'Willa Cather’s ‘River of Silver Sound’: Woman as Ecosystem in The Song of the Lark

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Willa Cather loved the Southwest. The landscapes and cultural history of the area held a prominent place in both her fiction and in her own creative consciousness. As Judith Fryer points out, after Cather visited New Mexico and Arizona in 1912, she became so enamored with the region that she returned many times over the following decade (41). During this period Cather published a novel heavily inspired by her affection for the Southwestern landscape—The Song of the Lark. This novel follows Thea Kronborg from her childhood in the fictional rural town of Moonstone, Colorado, through an artistic awakening in an Arizona canyon, and to eventual fame as an acclaimed opera singer. Thea represents an artistically successful, independent woman, and she does so by developing a deep, sensual connection to the Southwest. In particular, Thea’s experiences in fictional Panther Canyon—based on Walnut Canyon near Flagstaff—do much to transform her into a powerful natural artistic force. Fryer explains that Cather’s aesthetic sense was profoundly influenced by the “vast deserts and distant mountain ranges [and she] concentrates, especially in her novels of the Southwest [on] paring down language so that words exist as objects—physical things implying spiritual connectedness—as she searches for a form simple and pure enough to express her desire, to contain it exactly” (29). The Song of the Lark reveals Cather’s desire to contain and control the essence of artistic purity and leads her to create a character who develops, through deep association with a canyon ecosystem, into a vessel of natural artistic power.

The Southwestern landscapes described in The Song of the Lark, especially Panther Canyon, stand out from the rest of the narrative, enticing the reader to look for echoes of these places long after Thea leaves them behind. As Lawrence Buell states, “environmental interpretation requires us to rethink our assumptions about the nature of representation, reference, metaphor, characterization, personae, and canonicity” (2), and Cather’s novels encourage such ecocritical thinking. Laura Winters asserts that Cather “uses landscape not merely as a backdrop against which her characters struggle but also as a dynamic presence and a character in her fiction” (3). Susan J. Rosowski writes, “Cather created a landscape that mirrors Thea’s developing consciousness” (“Female” 234) and then argues that Thea progressively “becomes aware of a larger world, one metaphorically linked with the female sexuality that underlies a woman’s creative passion” (235). Ann Moseley, in an excellent study of the relationship between Thea’s artistic development and
Walnut Canyon’s influence on Cather, asserts that “Cather’s creative voice in *The Song of the Lark*, like that of Thea’s, draws on both cultural and natural sources in Walnut Canyon to express artistic ideas in inviolable living forms” (233). As these critics point out, Cather’s landscapes, especially Panther Canyon, play an active role in influencing Thea’s artistic abilities and identity.

In significant ways Panther Canyon stays with Thea long after she leaves Arizona. The canyon ecosystem becomes part of her identity, and this deep alteration of her humanity goes beyond simple artistic influence to Cather’s powerful physical hybridization of Thea with that Southwestern canyon. Just as Cather refashions the conventional role of the woman, so does she redefine the American landscape into a concept both artistic and sexual. With this said, neither Cather’s new metaphorical landscape nor its artistic function are necessarily feminine constructs. Cather transforms the customary metaphor of a feminine landscape into a multi-gendered—even genderless—natural and artistic entity, an entity that not only mirrors the perceptions of the characters, but that merges with the characters themselves.  

Cather employs a number of elements that illustrate Thea’s complex relationship with the Southwestern environment, an environment that removes gendered and even human constructs from her identity. During this removal, Thea’s identity progresses from female to male and ultimately to that of a canyon ecosystem. First, during her visit to Panther Canyon, a chameleonic interplay exists between Thea and the canyon—an interaction that furthers Thea’s self-discovery and artistic development yet sacrifices her individuality. Second, in what might be considered reverse anthropomorphism or ecomorphism, Cather repeatedly likens Thea to plants and animals, breaking her character free of boundaries imposed by both gendered and human representation. Finally, as the novel progresses, Thea takes on the characteristics of the Southwestern environment itself; she becomes a natural artistic resource, the price of which is her capacity to love those who help her gain artistic success.

