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Woman, Nature, and Observer in  
*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *To the Lighthouse*:  
An Ecofeminist Approach

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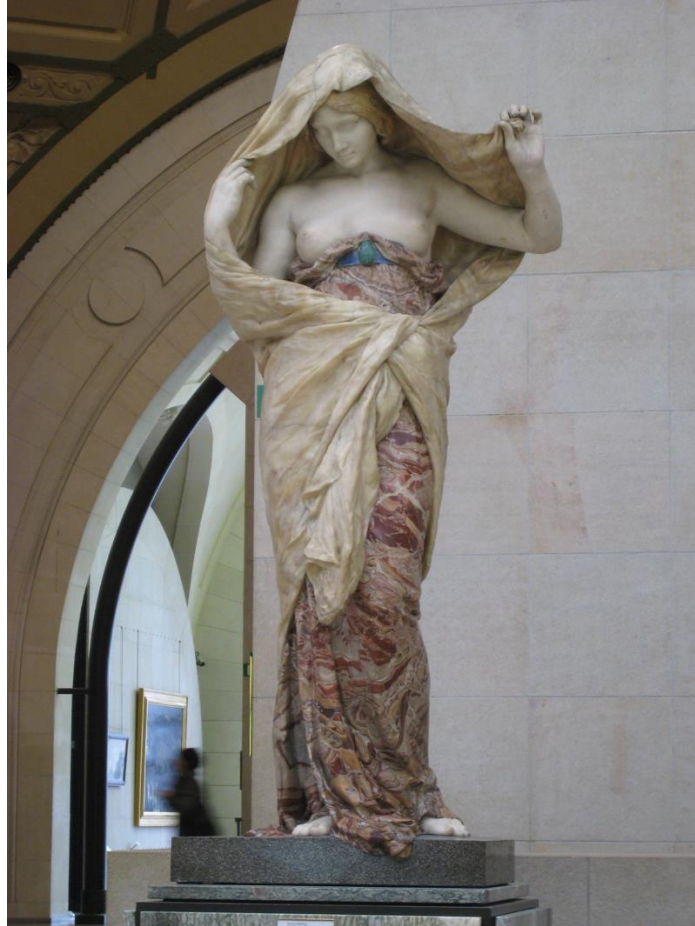
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*Nature Unveiling Herself Before Science*, 1899  
by Louis-Ernest Barrias, at Musée d'Orsay<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Photograph by Emilee Rader, 2008.

# Woman, Nature, and Observer in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *To the Lighthouse*: An Ecofeminist Approach

## I. Introduction

When I began this project, I did not know where it would actually lead me, other than to a mark of distinction on my degree, a stack of papers to which I could point while applying to graduate school. But it has become more than the culmination of my academic career. In these pages, I have been able to sort through the polluted political climate that arose in a misogynistic presidential campaign and the environmental enigma that is impossible to ignore as I sit writing these words in sweltering mid-March sunshine. I began reading for this project the same summer that I spent researching Duke University's own relationship to women's empowerment, and I found myself considering all my subsequent coursework through a feminist lens. Naturally, then, when I stumbled upon the branch of ecocriticism entitled ecofeminism, I knew the approach my personal and academic experienced had prepared me to take in my critical analysis of some of my best-loved literature.

When I first started planning this project, I anticipated some sort of application of ecocriticism to Victorian literature. For their evocation of society at a point of rapid reinvention, I had always been attracted to late nineteenth-century novels, and recent scholarship had placed them at the center of ecocritical interest. Ecofeminism combines feminist and ecocritical readings to advance the potential for this type of study. First, it requires a radical re-framing of perspective. As feminist criticism de-centralizes masculine authority, ecocriticism combats the hierarchy of human domain over the Earth, working in large scales of time and space. Further, by engaging in literary criticism with consequences outside of academia, this work has allowed me to reflect on the ways realist fiction shapes

both readers' performances of gender identity and their relations to the natural world. Most importantly, this approach demonstrates that active reading can be a form of activism. I will expand on this final point in my conclusion.

In the rest of this introduction, I will explain some of the basic terms necessary for reading with an ecofeminist approach and show why I chose *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>2</sup> and *To the Lighthouse*<sup>3</sup> to exemplify the potential for such reading in this project.

### **What is Ecofeminism?**

While Google can define ecofeminism in a single sentence, my research showed me that since the 1980s, ecofeminism has been employed by different scholars to widely varied ends. The scholarship I have studied all deals in some way with women and their relationship to the natural world, but ecofeminists themselves, even in journal issues devoted to the topic, resist any simple single definition. Glynis Carr echoes my conclusion in the opening pages of *Ecofeminism and Rhetoric*, stating frankly, "there is no single ecofeminism."<sup>4</sup> Ecofeminist scholars examine phenomena as diverse as gender discourse in conservation movements, lived experiences of women's relationships to nature, rhetorical and physical violence, and an intersectional approach to scientific reasoning<sup>5</sup>. Because the boundaries of academic ecofeminism are not clearly defined, I will clarify the ways in which I use this critical lens in my project.

