driven American frontier. Such a reading implies an environmental agenda in Cather’s fiction.

Awakening imagery permeates traditional forms of nature writing and is often exhibited in journals or natural science descriptions. Nature writers depend on land (including landscape and natural environments) as the main medium for obtaining consciousness of “self” and “other.” Annie Dillard, for example, incorporates ecological interests in her vivid descriptions of the landscape around Tinker Creek. Within this specific style of nature writing, Cather has no place. Cather does, however, describe her characters in the process of gaining awareness of and
grappling with the forces of nature. Cather uses the principles of awareness in her fiction without including first-person observations.

Relying on land to facilitate the process of becoming aware hearkens back to the idea of edges or what Slovic terms, boundaries. “It is only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realize who they are and what’s what in the world” (4). In this way, nature writers are pressing their edges of understanding and existence up against the world around them. Essential to nature writing is realization of “who” nature writers are and “what’s what in the world” for them. Through her treatment of the intersections of characters and land, Cather offers a greater awareness of the modern human condition that needs a reconciliation of the balance between issues of landscape and industry. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronberg’s life exemplifies the process of reaching self-awareness, based on her observations of her natural environment. In *My Ántonia* Cather presents an unresolved, but aware, Jim Burden, who is a model for seeking a balance between landscape preservation and industrial progress.

Cather does not outline a specific plan of action for those who achieve and maintain awareness, but according to Slovic, that is not the role of nature writers. He suggests that, “To write about a problem is not necessarily to produce a solution, but the kindling of consciousness—one’s own and one’s reader’s—is a first step—an essential first step” (14). This first step further associates Cather with Thoreau. Neither author offers clear solutions, although they both privilege nature’s ability to elicit awareness. Cather, like Thoreau, places natural environments as the catalytic center for awakening. Her approach and style vary from Thoreau’s, but her move towards relying on landscape is similar.
Cather’s Awakening in *The Song of the Lark*

*The Song of the Lark* illustrates Cather’s reliance on landscape as the origin for awakening experiences. The novel guides readers through the development of Thea Kronborg, a vocal performer. Thea’s childhood is spent on the Colorado frontier, where she first discovers her gift for music. She leaves her town of Moonstone for career opportunities in the city. Although she spends a great deal of time in urbanized settings, she never fully distances herself from the landscape of her youth. In the preface to the novel, Cather explains that the title *The Song of the Lark* does not refer “to the vocal accomplishments” of Thea; instead, “the book was named for a rather second-rate French painting in the Chicago Art Institute, a picture 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 was meant to suggest a young girl’s awakening to something beautiful” (*Song* v). Indeed, Cather’s novel traces the awakening of Thea’s musical ability, but more than that, the novel offers a pattern of how Cather incorporates and relies on landscape as the catalytic center for awakening moments.

The process of Thea’s awakening begins in Colorado. As she matures, she uses land to gauge her development. She felt the power and immensity of land, but she did not yet understand how it would facilitate her deepest growth. At age 13, she “wandered for a long while about the sand ridges, picking up crystals and looking into the yellow prickly-pear blossoms … she looked at the sand hills until she wished she were a sand hill” (*Song* 100). She recognized the beauty of the land, and she felt a kinship to it: a closeness that made her want to immerse herself in the land. She identifies her own existence and identity in relation to her natural environment, placing her recognition of landscape before her later recognition of music. Her natural environment becomes a main point of reference for her.
Other characters also see Thea’s dependence on landscape and the eventuality of her awakening. Through the eyes of Professor Wunsch, we see the depth of Thea’s development. Professor Wunsch remarks that there is “something unconscious and unawakened about her” (Song 122). He senses Thea’s potential. Later, when he is leaving, he describes Thea as “the yellow prickly—pear blossoms that open there in the desert; thornier and sturdier than the maiden flowers he remembered; not so sweet, but wonderful” (Song 122). He sees Thea as a reflection of the landscape, and she is most easily described through images of her native land. She is like one of the blossoms, waiting to bloom. Cather uses land imagery to contextualize Thea’s life, suggesting nature is the medium for analyzing and framing all of Thea’s experiences.

Although she loves her prairie home, Thea leaves to pursue her music career in the city. However, her urban relocation does not remove her rural foundation. A pivotal moment for Thea’s development takes place at a concert in Chicago where she references landscape imagery as she becomes aware of her deep love of music. There are so many moments when Thea begins to piece herself together, but she continually draws on her first exposure to the landscape of her youth to make sense of her experiences. As the horns ring out in the concert, Thea thinks of “the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. … the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a new soul and yet old” (Song 252). Thea is connecting with the Earth and its heritage. She brings with her the hills of her youth and feels their history. Music is the medium for her moment of understanding and awakening, but her instant association with her childhood landscape clearly shapes the experience. Just after this rhapsodic moment, Thea leaves the concert and becomes “conscious of the city itself, of the congestion of life all about her, of the brutality and power of those streams that flowed in the
streets, threatening to drive one under” (Song 252-253). Her awakening opens her eyes to the industrial reality of Chicago. She not only becomes more aware of herself but also of her surroundings. This experience, after four months of not knowing anything about the city of Chicago, instantly matured her. After the concert, she “pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl’s no longer” (Song 255). She crossed into maturity, but the bridge from girl to woman was facilitated by her remembrance of an initial association with land.

Thea’s impressions and memories of landscape lead her to Panther Cañon, which provides the physical environment for Thea’s journey to a full awareness of herself and her future. This scene, although not overtly Thoreauvian, closely resembles much of Thoreau’s experience at Walden Pond. Thea’s “room was not more than eight by ten feet, and she could touch the stone roof with her fingers” (Song 317). Her room was a bit smaller than Thoreau’s “ten feet wide by fifteen long” cabin, (Walden 141) but the principle is the same: need over convenience. “All her life she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up. Now, she reflected, as she drew herself out long upon the rugs, it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her. She had got to a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort” (Song 373). This description is vital to defending Cather within Thoreauvian versions of awakening because it shows Thea finding a place where she could leave the mass of men to reflect and discover something significant about herself. She steps out of industry’s fast lane and into a place where she can transcend.