The fourth part of *The Song of the Lark*, entitled “The Ancient People,” attracts much discussion about its relationship to Thea’s artistic and personal development. For the most part, this criticism centers on Thea’s connection with the natural and spiritual environment of Panther Canyon, arguing that Thea experiences a mix of sexual maturation, figurative childrearing (through the spirits of the long dead Native Americans) and ultimately an artistic rebirth or epiphany.  

Ellen Moers, one of the first to study the sexual significance of the landscape in *The Song of the Lark*, writes that “[t]he whole Panther Canyon section of the novel...is concerned with female self-assertion in terms of landscape” (258). This is a logical conclusion after reading passages such as Cather’s oft-quoted description of Panther Canyon:
It was accessible only at its head. The Canyon walls, for the first two hundred feet below the surface, were perpendicular cliffs, striped with even-running strata of rock. From there on to the bottom the sides were less abrupt, were shelving, and lightly fringed with pinions and dwarf cedars. The effect was that of a gentler Canyon within a wilder one. The Dead city lay at the point where the perpendicular outer wall ceased and the V-shaped inner gorge began. (267)

Critics tend to center on Cather’s powerful initial portrait of the canyon as female genitalia instead of other descriptions that complicate Moers’ view that “this plainly sexual landscape [represents] solitary, feminine assertion” (259). A masculine element also permeates Panther Canyon demonstrating that the landscape does more than mirror Thea’s development.

Cather’s canyon ecosystem does not simply reflect Thea’s sexual and artistic maturation; it pulls these changes into itself. For example, almost immediately after Thea’s “ritualistic” bathing-induced epiphany in the canyon’s streambed (273), the environment begins to display masculine elements. Thea’s old self is also her feminine self, and to develop as an artist, she must dispense with her socially constructed female identity. After Thea ritualistically washes her female self away, the environment changes. Both Thea and the canyon ecosystem become more masculine. The first masculine change in the canyon is the arrival of Thea’s friend / lover, Fred Ottenburg. The two spend their time exploring the area and playing childhood games. Yet Thea undergoes a change, and upon walking into the canyon, Henry Biltmer, the caretaker of the land “shaded his eyes with his hand. There on the promontory, against the cream-colored cliff, were two figures nimbly moving in the light, both slender and agile, entirely absorbed in their game. They looked like two boys” (278; emphasis added). Biltmer actually sees Fred and Thea, but as the description indicates, Thea appears masculine. As Thea’s identity shifts, Panther Canyon takes on characteristics simultaneously masculine and elderly:

The voice of the stream at the bottom of the gorge was hollow and threatening, much louder and deeper than it ever was by day—another voice altogether. The sullenness of the place seemed to say that the world could get on very well without people, red or white; that under the human world there was a geological world, conducting its silent immense operations which were indifferent to man.... [T]his Canyon seemed to waken like an old man, with rheum and stiffness in the joints, with heaviness, and a dull, malignant mind. (281; emphasis added)

Just as the earlier descriptions of Panther Canyon invoke Thea’s feminine identity, the natural surroundings incorporate her masculine self. In
accomplishing this, the landscape takes on a rare literary incarnation, that of a male. Thea’s masculine layer of identity, recognized earlier by Biltmer, becomes superimposed upon the surroundings. Significantly, Cather’s masculine landscape is not just male but also repulsive. The image of the “old man, with rheum and stiffness in the joints, with heaviness, and a dull, malignant mind” (281) comes from within Thea and pours out into the surrounding Panther Canyon ecosystem. By portraying the masculine environment in unappealing terms, Cather makes a statement about the need for women to find new creative selves, identities far removed from the influence of the male world.