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<sup>2</sup> All page notations from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in this thesis refer to: Hardy, Thomas, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> All page notations from *To the Lighthouse* in this thesis refer to: Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse* (Mariner Books, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Vakoch, Douglas A., ed. *Ecofeminism and Rhetoric : Critical Perspectives on Sex, Technology, and Discourse*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. Glynis Carr explains in the foreword that ecofeminism's variety of applications results from feminism's and environmental studies' interdisciplinary tendencies.

<sup>5</sup> Ropers-Huilman, Rebecca. "Editorial Introduction: Ecofeminism," 23.2 (2011).

The fundamental common aim of ecofeminist criticism is what interests me most: to deconstruct and reconstruct ideologies that have normalized the subjugation and exploitation of women and non-human nature. The stories we tell ourselves about women and nature have a material impact on how we live in the real world. For me, this speaks clearly to the value of ecofeminist criticism for literary analysis.

One does not have to look far to find connections between women and nature in the literary tradition. From the nature goddesses of Roman and Greek mythology to the sensual fruit in the *Song of Solomon*, we already recognize a tendency to associate woman with nature in symbolic characters as well as through descriptions of beauty, purity, and the erotic. Throughout literary history, we see the fertility of woman written in the fertility of landscape, Nature described in feminine pronouns, and natural deities arising in feminine forms. Literary discourse did not need ecofeminism to make those connections, but it did need a way to understand how those tropes can either empower or subjugate women and nature. In this project, I am concerned not only with the representation of women and nature in literature but also with narrative technique as it relates to those representations.

In the following chapters, I will discuss narration as a tool that mediates the portrayal of women and nature by subjecting both to the perspective of an observer. Realist fiction provides us with material to study this phenomenon in depth because of its intention to reflect reality. Accordingly, I argue that there are ecological stakes in narrative technique because the way we narrate fictional human relationships to nature reflects and influences actual human relationships with the environment. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, massive shifts were occurring in those relationships. This period also saw the end of one literary tradition (Victorian realism) and the start of another (modernist



experimentalism). I believe that the two are related, that transformations in narration techniques coincided with a consciousness of planetary change.

### **What is the Anthropocene?**

Geologists have deemed the Industrial Revolution the start of the Anthropocene, a period in Earth's history in which the most influential force of physical change is human activity. This concept is vital to ecocriticism because in order to comprehend the human relationship to nature, we must maintain the proper scale in which to consider its consequences.

Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf were writing in the context of Charles Darwin's evidence of deep time, that large-scale, 4.5 billion-year version of Earth's history that was incompatible with biblical interpretations of the relative span of human and natural existence. Astronomer Carl Sagan puts the earth's history into perspective with the comparison of a calendar: If the planet's 4.5 billion years were condensed into a single calendar year, beginning January 1, dinosaurs would appear mid-December and go extinct on Christmas Eve. Homo sapiens would not exist until December 31st at 11:59:59 p.m. All of human history, then, equates to less than one 31.5 millionth of Earth's lifetime.<sup>6</sup> This perspective, while discomfiting for a species as narcissistic as our own, is imperative to comprehending the drama of the impact we have had in our brief history. It makes us mortal, not just as individuals, but as a species, and it places the consequences of human activity in the context of a dominant rather than dominated planet.

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *To the Lighthouse* prove excellent pieces in which to situate this argument because they occupy the formative years of the Anthropocene and

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<sup>6</sup> Sagan, Carl. *The Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence* (Random House Publishing Group, 2012). Sagan explains what he calls the Cosmic Calendar in pgs. 13-17.

because of their relationship to each other, as examples of the shift from late Victorian to modernist techniques. In literary criticism, what interests me about these novels is not just what they say about the human-to-planet relationship, but how they say it. The two novels' different narrative techniques are as important to an ecofeminist reading as the stories about women and nature that they tell because they indicate vastly different methods of knowing humans' place as inhabitants of and influences on the planet.

### **Hardy, Woolf, and Scales of Anthropocene Proportion**

The two novels I have chosen, while relevant to this project for their timing and exemplification of different literary traditions, are especially useful for their rumination on the human relationship to the natural. Both authors use conceptual tools only newly available in the Anthropocene as major fixtures in their stories.