Thea’s discovery of the ancient Cliff-dwellers is another Thoreauvian parallel. Just as Thoreau recounted the lives of the animals surrounding Walden Pond, Thea sought to discover the history of the Cliff-Dwellers. She discovers that the land absorbs feelings and identity. So,
not only is the land forever the storyteller, it also becomes the story. As she let the land into her world, the land answered. She could feel ‘the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed’ (*Song* 376) the water-trail in the cañon. The water also plays a part in her awakening; she describes the stream “as the only living thing left of the drama that had been played out in the cañon centuries ago” (*Song* 378). Just as Thoreau’s bathing in Walden Pond became a sacred ritual of his book, Thea’s “bath came to have ceremonial gravity” that was “a continuity of life that reached back into the old time” creating an “atmosphere of the cañon [that] was ritualistic” (*Song* 378).

By focusing on Panther Cañon as the catalyst for Thea’s awakening, Cather suggests the power and importance of natural landscapes to teach humanity about its soul. The natural environment of the cañon provides the means for her awakening. She realizes that in her awakened state in the cañon “everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood. … ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She felt united and strong” (*Song* 380). She fulfills Thoreau’s plea for “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity” (*Walden* 173) and in the process she realizes a greater awareness of “self” and her relation to the world. Thea’s experiences in the cañon offer her the awakened freedom of the song of the lark, as Cather intended. Cather does not depict a natural environment without human history, in fact, it is the human history that furthers the awakening moment for Thea. This move creates a dependence on the past for the present and the future. Only in the cañon could Thea find the real purpose of her life, through person tutorials from the same earth that had tutored the Cliff-Dwellers long ago. As much as the land teachers Thea of her connection and reliance on the past, it also teaches her how to continually tap into the life force of landscape. Chicago could not give it to her but Panther Cañon could. She understands her future is in Germany, in the industrial world, but she
needs Panther Cañon to exist in her soul and to stand as the ancient reminder of her deepest desires. Cather is saying that each of us needs such a place in our lives; a place where we are able to learn from natural environments. It is in the cañon that Thea resolves to go to Germany, without delay. “The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations” (Song 382-3). Thea’s awareness of self leads her in the direction of her desires, and she would have to leave the cañon to obtain them just as Thoreau left the pond.

An important part of Thea’s awakening in the cañon centers around her discovery of art and her increased ability to sing. Some critics argue that art is the origin of awakening in Cather’s characters. In Bernice Slote’s The Kingdom of Art, she asserts that “Panther Cañon was the point of the mythic awakening … to become one with nature and the deepest sense of life” but she then suggests that “The Song of the Lark is primarily directed to power—the primitive, physical, and emotional involvements of art” (89). Upon further examination, however, we see landscape as the deeper source of such power. In one scene, Thea describes broken pottery she finds in the stream,

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—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one makes a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (Song 378)

Cather emphasizes the power of art to teach wisdom and inspire living a fulfilled life, but her interest in art springs up from the deep reservoirs of the earth. Music and art do not initiate the
awakening process; they are a result of it. Cather depends on aesthetic appreciation, and her deep interest in aesthetics is integrally linked with the importance of landscape, which might suggest that Bernice Slote’s *The Kingdom of Art* might need an accompanying volume titled *The Kingdom of Nature*. Such a volume could begin by recognizing that Cather’s art also grows out of her experiences with landscape. It was not until after Sarah Orne Jewett gave Cather the advice, “You must find a quiet place. You must find your own quiet center of life and write from that. … To write and work on this level we must live on it—we must at least recognize it and defer to it at every step” (Brown 140) that Cather refocused her attention to her childhood landscape and began to produce her best writing.

Although this study places landscape at the center of Cather’s awakening imagery, art plays an important part of the process. Thea’s knowledge of her ability to sing grows out of her awareness of self. In the cañon, Thea “was singing very little … but a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering” (*Song* 373). She was not specifically working on her singing, but her realizations about herself carried over into her ability to sing. Her singing was a product of her newly acquired awareness, and it became an expression of her deeper consciousness:

> Music had never before come to her in that sensuous form. It had always been a thing to be struggled with, had always brought anxiety and exaltation and chagrin—never content and indolence. Thea began to wonder whether people could not utterly lose the power to work, as they can lose their voice or their memory. 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. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a colour, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas. (Song 373)

Thea’s time in Panther Cañon is the turning point in her life. She is awakened to herself and to her future. Not only is her voice stronger, but her direction is also steadily grounded. She defines herself in new ways, as if she can be a color or a sound. She first understood her own edges, the parts of herself that defined her character, and then she began to understand what life was like when she pressed her edges against nature and history. This quest for consciousness echoes Thoreau’s own awakening at Walden Pond as he discovered himself and his relation to a larger community, and provides adequate evidence for paralleling Cather’s use of awakening imagery to Thoreau’s, a parallel that establishes Cather as an American nature writer.

**Awareness in *My Ántonia***

A more complex discussion of Cather’s use of awakening is seen in *My Ántonia*. Land still acts as the catalytic center for awareness, but the results of awareness are complicated by the inevitability of intruding industry and the resulting tensions from its impact on landscape. Cather’s characters in *My Ántonia* wrestle with finding a balance between modern industry and land preservation. The effects of technology and industry were more fully manifest in Cather’s time than in Thoreau’s, resulting in more overt discussions of environmental issues than similar issues found in *Walden*. Her recognition of further industrial development and its inevitable effects on natural environments places her within the discussions of environmental discourse. In response to such realities, she creates places where industry can be used to elicit environmental awareness and foster balanced communities.
*My Ántonia* is an important environmental text because it depicts the realities of becoming aware to self and to community. Cather’s use of awareness in *My Ántonia* responds to modern discussions of industry and preservation in environmentally friendly ways. Some critics view *My Ántonia* as a strictly industrial text, meaning that Cather sees landscape only in terms of its economical value. Such readings miss Cather’s rendering of an environmental community where industry and natural environments learn to co-exist. An example of such an industrial reading is seen in Joseph W. Meeker’s “The Plow and the Pen.” Meeker claims Cather’s fiction is void of an “environmental ethic” (88) and instead creates “an ethic of development that supposes that land fulfills its destiny when it is successfully farmed” (88). Meeker’s argument focuses on Cather’s Nebraska novels, tracing the characters’ relation to the land with their final destinations. For example, in *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* he concludes that the main characters, Thea and Jim, have no real connection to the land because they leave their childhood landscapes for city life. This move suggests that the final destination of Cather’s characters reveals her tendency toward industrialization over environmentalism.