Cather’s portrayal of Thea becomes an object lesson in female creativity and in some ways breaks with literary convention. Much of the scholarship dealing with The Song of the Lark focuses on what critics such as Marilyn A. Carlson Aronson see as Cather’s portrayal of “strong heroines or earth-goddesses, who are vibrant pioneers, adept and capable of survival” (5). Helen Fiddyment Levy argues that “Cather creates the Earth-Goddess, who represents the elemental creative force of female biological creativity—the heroine of The Song of the Lark bears the name ‘Thea’ lest the reader miss the author’s intent!” (65). Clearly Thea Kronborg embodies the concept of the strong female who vows to “grab a few things” in life (Cather 198), but both the designation of Thea as an “Earth-Goddess,” and Levy’s interpretation of the character’s name, pose problems. The Greek word Thea does mean goddess, and Cather certainly connects Thea with the natural world, but calling her an “earth-goddess” discounts her relationship with her mother. In Greek mythology, the goddess Theia is not associated with the Earth. The goddess Gaea, the mythical Theia’s mother, is the deity most commonly associated with the role of earth-goddess (Littleton 139). In a book that questions the traditional role of the woman, it seems more likely that Cather chooses not to locate Thea within the commonplace position of earth-goddess and names her heroine carefully to reflect the movement of a woman away from a traditional romanticized identification with the land. Thea’s apparent apathy concerning marriage and childbirth also calls into question her role as earth-goddess because such figures typically embody the concept of fertility. In The Song of the Lark, Thea’s mother, who bears seven children and believes “that the size of every family was decided by heaven” (11), more ably represents divine fertility. While the childless Thea does not fill the role of an earth-goddess, her connection to the Southwestern environment functions as a crucial factor in her artistic development and success.

A significant stage in this development, Thea’s gendered metamorphosis, provides insight into Cather’s view of female identity. Rosowski points out that when Cather attended the University of Nebraska one of her friends was F. E. Clements, a man who would, through his study with
Nebraska's famed ecologist Charles E. Bessey, create the revolutionary theory of ecological succession ("Ecology" 37). Clements proposed that ecosystems progress through a series of interrelated phases until they approach a mature state called a climax ecosystem. Rosowski connects Cather's thinking with such ecological principles: "It is not only that Cather observed nature closely, however, nor is it solely that she wrote of place by principles of ecology; botanical and ecological principles helped shape Cather's very idea of art" ("Ecology" 42). Because *The Song of the Lark* serves as a study of the artist and her aesthetic beliefs, it is unsurprising that Cather's ecological artistic framework emerges in Thea's development. While not truly analogous to Clements' theory of ecological succession, Cather's method of emptying Thea of social constructs furthers the idea of a natural world as a dynamic place, and for Cather, a place in which humans change along with the ecosystem.

Emptied of her feminine self, Thea's underlying masculinity emerges. This process represents the beginning of Cather's artistic theory of succession, a theory that removes rather than accumulates layers. More stages of Thea's succession soon arise, but for a moment her masculine identity appears on the surface. Fred and Thea play conventionally masculine games; they throw rocks, and Fred comments to himself, "there weren't many girls who could show a line like that from the toe to the thigh, from the shoulder to the tip of the outstretched hand" (278). Fred perceives Thea's form as masculine, but he still sees her as a "girl." He immediately demonstrates this by stealing an unexpected and awkward kiss:

He slipped his arm about her. "If you look as pretty as that—"
He bent his head and kissed her. Thea was startled, gave him an angry push, drove at him with her free hand in a manner quite hostile. Fred was on his mettle in an instant. He pinned her arms down and kissed her resolutely.

When he released her, she turned away and spoke over her shoulder. "That was mean of you, but I suppose I deserved what I got."