Hardy encourages his reader to think on large scales of time and consequence, placing Tess's concerns into a larger context. Early in the novel, he explicitly references a larger perspective than the immediate fate of our protagonist: "The mute procession past her shoulders of trees and hedges became attached to fantastic scenes outside reality and the occasional heave of wind became the sigh of some immense sad soul, conterminous with the universe in space, and with history in time."<sup>7</sup> Hardy weaves here a romanticist poeticizing of nature and punctuates it with a powerful allusion to deep space and time, placing the environment in their same plane. Something much larger, unfathomably larger than Tess is in play here, yet Hardy fastens her to it.

My analysis of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* provides a powerful contrast to Hardy's mode of representation in *Tess*, even though both authors deal with similar themes. Woolf

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<sup>7</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 41.

complicates scales of time by de-centralizing the human experience in her well-studied section entitled “Time Passes.” Her characters think about human beings in terms of species, and their connection to the natural world is more often self-acknowledged than imposed by an external observer. Unsurprisingly, Woolf’s work has already gained the attention of feminists and ecocritics. For my purposes, *To the Lighthouse* acts as the ideal counterpart to *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* not only thematically, but also in terms of narrative technique.

Both Hardy and Woolf wrote in conversation with trends in life-science methodology that revered objectivity or unbiased observation. In *Objectivity*, Lorraine Daston traces the origins of the myth of this observational ideal and its association with white, upper-class male voices.<sup>8</sup> The result was a gendering of the terms *objective* and *subjective*, such that objective was coded masculine, and subjective, in opposition, was coded feminine. In realist fiction, the narrative technique of adopting the so-called objective voice and using it to create a sense of authority has implications for women and nature that Hardy recognized and problematized and that Woolf outright rejected by creating an alternative. While many scholars consider Woolf’s alternative a distinctly feminine form of observation, I argue that she intends it to be simply human, outside the gender associations and assumptions of antithesis that bled into objective/subjective discourse.

We can clearly see the implications of different narrative techniques when we study these texts in tandem. Hardy and Woolf both write women and nature in anthropomorphic figurative language, but the gaze that mediates those scenes differs drastically, and so do the resulting representations. The effect is most obvious when considering similar passages in juxtaposition. Hardy’s narrator describes Tess in an erotic unity with nature:

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<sup>8</sup> Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene. At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story. Rather they became a part of it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were. The midnight airs and gusts, moaning amongst the tightly-wrapped buds and bark of the winter twigs, were formulae of bitter reproach. A wet day was the expression of irremediable grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being whom she could not class definitely as the God of her childhood and could not comprehend as any other.<sup>9</sup>

The authority of the narrator renders this evaluation both factual and external. Whether Tess actually perceives herself in this way or whether the narrator simply projects his gaze onto her and elicits a sexualized poeticism, we cannot be sure. In great contrast, in a similar description in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's narrator attributes the erotic entanglement of Mrs. Ramsay and nature to the character's own perspective:

She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like the light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself.<sup>10</sup>

These are Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts, explicitly deemed so, and mediated by the narrator with no external evaluation. The simple inclusion of the qualifier *she thought* alters our understanding of the observational situation's influence on the content of the description. Even though both authors imbue their female characters with the power to embody, alter, and share form with nature, Hardy situates his narrator at a certain distance, reminding us that this is the narrator's experience of Tess, not her own, even if the narrator never admits it. The omission of this concession is a large part of Hardy's critique. Whereas Hardy's narrator himself represents the white, male, upper-class voice of his contemporary sense of objectivity, the imagery of Tess he generates drips with subjective sensuality. Woolf's

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<sup>9</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 63-64.

narrator, in contrast, tells us so much of Mrs. Ramsay's subjective experience without the interference of its own opinion that our perception of the character feels less mediated. The effect of these passages side by side with particular attention to the narrator's role in conveying the unity of woman and environment illuminates the potential problematic representations that the objective voice creates and the subjective voice resolves.

In my first chapter, I will analyze how Hardy problematizes the traditional objective voice by using it to distort Tess's story. I will look at how the narrator's perspective gives way to descriptions of both women and nature that suggest a hierarchy in which the feminine is subject to domination. Parsing the ways in which this domination manifests in narration as well as symbolically or literally in the plot, I argue that Hardy's novel problematizes its own narrative technique, but does not offer an alternative to that technique.

In the subsequent chapter, I will examine Woolf's narration technique in *To the Lighthouse* as it functions both within the novel and in relation to Hardy's narrator. Woolf's multiperspectival narrative is made up of many subjectivities. Narrating from both inside and outside these subjectivities results paradoxically in a less biased form of representation. I will emphasize the contrast in Hardy's free indirect discourse to Woolf's combination of free indirect discourse, normal direct discourse, and stream-of-consciousness as they impact representations of women and nature. Ultimately, I find that Woolf offers a genuine alternative to the authoritative objective voice of Victorian third person narration.