However, Meeker complicates the issue by citing Thoreau (among others) as representative of traditional environmental ethics. If Meeker’s discussion hinges on the final destination of nature lovers, then he would have to consider that Thoreau left the edge of Walden Pond because “perhaps it seemed to [him] that [he] had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one” (*Walden* 343). Meeker misses the depth of the environmental imagination’s project by simply writing off Cather as a land consumer who fled the frontier for city life. It is in the juxtaposition of the frontier and the city where we see Cather’s true environmental ethic established as she works towards creating an environmental balance. She is battling many of the same tensions of progress and conservation Thoreau grappled with, but on a
larger scale. Thoreau battles his ideas out in the Northeast; Cather deals with the Western frontier.

Meeker’s simplification of Cather’s approach to landscape represents a larger misunderstanding in Cather scholarship; many critics associate Cather’s use of farming images as privileging industry over nature, an assumption that easily disqualifies Cather from favorable environmental readings. Meeker concludes that the land in My Ántonia “provides a background for her stories of human growth and development, but it is not loved and studied to find its own integrity and value, let alone its own story. The land is raw material in the hands of Cather’s Muse, and it is the setting where the plow and the pen come together” (88). Such a reading ignores the relevance of landscape in the novel. Yes, Cather integrates farming imagery into My Ántonia, but it is used to further her evolving concept of an environmental community.

Jim Burden’s role in the novel serves my discussion of industrial modernization and landscape because his character struggles to fully reconcile his place in nature and industry. Through his journey to awareness, readers are better able to understand the realization of an environmental community. Cather first introduces Jim on a train, as he and the narrator travel across Iowa. Jim is a business man, traveling to somewhere from New York City, his home. Looking out at the land beneath them from the “observation car” they saw “bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun” (Ántonia i). Jim and the narrator realize the land of their youth was still very much a part of them. Although they were rolling across the land, they felt very much rooted in it. Jim “loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development” (Ántonia ii). The railroad represents the industrial speed and force of technology on the plains. Thoreau ascribed trains to industry’s advancements, although he saw
the railroad as an obstacle to experiencing landscape. Cather uses a train as a vehicle to remind
Jim of his natural environment. This shows how Cather realizes the inevitability of industry, but
she also sees the need to make industry work for preserving landscape.

Achieving a balance between issues of industry and landscape is not an easy process.
Jim’s love of his boyhood landscape appears to contradict his chosen career as legal counsel for
the Western railroads. Preservation becomes an important issue in My Ántonia, especially in
discussing Jim’s role in the novel. Joseph Urgo positions Jim Burden as “emblematic of the
conservation debate. He is both legal counsel for the railroads [and so he profits by land
development], and he is a preservationist, someone you can count on for funding ‘big Western
dreams’” (50). Jim struggles to reconcile his two worlds into one reality. However, Jim’s return
to the plains at the end of the novel suggests a fusion of his two worlds. Such a world suggests
Cather’s contribution to environmentalism: creation of a place that acknowledges the
inevitability of land development and the necessity of land preservation and works for the good
of both.

The debate over conservation was particularly heated during Cather’s lifetime. Urgo
defines the period in which the novel is set as

one of national landscape preservation. But national-parks creation is no
coincidental context for the novel. …The forty years between 1880 and 1920 are
known as the “formative years” of American environmentalism (and of Willa
Cather), . . . the era is marked as well by the cultural work of writers intent on
making conservation a matter of public spirit and national policy. We may want to
include Willa Cather within this environmentalist, intellectual awakening. (46)
Cather should not only be included as part of this environmental awakening, but *My Ántonia* can be seen as a text dealing with the necessity of preserving land within the industrial movement. Jim embodies the tensions of the environmental movement as he struggles to understand his own relation with land and its value in his life. Cather could be using Jim’s character to respond to the national struggles between industry and preservation. Urgo explains that “The era Cather lived in was consumed by the connections it sensed between the American landscape and the nation’s vitality—its history, its economy, and its future” (61) and he further states:

> This was the milieu into which Cather offered *My Ántonia* —one where policymakers and technocrats, capitalists and intellectuals, were grappling with the right relation between human beings and nature. At issue was the question of how to preserve the American wilderness experience as an art form, how to transform carefully selected wildlands into sites of heightened experience, valued by virtue of the capitalist sacrifice of profit represented by preservation. (49)

This understanding of Cather’s period more fully establishes her as an environmental writer who wrestles with the needs to reserve land for its intrinsic and economic value. I am not satisfied that *My Ántonia* is a solely preservationist text, although I believe Urgo is much closer to defining Cather as a nature writer than other critics. *My Ántonia* is saturated with the possible effects of establishing a land ethic that would recognize human and natural environments as important. The contrast of the Nebraska plains with the modernized cities is the backdrop, but the presence of such landscapes only begins to present the environmental tensions Cather felt. The novel does not offer clear solutions, but it suggests that humanity must recognize their origin in landscape and their continuing obligation to value and protect land. In this way, Urgo is correct in prescribing the text as a preservation novel when he states that “The preservation movement of
the early twentieth century applied not only to ancient ruins but should properly inform as well the way we think about the landscape we live in now” (58). Not only does Cather have her characters discover awakening through the landscape, but she also advocates a larger, national ecological awakening.