"I should say you did deserve it," Fred panted, "turning savage on me like that! ...[Y]ou looked as if you'd like to murder me. (279)

Ironically, Fred—who forces himself upon Thea then comes away panting—accuses her of acting like a "savage." This accusation, which suggests male hypocrisy, serves as a reminder of the context of Thea's metamorphosis from a feminine to a masculine state. Fred acknowledges Thea's boy-like form and kisses her, attempting to reposition her within a socially accepted female role, but by this point she has shed much of her conventional gender identification. Thea herself seems perplexed at her inability to throw rocks as far as Fred and remains determined to match his physical ability. Through Fred and Thea's strained kiss, Cather hints...
at the proliferation of socially accepted, yet often undesirable, roles for women. By forcefully kissing Thea, Fred unsuccessfully attempts to reorder the social dynamic to that of the typical, male-dominated norm, but as evidenced by the canyon ecosystem, things are no longer that simple.

By momentarily describing the Panther Canyon ecosystem in terms of the male body and voice, Cather defies one of the more established literary conventions, that of representing the landscape as female, as Mother Earth. In examining literary portrayals of the landscape, Annette Kolodny observes that in much American literature the landscape functions as a submissive female entity, the object of male desire and exploitation (4). Cather breaks with convention by creating a landscape that does not so much reflect the feminine and masculine self of Thea as absorb these portions of her identity. The resulting absorption creates a situation in which Thea’s persona loses gendered and human identities so that she sees the former layers of her identity in the landscape she loves. As Mary Lawlor argues, Cather’s landscapes function as “a record for human subjects of their own histories” (167). The Southwestern ecosystem of *The Song of the Lark* holds true to Lawlor’s reading because the history of Thea’s identity and artistic development is written in the environment of the canyon. From this perspective, analogies representing Cather’s landscapes as reflexive environments do not completely work, because in the Panther Canyon ecosystem Thea sees not what she is or what she gains but what she loses as her development progresses. Even Fryer’s explanation, that “[i]n *The Song of the Lark*, the enclosed felicitous space makes possible the in-gathering of the creative person” (34), assumes that Thea accumulates her artistic development through her experiences at Panther Canyon. Yet passages such as this suggest the opposite in terms of Thea’s artistic epiphanies:

> 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.... [I]n singing, one made a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream of life in a scale of natural intervals. (273)

Thea realizes that to become an artist, one who can catch “the stream of life” (273), she must become a vessel, an empty sheath to contain the artistic element. For Thea, her experience at Panther Canyon is not one of filling the self but of emptying it, of cleansing her identity and leaving room only for art. Thea hollows herself, pouring out both the feminine and masculine selves that make up so much of her creative identity.

Thea’s cleansing of her identity results in her intense artistic focus, and though she may appear “savage” to Fred at certain points, she is not, as John Ditsky claims, “[b]eset by reminders of her region’s relatively...
recent pioneer past, and by the threat of reversion to wildness or savagery" (393). Panther Canyon’s past, as evidenced by the beautiful and sophisticated Native American pottery that Thea finds, is far from a place of “savagery.” As for any threat of “reversion,” Thea instead projects the opposite. She appears unthreatened and unaware of any prospect of reverting to some savage state. The perception that she reverts rather than advances belongs only to Fred. After Fred’s ill-received kiss at the canyon, he labels her as “savage” (Cather 279), but a better definition of Thea’s transformation and subsequent behavior is what I call an ecomorphic hybrid. An ecomorphic hybrid is a character whose identity figuratively combines with that of the natural world, resulting in a suprahuman character who displays abnormal human abilities or characteristics that arise from this connection to the ecosystem. In Thea’s case, she casts off gender roles to reveal herself as a vigorous artistic force of nature. To become this force, this artistic vessel, Thea must lose not only her gendered identity but also her human one. Critics tend to overlook Thea’s ecomorphism in favor of ending their discussions with her gender roles. Rosowski, for example, writes that “previously separated male and female imagery, now combined as opposites working together, anticipate the final stage of Cather’s metaphor of imaginative growth, that of androgyny” (“Female” 237). Though Thea’s gender roles are important, her status as a member of humanity may overshadow the gendered aspect of her identity. Cather’s overall plan for Thea’s artistic development rests upon her systematic ecomorphism, not only the loss of gender, but on the removal of her basic human categorization. This process of ecomorphism is linked with the previously mentioned portrayal of the canyon ecosystem as an old man. In writing that “the sullenness of the place seemed to say that the world could get on very well without people, red or white; that under the human world there was a geological world, conducting its silent immense operations which were indifferent to man” (281), Cather suggests that a geological realm exists beneath the human one. Thus, the removal of gender in Thea’s identity acts as only one phase of the process. Once Thea’s socially constructed layers of identity fall away, she becomes a part of the canyon, a Southwestern ecosystem. For the remainder of the book Thea remains somewhat aloof and certainly “indifferent to man” (281). With her human identity removed, Thea—like the Native American pottery she finds at the canyon—becomes a perfect artistic vessel, simultaneously empty and receptive to the stream of life. Near the end of the novel Fred asks the now famous Thea: “You’re as much at home on the stage as you were down in Panther Canyon. Didn’t you get some of your ideas down there?” to which she replies, “Oh, yes! Out of the rocks, out of the dead people” (397). Thea gets her ideas from the artistic significance of “rocks” (the Southwestern environment) and “dead
people” (the combined spiritual effect of dead Native Americans and their pottery), coupled with a lack of social structure to bind her in an artificial gender role.