Jim’s awakening process begins early in the novel. Just as Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark began her awakening process in her youth, so does Jim. Both characters begin their respective journeys toward awareness on the American plains. Cather scholar John Murphy compares Jim’s experience “leaning against a warm yellow pumpkin” where he “experiences complete happiness, the feeling of being dissolved into the universal, ‘whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge’ (Ántonia 14) with Emerson’s seeing eye:

The experience recalls the transparent eye-ball passage at the beginning of Nature, when alone in the woods Emerson feels the currents of the Universal Being circulating through him, and also the later passage where he admits a child’s love of nature: ‘I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons.’ Jim approaches this new world with new eyes, as Emerson encourages, building his own world, his own heaven. (59-60)

This experience is a first step in Jim’s awakening. He starts to make connections to landscape and to figure out his relation to it. Although he is seeing, he is involved in a much more inclusive awakening process that becomes apparent throughout the novel. His awakening on the prairie prepares him for a much deeper and complicated awareness that his experiences in the city provide.

Throughout the novel, Jim strives to reconcile his awareness of landscape with his intellectual awakening in the city. Jim begins his awakening in the prairie where his awareness is
greatly facilitated by his relationship with Ántonia. He feels the connection with the universal, but he does not completely allow the awakening to transform him. Ántonia, on the other hand, is a fully awakened character. The marrow of her bones is so thick with awareness that she becomes emblematic of the landscape. Cather uses Ántonia as a representation of the fusion of land with self. Jim’s first description of her reflects such a description,

I remembered what the conductor had said about her eyes, they were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark colour. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking. (Ántonia 17)

Everything about her physical features makes Jim connect her appearance with the landscape. Ántonia becomes an image of land in human form, even when a small child. She becomes a symbol of growth and connection to the land for all of her neighbors and especially for Jim.

Ántonia’s role as a symbol of landscape suggests she is an extension of the land—the harshness and the beauty of it combined in one woman. When she goes to work in the fields after her father dies, Jim comments on “how much older she had grown in eight month! . . . . She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries” (Ántonia 79). Ántonia spends so much time with the land it is as if she grows roots and becomes a tree raising out of the plain. Early in the novel, Jim comments on the scarcity of trees on the plains, “Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons” (Ántonia 21). Ántonia becomes as precious to Jim as the prairie trees. She is also a permanent fixture of
the land; he cannot think back to the land without seeing Ántonia, as if her tree-like stature stands as a memorial to the rawness of the frontier.

In the beginning of the novel, Jim attempts to establish a sense of place, a process he continues throughout the remaining chapters. After Ántonia impatiently probes, “Name? What name?” (Ántonia 19) again and again, Jim begins to teach her English. Neil Evernden, in his essay “Beyond Ecology” suggests that “The act of naming may itself be a part of the process of establishing a sense of place” (101). Jim is not only establishing a sense of place for himself, but for Ántonia as well. She learns through his eyes and his ability to explain the world. He brings the world to her, and in turn she draws closer to him, which ultimately situates him closer to the land itself. All of these early episodes provide Jim with personal experiences with landscape, eventually leading Jim to his own land ethic.

As Jim interacts with Ántonia and the Nebraska plain, he encounters the raw power that land can wield against its inhabitants. In these situations, Jim begins to wrestle with the reality of industry and progress fighting against the rawness of the land. One instance involves the snake Jim and Ántonia come upon. Jim tells the story of how “he ran up and drove at his head with my spade, struck him fairly across the neck, and in a minute he was all about my feet in wavy loops. I struck now from hate” (Ántonia 32). Murphy’s comments of this moment offer a significant aspect of this scene:

Although the snake killing is an initiation experience for Jim, one that causes Ántonia, for a time at least, to regard him as ‘just like big mans’ (Ántonia 33) we must look beyond this personal aspect to the fallen condition of humanity the threatening snake has come to symbolize. The echoes of Genesis are clear as Jim confronts the snake. (63)
Understanding Jim and Antonia as part of the “echoes of Genesis” provides further insight into this moment. The echoes of Eden in My Ántonia are not exact parallels to the Genesis story, but exploring the parallel of Jim and Ántonia to Adam and Eve intensifies the larger argument that surrounds the preservation of landscape and the destruction of industry. In the Genesis account, the snake tempted Eve and Adam to partake of the fruit and leave their Edenic state to gain knowledge. Because they partook, they had to leave the Garden of Eden. When Jim chops off the head of the snake, he figuratively leaves the Edenic nature of his boyhood behind. He never looks at the landscape the same way again. He exclaims that “The great land had never looked to me so big and free. If the red grass were full of rattlers, I was equal to them all” (Ántonia 32). In the act of killing the snake, he forges his own place in the land. Ántonia rides off with him, both of them having more knowledge about their individual places in their larger natural environment. However, this idea is complicated when we view the event as Jim conquering nature by killing a creature of nature. He is supposed to be establishing his place in land, but it comes through violent interactions with it. This experience reflects larger tensions in the novel. Questions of ownership and stewardship in natural environments arise. Does Jim become owner of land or steward of land through the snake episode? Perhaps Cather is posing such a question.

When Ántonia’s father dies, Jim learns another lesson about progress and landscape. Mr. Shimerda attempts to reconcile the change of rustic frontier to industrial frontier. The distance between the new foreigners and the established neighbors reflects the tensions of industrial advancements in rural settings. The Shimerdas live in a cave and are as close to the land as they could possibly be. We see them struggle to survive, the ultimate cost being the death of Mr. Shimerda, who could not reconcile his new circumstances. This implies that living so close to the
land can be destructive, for there must be an awareness of industrial progress taking place. Relying solely on land could not sustain life on the Nebraska prairie.