Only after Thea discards her gendered constructs does she move to the next stage of transformation, becoming an animal. She shares the characteristics, and in some ways the powers, of the canyon ecosystem, and Cather likens Thea to a number of animals throughout the book to further enhance this environmental power. These animal associations do not necessarily represent a state inferior to humanity. Thea in no way reverts to a less civilized state; her experiences in nature help her transcend gender identities to realize her artistic potential. To become a great singer, Thea must develop her suprahuman, or ecomorphic, voice. In short, Thea becomes something other than human, not less than human. These connections with the animal world occur throughout the book and often take the form of similes to common Southwestern animals such as lizards, coyotes, deer, and other creatures. For example, in Cather’s preface to the novel, she warns readers not to “take it for granted that the ‘lark song’ refers to the vocal accomplishments of the heroine, which is altogether a mistake. Her song was not of the skylark order” (xxxi). Instead, Cather connects Thea to a particular bird of prey, and near the end of her stay in Panther Canyon, a drowsy Thea notices that an eagle, tawny and of great size, sailed over the cleft in which she lay, across the arch of the sky. He dropped for a moment into the gulf between the walls, then wheeled, and mounted until his plumage was so steeped in light that he looked like a golden bird. He swept on, following the course of the Canyon a little way and then disappearing beyond the rim. Thea sprang to her feet... O eagle of eagles! Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! From a cleft in the heart of the world she saluted it. (287-88)

Cather links her to the eagle, as well as to other animals throughout the novel, but Thea’s exact relationship with these animals, both in contact and in comparison, remains ambiguous. While the eagle might represent Thea’s newfound artistic and social freedom, this view ignores the involved process of ecomorphism she undergoes. In writing that the eagle “sailed over the cleft in which she lay” (287), Cather avoids directly associating Thea with the action of the bird. Looking up from below, Thea serves as a spectator rather than as a participant in the eagle’s freedom. After all, Thea does not obtain freedom from her ecomorphic status, nor does her artistic success act as a correlative to the flying of the eagle. Thea’s position, as shown in the passage, is that of the ecosystem itself. She occupies “a cleft in the heart of the world” and exists on a dissimilar yet combined plane with the eagle and other animals (288).
Animals sometimes function as connectors between Thea and the ecosystem rather than to the animals themselves. During one of the many significant moments of her stay at Panther Canyon, Thea realizes that "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" (270). In this passage, Cather compares Thea to two different creatures, the lizard and the cicada. Cather connects Thea to these animals to explain her even basic relationship with, or identity as, the Southwestern ecosystem. Through comparison with the lizard she becomes a color, and through the cicadas she becomes the repetition of a sound. Cather breaks Thea down into the basic components of existence, and this stripping of humanity followed by fragmentation of color and sound reveals the way that Cather transforms Thea into an ecosystem, rather than a fertile earth-goddess.