Cather further explicates Jim’s awareness of landscape by relocating him and Ántonia to Black Hawk. In Black Hawk, we see Ántonia’s inability to survive without her natural environment. Cather depicts this reliance on land in the breakdown of Ántonia’s moral values as she is submerged into the hustle of city life. Separated from the land, she loses her strength and succumbs to Larry Donovan. She returns to the land in restore order. Jim goes to visit her after she has her baby. Her assessment of city life solidifies her continuing role as a symbol of landscape, she says “I’d be miserable in a city. I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly” (Ántonia 206). Jim recognizes Ántonia’s inability to settle into city life, and he recognizes that her place is in the country. For Jim, however, the city ultimately becomes his home, although his job frequently takes him to the plains. He realizes that one or the other is not the answer for him; he is always in between the two, not fully a part of nature or industry. He cannot find happiness in the city, unless he holds onto his memories of Ántonia. The juxtaposition of his two worlds is essential to creating a balance of industry with preservation of landscape—an idea that is one of Cather’s contributions to the environmental discourse.

In contrast to Jim’s relationship with Ántonia on the prairie, Cather includes Jim’s friendship with Lena Lingard, whose life represents the benefits of industrialization. Where we saw Jim responding to his natural environment with Ántonia, we now see Jim learning about the industrial environment. Before moving to Black Hawk Lena was “something wild, that always lived on the prairie,” (Ántonia 106) but Black Hawk changed that. In the city she was one of the “hired girls,” and she adapted quickly. Jim begins to see her “matching sewing silk or buying
‘findings’” (Ántonia 109). After Black Hawk, she moves on to Lincoln where she again interacts with Jim. Although Lena is first introduced in association with the country, she quickly transforms and adapts to the industry surrounding her. Murphy sees this movement from country to city as a move from “space and landscape” to “sex and social issues” (72). There are issues in the city that do not exist in the country. Jim must learn to understand these issues as well as those he faced on the prairie. This is an important part of his growing awareness because he is forced to weigh the implications of privileging either industry or nature.

Jim notes the changes that have taken place with Lena when he encounters her in Lincoln. She adopts “all the conventional expressions she heard at Mrs. Thomas’s dressmaking shop.” He observes that “Ántonia had never talked like the people about her … there was always something impulsive and foreign about her speech” (Ántonia 181). Jim’s comparison of Lena to Ántonia is a way of comparing industry to landscape. Lena stays in the city and works for her living, while Ántonia returns to the plain. His relationships with Ántonia and Lena create a synecdoche of larger preservation issues he deals with. Although Lena’s character was first introduced in the prairie sections of the novel, she is fully transformed by industry; she represents the loss of landscape. Ántonia can never fully be consumed by industry; she represents the endurance of landscape. Jim attempts a relationship with Lena, but it is not fulfilling and he leaves. There is no place for him in her fully industrialized world. He explains this to Lena, “I’ll never settle down and grind if I stay here. You know that” (Ántonia 187). He was still searching for a reconciliation of the pulls he felt from his “mental awakening” (Ántonia 165) in the city and his communion with the Universal on the prairie.

Jim’s return to the prairie in the last scene and one of the novel’s strongest evidences of My Ántonia’s environmental agenda. The progression of the novel from land to city, and then
back to land suggests Cather’s rendering of environmental issues. The progression suggests that we all must return to nature. Even for all of the modern conveniences and advancements, if we lose our roots in nature, we forfeit lasting happiness. Jim finally understands that part of his happiness depends on his ability to create a place where the landscape of his youth and the industry of his adulthood can work together in an effective community. In this way, Cather creates a modern space that hinges on a balanced idea of nature. She brings Jim’s two worlds together into one continuing road. Jim’s closing comments echo the possibility of such a journey,

I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man’s experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. (Ántonia 238)

Jim wants to restore what was lost. He thinks back to his childhood, a time when he felt most awakened to the world. The closing scene discloses Jim’s attempts to reconcile the tensions in his life. He understands the power of the land, so he returns, but he cannot stay on the prairie forever. He builds a world where he can access both industry and nature. His legal case represents this duality; he kept his love of landscape next to his work, reminding him of where he had been. Some critics might wonder whether Jim is the result of industry or if he is really a preservationist. Can he be both? Is Ántonia only part of Jim’s industrial career or is she equal to it? Cather raises important environmental issues and guides her readers to think about the consequences. Within the scope of this study, her larger argument deals with the need to preserve landscape in America. Just as Jim finds part of his identity in the prairie; he recognizes the prairie as home. Reading My Ántonia as an environmental text suggests that Cather uses Jim’s
life to represent the larger issues of environmental communities where opponents of industry or preservation work together to establish a sense of home that Jim describes at the end of the novel.
Chapter 3: Wilderness as an Environmental Community in  

*Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Willa Cather recognizes that industry and progress have to work with land preservation in order to create a sustainable community. *My Ántonia* raises issues of environmental communities, where industry and landscape preservation attempt to strike a balance, one not overpowering or privileging the other. A more developed discussion of such communities is portrayed in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In *Archbishop*, Cather again relies on landscape as the catalytic center for awakening, but her discussions of awareness have more to do with establishing balanced environmental communities than those in *The Song of the Lark* or *My Ántonia*. This reading of *Archbishop* focuses on Cather’s dependence on ideas of “wilderness” in establishing an environmental community in the American Southwest. Revisiting Henry David Thoreau’s statement, “In Wildness is the preservation of the World” foregrounds a discussion of wilderness. Thoreau sees wildness as an essential quality of both human and natural environments. Breaking down misconceptions of wilderness as pristine places free from human impact allows wildness to exist in industrial places. This move is key to understanding Cather’s version of environmental communities because it suggests that human environments and natural environments are all part of nature’s larger community. Re-evaluating ideas that view wilderness as antithetical to human environments with ideas that suggest wilderness is part of local environments begins a process toward identifying wildness in our everyday lives, a process Thoreau’s statement endorses and Cather’s fiction elucidates.

During Cather’s lifetime, ideas of wilderness were being defined primarily through the establishment of National Parks. In 1919, the United States Government formed the National
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Park Service, which had as its objective “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (An Act to Establish). Within this motto lies at least two destructive misunderstandings regarding wilderness: 1) the notion that nature does not change or evolve, and 2) the idea that there is untouched or undefiled land in the United States, disregarding the many inhabitants who had called that land home long before white colonization. In both misunderstandings, land becomes a fictional place instead of a realistic depiction. Cather addresses these misconceptions of wilderness in Archbishop through her portrayal of the Southwest as an environmental community that fosters and recognizes wildness within civilization.

The bulk of the imagery in Archbishop describes the landscape of the American Southwest; however, before Cather introduces her readers to the frontier, she sets up her discussion of wilderness by beginning the story in Rome to show the gap between common depictions of wilderness and its reality. Rome is the initial setting in the novel, establishing a comparison between the ancient, civilized city of Rome and the harsh, primitive region of the Southwest. The three Cardinals at a “villa in the Sabine hills, overlooking Rome” (Archbishop 3) are greeted by a missionary Bishop from the lake country of the United States. Rome had been cultivated and civilized for centuries. To the Cardinals, anything outside of their “potted orange and oleander trees” (Archbishop 3) was wild. The Bishop, however, has an intimate understanding of the wildness of the American frontier. He explains:

There are no wagon roads, no canals, no navigable rivers. Trade is carried on by means of pack-mules, over treacherous trails. The desert down there has a
peculiar horror; I do not mean thirst, nor Indian massacres, which are frequent. The very floor of the world is cracked open into countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand. Up and down these stony chasms the traveler and his mules clamber as best they can. It is impossible to go far in any direction without crossing them. (Archbishop 7)

Cather uses words such as treacherous, horror, and massacre to leave a formidable impression on the Cardinals that no civilized person could survive such a fierce, desolate, uncaring place. The rendering of the frontier only becomes more severe as the Bishop tells of the inhabitants, who are full of “savagery and ignorance” (Archbishop 8). The Bishop has not lived in the Southwest, and he continues to rely on common ideas of its savageness. Such descriptions present a landscape incapable of producing anything that might resemble civilization meaning that “civilized” landscape will produce “civilized” people and “primitive” landscape will produce “primitive” people. Cather introduces a fierce, uncontrollable wilderness that has the power to “drink up … youth and strength as it does the rain” (Archbishop 9). The landscape is alive; it has raw power. William Cronon labels these misconceptions of wilderness under two headings: “the sublime and the frontier” (72). Wilderness exemplified the sublime state of fear and dread, offering adventure and romance on the unknown frontier. For the city dwellers, wilderness was an outlet for experiencing primitive nature. For some, there was power in knowing that wildness was unconquered but waiting to be tamed by humans.

Relying on constructed ideas of wilderness ensures that the gap between natural and human environments will widen. One of the Cardinals responds to the Bishop’s depiction of the Indians in the Southwest by saying, “I see your redskins through Fennimore Cooper, and I like them so” (13). The Cardinal relies on fictionalized ideas of wilderness and of “wild” Indians,
which further enhances his misconceptions of frontier life. He has no desire to change his ideas; he enjoys the Romantic idea of American wilderness with its savage inhabitants. The tone of the “Prologue: At Rome” suggests Cather’s criticism of those who refuse to see wilderness for what it is. Cronon would agree with such an assessment that “to the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like” (81).

Many did not and do not bother to discover wilderness for themselves, but rather relied on fictional depictions of wilderness. The Cardinal is in such a situation; he refuses to entertain the idea that wilderness is anything other than its constructed description.

After the first scene in *Archbishop*, Cather suggests a different idea of wilderness, one that enables human and natural environments to thrive as part of a larger community. Some might argue that Cather is merely constructing her own version of wilderness; however, *Archbishop* offers hope in a human and natural community that espouses the preservation of the world through an honest portrayal of wilderness.

Cather counters all the Cardinal’s constructed ideas of nature through Father Latour and his experiences in the Southwest. An important part of Cather’s attempt to reorient misconceptions is her portrayal of Christianity’s negative role in Western development, which contradicts contemporary conclusions that Christian influence in the expansion of the American frontier is completely fueled by economic gain. Lynn White asserts that Christianity, particularly in its Western form, “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (189). Such an understanding of man and nature meant that nature only existed to serve humankind. Within this view, there would be no
ethical dilemma in consuming and exploiting land for further development and industrialization as long humans benefited. In fact, according to this line of thought, God’s will was fulfilled in the industrialization of the American landscape. Such belief in God’s will leaves little hope of redeeming Western Christianity from its anti-environment status. Cather, however, presents a different view of Western Christianity in *Archbishop*.

Cather infuses the development of wilderness with the hope of Christianity. She presents an environmental Father Latour who establishes a proper attitude toward Christian land stewardship. Through his experiences and personal characteristics, we see how nature and civilization can combine into a mutually beneficial, sustainable existence. He is not a perfect character, but he recognizes the need to balance human and natural environments. Cather does not hide her intentions for Father Latour. In her introductory description of him, he is seen interacting with the land, and he is observant. Although he notices that “the country in which he found himself was so featureless—or rather, that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike” (*Archbishop* 17) he sees “one juniper which differed in shape from the others. … Living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the Cross” (*Archbishop* 18). He recognizes the life force of nature, and he is willing to kneel “at the foot of the cruciform tree.” (*Archbishop* 18). Cather further comments that “his bowed head was not that of an ordinary man,—it was built for the seat of a fine intelligence” (*Archbishop* 19). He is an ennobled character from the beginning. He is alone in the wilderness, but he finds comfort and familiarity among its creations because he is open to seeing nature as more than “uniform red hills” (*Archbishop* 17). He does not see nature as something outside of his previous experiences; he simply works his new surroundings into his faith. He recognizes what Pam Kuhlken calls as Cather’s “redemptive quality” to land (368). He could be considered a type of St. Francis of
Assisi, because Father Latour “had a kind of courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing” (Archbishop 19). These ideal characteristics position Father Latour as a heroic environmental figure throughout the rest of the novel.