The landscape of Thea does not end with animals. Plants also occupy an important place in Cather's design:

The faculty of observation was never highly developed in Thea Kronborg. A great deal escaped her eye as she passed through the world. But the things which were for her, she saw; she experienced them physically and remembered them as if they had once been a part of herself...when she thought of the moonflowers that grew over Mrs. Tellamantez's door, it was as if she had been that vine and had opened up in white flowers every night. (270; emphasis added)

As this passage demonstrates, Thea does not exhibit keen observational skills, but she feels a deep connection with those things that seem made for her to appreciate, "as if they had once been a part of herself" (270). Thea, as an ecosystem, incorporates her surrounding elements making them part of her self, such as becoming the moonflower vine above Mrs. Tellamantez' door. Significantly, this passage hints at Thea's ecomorphic status during her childhood in Colorado, well before her visit to, and subsequent epiphany associated with, Panther Canyon. Her experiences during "The Ancient People" part of the novel do more to strip away conflicting identities, both gendered and human, than to infuse her with a new identity.

Immediately after departing Flagstaff by train, Fred notices distinct aspects of Thea that resemble a landscape: "He looked at her shining eyes, her parted lips, her chin a little lifted. It was as if they were coloured by a sunrise he could not see" (295). Thea is often associated with glowing or light in the novel, but in this instance the light takes on the semblance of a sunrise over the topography of "parted lips" and a "lifted" chin. Thea's topography and animalistic connections surface again later in the novel as she sings the part of Elsa von Brahant in Lohengrin. Dr. Archie
sits in the audience amazed at her talent; he likens his response to that of an inexperienced hunter:

There was a flutter of white at the back of the stage, and women began to come in: two, four, six, eight, but not the right one. It flashed across him that this was something like buck-fever, the paralyzing moment that comes upon a man when his first elk looks at him through the bushes, under its great antlers; the moment when a man's mind is so full of shooting that he forgets the gun in his hand until the buck is gone. (358)

Again Cather compares Thea to an animal and, like the eagle, a male animal. The buck analogy demonstrates Thea's retention of both the non-gendered and non-human status she acquired at Panther Canyon.

Lest one simply associate Thea with plants and animals, Cather highlights her character's complicated ecomorphic status in this same scene when Dr. Archie, upon first hearing her sing, equates the experience to "dreaming upon a river of silver sound" (359). This description echoes the "voice of the stream" that Thea encounters in Panther Canyon (281), and like Fred, Archie also notices her "sunrise smile" (359). Even in the opera house, she is a complete ecosystem, composed of a river, topography, a sunrise, plants, and animals. After Thea finishes singing, Archie notices that her face is "drawn and deeply lined" (361). It appears, at least to Archie, that the total exertion of singing, the great artistic outpouring from the "river of silver sound," temporarily erodes Thea's landscape. Archie comments to himself that she looks pale and much older. Panther Canyon taught Thea to become a vessel, and Archie catches her at the exact moment of emptiness.