Father Latour represents a character who allows landscape to awaken his sensibilities and his understanding of self and community. His awareness appears throughout the novel in his descriptive images of landscape mixed with detailed ecological observations. Father Latour observes that every mesa was duplicated by a cloud mesa, like a reflection, which lay motionless above it or moved slowly up from behind it. These cloud formations seemed to be always there, however hot and blue the sky. Sometimes they were flat terraces, ledges of vapour; sometimes they were dome-shaped, or fantastic, like the tops of silvery pagodas, rising one about another, as if an oriental city lay directly behind the rock. The great tables of granite set down in an empty plain were inconceivable without their attendant clouds, which were a part of them, as the smoke is part of the censer, or the foam of the wave. (Archbishop 95)

His attention to detail and to natural patterns in his natural environment is characteristic of the vivid imagery throughout the novel. Father Latour watches the landscape, noticing the details and fluctuations of the land and sky. He is aware of the land and its inhabitants because he invests his time and energy in it. As he spends time with the landscape, he recognizes the constant change of nature, a recognition that is linked to the first misunderstanding of wilderness: its unchanging status. Father Latour allows himself to be tutored by the changing landscape. He does not superimpose ideas of wilderness on the frontier; instead, he consistently
observes the nature of the frontier determining its own story. On one expedition, as he scales a rocky cliff, he notices “a plant with big white blossoms like Easter lilies” (Archbishop 98). He stops to observe the plant and then he begins to classify it: “By its dark blue-green leaves, large and coarse-toothed, Father Latour recognized a species of the noxious datura. The size and luxuriance of these nightshades astonished him. They looked like great artificial plants, made of shining silk” (Archbishop 98). So, not only does he observe the essence of nature, but also its specificities. Father Latour wants to understand his surroundings on their terms, thereby establishing his sense of place on the frontier.

Father Latour is equally as observant and descriptive of the people he encounters as he is of the landscape he discovers. One evening in the home of Madame Olivares, Father Latour is caught watching the men at the party: “observing them thus in repose, in the act of reflection, [he] was thinking how each of these men not only had a story, but seemed to have become his story” (Archbishop 182). Such stories are much different from the constructed stories of the Cardinal. The people of the frontier are depicted as individuals with similar feelings and hopes to people in more “civilized” societies. Father Latour had learned to hear the real stories of the land and the people. For Father Latour, these stories became one story—the story of the Earth and its all-encompassing community. He had listened “to one of the oldest voices of the earth” (Archbishop 130) in the cave with Jacinto. His realization, that the individual stories (and his own story) were all part of one large story, heightened his awareness of place. His mission to create a community was fostered by his ability to recognize and hear the stories of the Earth.

Father Latour listens to the people and also to what their stories relate about their connection to landscape. His relationships with the native people redefine concepts of wilderness, disregarding the savage depiction of the Cardinal. Once, when Father Latour visited
Kit Carson, he was received by Señora Carson “with that quiet but unabashed hospitality which is a common grace in Mexican households” (*Archbishop* 153). In this scene we learn that wilderness, which had been called savage, had a “common grace.” Attributing grace to a wilderness area would seem to remove the wildness from it; however, Cather suggests a completely different idea of wilderness by depicting an inherited ancient grace that is antithetical to savageness. This move is linked to the second destructive misunderstanding of wilderness: the idea that there was untouched or undefiled land in the United States, disregarding the many inhabitants who had called that land home long before white colonization. The human quality of grace appears to be as ancient as the landscape, which shows a shift in thinking that redefines conceptions of savage primitivism by depicting a land rich with a history of civilization.

Redefining misconceptions about wilderness requires an acknowledgment that wilderness areas are not in their “original” condition. Supposing that true wilderness areas represent notions of primordial nature devalue the endurance of evolving natural environments. Cather’s depiction of wilderness values the intersections between human and natural histories, as seen in an episode between Father Latour and an old grandfather who “had shown [Father Latour] arrow-heads and corroded medals, and a sword hilt, evidently Spanish, that he had found in the earth near the water-head. This spot had been a refuge for humanity long before these Mexicans had come upon it. It was older than history” (*Archbishop* 31). The novel attests to the fact that the primitive, uninhabited land had actually been catalogued long before the Mexicans staked their claim. Part of accepting the idea that natural and human environments can co-exist relies on accurate renderings of the history of wilderness.

Cather establishes the history of the land by including the parallel history of its inhabitants, which emphasizes natural history as a part of human experience. In depicting a
village, she explains that “some subterranean stream found an outlet here” and “the result was grass and trees and flowers and human life; household order and hearths from which the smoke of burning piñon logs rose like incense to Heaven” (Archbishop 31). The description includes humans with trees and flowers, all in one large image, showing that the history of the region was part natural and part human, with no significant separation between the two. Cather diffuses the negative conception that primitive land grew primitive people; instead, she connects the people and the land in positive ways in an attempt to create a community with one history and one future.

The Cathedral Father Latour desires to build represents a community in which natural and human environments are interdependent. The narrator states that “Bishop Latour had one very keen worldly ambition; to build in Santa Fe a Cathedral which would be worthy of a setting naturally beautiful” (Archbishop 175). The Cathedral reverences the land and it reverences the people who inhabit it by bringing them together in one manifest object. Bishop Latour wanted a place that exemplifies the natural history of the land and where the inhabitants could join in a unified purpose. It has been said of Bishop Latour’s Cathedral that “the European tapestry of his life has been interwoven with the Navajo rug of the place, (Weidman 52)” which tapestry or rug would welcome all into his Cathedral. The structure is built up from the sacred earth into a vision of the new Southwest. Molny told Father Latour, “Setting is accident. Either a building is a part of a place, or it is not. Once that kinship is there, time will only make it stronger” (Archbishop 270). For Bishop Latour the Cathedral held a kinship to the land and to the people. Although it was Romanesque in architectural design, it was of the Southwest in heritage. It embodied the old while embracing the new. Bette S. Weidman says “The Cathedral, a work of art epitomizing the Archbishop’s life, is not presented in the book as an expression of colonialism, but as Latour
understands it, as a marriage of the skills and vision of the old world and the raw strength and beauty of the new” (54). Bishop Latour’s death scene depicts the realization of community within the Cathedral. Built up out of the Southwestern earth,

the Cathedral was full of people all day long, praying for him; nuns and old women, young men and girls, coming and going. …Some of the Tesuque Indians, who had been his country neighbors, came into Santa Fe and sat all day in the Archbishop’s court-yard listening for news of him; with them was Eusabio the Navajo. Fructosa and Tranquilio, his old servants, were with the supplicants in the Cathedral. (Archbishop 296)

Under the shelter of Cathedral, the varied cultures of the Southwest community came to honor his legacy. They gathered within the walls constructed from of the earth. Through his willingness to recognize wilderness as more than a savage frontier, Bishop Latour helped establish a community that respected and preserved the natural landscape in a reflection of human history. Cather ultimately reorients the reader’s ideas of wilderness through Bishop Latour’s Cathedral, which represents human and natural environments blending for the sake of community.

Within Cather scholarship Archbishop has often been examined in terms of landscape by categorizing Willa Cather as a regional or travel writer; however, this study suggests that her evaluation of ideas of wilderness and environmental communities in Archbishop clearly mark it as one of Cather’s strongest examples of nature writing. She accentuates the role of natural environments in sustainable communities. Glen Love believes that Cather “never ignores the primal undercurrent, the wild land that kicks things to pieces, while it may also yield the pastoral farms of Alexandra and Antonia” (235). Perhaps part of Cather’s legacy to the environmental discourse is suggested by her version of nature’s voice: “I am here still, at the bottom of things,
warming the roots of life; you cannot starve me nor tame me nor thwart me; I made the world, I
rule it, I am its destiny” (*Kingdom* 95). A destiny imbued with ideas of the interconnectedness of
human and natural environments.
Conclusion

Although the 2003 volume of Cather Studies did not include an essay dedicated to parallels between the writings of Willa Cather and Henry David Thoreau, the collection of essays discussing Cather’s ecological imagination opened doors for reading Cather in such a light. Cather’s fiction depends on landscape imagery—an element of her writing that deserves further attention. Contemporary ecocritical discussions have facilitated green readings of Cather’s fiction by focusing on the land Cather depicts. Examining her fiction for its environmental implications suggests Cather’s modern environmental sensibilities. She uses awakening imagery to propel readers into larger discussions about wilderness and environmental communities, discussions taken up by nature writers and environmentalists after her. This study further recognizes Cather’s ecological contribution to the canon of American literary studies.

Viewing Cather’s ecological writing through a Thoreauvian lens provides another perspective to current ecocritical readings of her. In his recent book, Lawrence Buell suggests that “right now, as I see it, environmental criticism is in the tense but enviable position of being a wide-open movement still sorting out its premises and its powers” (Future 28). In application, environmental literary criticism opens wide traditional readings of American literature to explore their greenness. Revisiting Willa Cather’s fiction in terms of Thoreauvian parallels is not meant to revolutionize Cather or Thoreau scholarship, but to show the fluidity of American thought while delineating common tensions and challenges found in discussions about landscape. Environmental criticism facilitates an unleashing of the impact and legacy of Cather’s fiction, even more than fifty years after her death.

I began this entire project with Thoreau. I wanted to know why so many people continue to read and reread his writings. Thoreau’s influence is more far reaching than his mixing of
scientific observation and descriptive imagery. His life and his writing reveal the beginnings of established nature writing in the United States. He is a point of reference for defining American ideas of nature. For me, and for many others, his writings awakened my own appreciation of nature. His writing continues to introduce the wildness of nature to readers everywhere.

Cather went about introducing nature in a different, but still significant, way than Thoreau. She was working from similar principles, but she uses those principles to teach how human and natural histories are part of a larger community. She places nature in with other social structures to show how it can provide transcendental moments in daily life. Transcendence operates in different ways throughout her fiction. She depicts the power of landscape to elicit music and art in *The Song of the Lark*. She discusses the reality of modern industry and land preservation in *My Ántonia*. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* imparts Cather’s strongest plea for recognizing landscape as an integral part of American community. Analyzing Cather’s ecological imagination demonstrates how Cather wrote fiction that tapped into the lives of Americans during her day and attests to her understanding of the character of the United States. She deduced many of the ecological and social tensions that had been raging since Thoreau’s time and before, battles we continue to face.

I came to Cather’s fiction colored by my own shade of green. I had read *Death Comes for the Archbishop* long before I knew anything about ecocriticism, but I remember being awed by her vivid descriptions of natural environments. I associated Cather with other nature writers I had read. When I first discovered the Cather Studies volume about Cather’s ecological imagination I started to reread her fiction with more serious attention to her use of landscape. As I merged my findings with current discussions in ecocriticism, I was surprised that her fiction fits so well within the genre of nature writing. Part of her comfortable fit comes from the openness of
ecocritical readings. For an author who has been thoroughly examined for her attention to place and landscape, she well deserves her place within the genre of nature writing.

A result of Thoreau’s project is the preservation of Walden Pond. Its preservation promotes the environmental ideas he espoused. In a similar way, Cather’s depictions of the Southwest have helped preserve a sense of community in Santa Fe. In the spring of 2005 I attended Easter Mass in the Cathedral of Santa Fe. The art of the building and the service performed were a blending of English and Spanish cultures. The heritage of community Cather emphasized in *Archbishop* is place is still evident in the Cathedral, evidencing the potential of an environmental community where landscape, history, and progress work together.

Reading Cather as a nature writer who recognized similar environmental issues as Thoreau forces critics to broaden the canon of American nature writing. Such a reading also expands previous ideas of the form and style of nature writing.
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