Just as she did in Panther Canyon, Thea replenishes herself, refills the artistic vessel through ritualistic bathing. The morning after singing, she escapes to the "refuge" of the bathroom, sheds her nightgown and becomes "a natural creature again" (370). Like the Southwestern ecosystem of Panther Canyon, Thea's physical topography becomes an element of solace for her: "Her own body was always a cheering sight to her. When she was careworn, when her mind felt old and tired, the freshness of her physical self, her long, firm lines, the smoothness of her skin, reassured her" (370). After visiting Thea again, Dr. Archie notices the change the bath makes in her: "[T]he chin was as lovely as ever, the cheeks were as smooth. All the lines of last night had disappeared" (371). Thea also projects her Southwestern landscape beauty into her hotel room. Like a grassland after a rain, Thea is host to blossomings: "The rooms, Archie noticed, full of last night's flowers, were furnished in light colours" (371). Thea's rain, her artistic outpouring, results in congratulatory flowers. Her topography, replenished by ritualized bathing, once again regains its beauty but a beauty constantly eroded by her singing.
Cather’s image of Thea’s voice as a “river of silver sound” (359) also contains other, more exploitative, implications. Throughout the novel men attempt to mine for the silver in Thea’s voice, hoping to extract a profit from her talent and work. While on her way to finish Sieglinde for an ailing singer, Thea’s “face, in the white light, looked as bleak as a stone quarry” (379). Cather’s equation of Thea to a stone quarry introduces the idea that Thea occupies the status of an exploitable natural resource. At the beginning of the fifth part of the book, “Dr. Archie’s Venture,” Thea telegraphs Archie asking for money to finance her trip to study voice in Germany. He thinks nothing of borrowing against his stock in the San Felipe Silver Mine for the chance to invest in Thea, telling himself, “that sort of thing is more interesting than mines and making your daily bread. It’s worth paying out to be in on it—for a fellow like me. And when it’s Thea—oh I back her!” (313). Thus Cather equates Thea, with her “silver” voice, to a San Felipe silver mine, a Southwestern environment to be invested in, or exploited, depending upon the interpretation. Jealous of Archie’s status as Thea’s benefactor, Fred also wishes to invest in Thea: “I thought you’d perhaps let me go in on the business end of it and invest along with you. You’d put in your talent and ambition and hard work, and I’d put in the money [and] when the thing panned out big, we could share together” (317). This “panning” of Thea reveals that she is now a natural resource, a mine of talent for male investment.

Cather completes Thea’s ecomorphic hybridization by the sixth part entitled “Kronborg,” but her status as a commodity runs throughout the book and is not solely the result of her experiences at Panther Canyon. After describing Nordquist’s attempt to buy a divorce from his wife so that he and Thea might marry, Thea comments on her early debt to another investor: “I began the world on six hundred dollars, and it was the price of a man’s life. Ray Kennedy had worked hard and been sober and denied himself, and when he died he had six hundred dollars to show for it. I always measure things by that six hundred dollars, just as I measure high buildings by the Moonstone standpipe” (393). Investment-minded men weave throughout Thea’s life. Harsanyi, the music teacher who discovers the operatic potential of Thea’s remarkable voice, reduces her to just her throat. In a sexually charged analogy, he remarks that “[a] healthy and powerful organ had found its own method” of singing (172). Even Fred, whose interest in Thea goes well beyond her singing ability, focuses on this single physical portion of her body: “Do you know,” he said confidentially, “I believe I’m more in earnest about all this than you are.” / “All about what?” / “All you’ve got in your throat there” (248). In such passages, Cather removes Thea from the role of a woman, and even a whole person, to express the masculine tendency to objectify and even dissect women, especially talented ones who become the object of investment.
Thea, the rich natural resource, takes her tornadic power onto the stage for her own benefit. Rather than a resource to be exploited by men, Thea positions herself so that she benefits from her talent and work. Cather’s removal of Thea’s human status does not demean or lessen her character, emotions, or artistic success. *The Song of the Lark* demonstrates the sacrifices women make to succeed, and Thea develops into an artist not by adding skill or maturity but by shedding socially constructed gender and human expectations that hinder artistic potential. An understanding of Thea’s ecomorphic hybridization exposes Cather’s broader views of both the artistic significance of the Southwestern environment and the composition of female artistic identity.

**Notes**

1. I wish to thank Linda Leavell and Eric Gary Anderson whose comments strengthened this essay.
2. For discussions of the landscape-as-woman metaphor see Annette Kolodny and Catrin Gersdorf.
3. See David Stouck for a discussion of Cather and American Indians.
4. Fred eventually does become Thea’s husband, but Cather only mentions this briefly in the epilogue of the novel. This marginalization further highlights Thea’s apathy toward marriage.
5. For a history of ecological thought, including the contributions of Charles E. Bessey and F. E. Clements, see Donald Worster.

**Works Cited**