Beyond the timeliness of this argument's place in the current political and literal climates, it coincides with the emergence of a great deal of recent scholarship, adding to a now-growing body of work concerned with women, nature, and observation. I have chosen *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *To the Lighthouse* for their direct engagement of the problem

of the subjugation of women *and* nature, both on the level of plot and character, and on the level of narrative technique. Both novels, though in different ways, are interested in how narrative technique can counter or be complicit in the very subjection it represents. While each of these texts has gained attention separately in existing scholarship, by putting these pieces in conversation, we can better understand the transition from Victorian to modernist narrative techniques as it relates to human-nature relationships in the Anthropocene and the implications of that shift.

## II. Chapter I: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

### Mechanics of Representation: Hardy's Darwinian Narrator

A great deal of scholarship already connects Thomas Hardy to Charles Darwin's writing and theory, noting Hardy's adoption of Darwinian pessimism, sensory description, anthropomorphic conceptualizations of Nature, and scales of time.<sup>11</sup> We know from his journals that Hardy had read *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* around the time he was writing *Tess*, and his journals reveal the author's acceptance of and fascination with evolutionary theory.<sup>12</sup> This, combined with Hardy's interest in observing farm laborers and collecting ethnography and folklore, clearly influenced the major themes of heredity and the struggle of the laboring class as they are explored in *Tess*.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, he wrote on the cusp of the Anthropocene, within the earliest evidence of industrialization's devastating effect on both rural populations and the natural environment. Between all of this, philosophical, poetic Hardy created a novel aware of the human factor in ecosystems, massive time-scales, and the growing rift between the scientific study of the natural environment and the authority of organized religion. Yet, a consequence of this consciousness is the resulting portrait of woman that his *Tess* renders: one inextricable from Nature and thereby susceptible to man.

As Hardy's lyrical language equates *Tess* to a non-Christian notion of nature, the Darwinian aesthetic and scientific gazes convey their observations of her as fact, and she falls further prey to the narrator of her own story. While Hardy makes visible man's exploitative, dominating relationship with a feminine nature, he does not offer any solace, no

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<sup>11</sup> Beer, Gillian. *Darwin's Plots* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>13</sup> Gibson, James, *Thomas Hardy: A Literary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

solution to the evolution of the human species into its own extinction. His novel may be analytical, but it is also fatalistic, culminating in a convoluted sense of justice and leaving his heroine a victim of fate and a godless game of natural selection.

Accordingly, an ecofeminist reading of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* must be a critical one. The issues at play are two-fold: first, there is the writing itself, often overshadowing plot, that determines how and by whom Tess's story is told; second, there is the plot, wrought with the tension between intellect and industrialization and their violence against both woman and nature. A close analysis of the narration of the novel reveals an unsettling tie between Hardy's third-person free indirect discourse and the white, upper-class, male voice of Western science. It is the authority assumed by this unmarked observer throughout the narrative that distorts demonstrations of agency, turning Tess and her environment into erotic, primitivized objects under the masculine gaze and ultimately contributing to the subjugation of their real-world counterparts. Within the plot, the relationships of Angel Clare and Alec D'Urberville to Tess and the forms of violence they inflict upon her represent the rhetorical and physical violence to which women and nature are frequently subject. Parsing Hardy's narration, positioning, and plot choices, this reading illuminates the apparatus responsible for problematic representation that Hardy makes obvious in his vehement narrator.

### **The Authority of the Narrator**

In spite of its diverse applications, ecofeminist scholarship consistently takes issue with the traditional scientific voice—the Western, white, upper-class observer whose authority goes unchecked and whose perspective turns god-like. In fiction, the third-person narrator often takes this same authority, and in *Tess*, the narrator seems to take on its class



and gender, too. The illusion of objectivity maintained by the masculine voice charged with telling Tess's story renders problematic representations of women and nature, skewing the understanding a reader can have of Hardy's heroine with the sentiments of the biased, disembodied voice.

In considering the power of narration in written fiction, I find it helpful to imagine Hardy building a scene and setting it under a microscope. In this case, Hardy's had to build the microscope, too. He then tells his readers what he observes of his creation through the lens. If the story is the slide, then the narrator is the microscope lens. No matter how much of the story exists, the lens determines from what angle its seen, at what magnification, and with what limitations and distortions.

Free indirect discourse offers, for this illustration's sake, a compound microscope. It is outfitted with multiple objective lenses that, as they are turned about the apparatus, offer varying levels of magnification—different perspectives, yet all still third-person. Beer notes this type of narration across Hardy's works, remarking that this position of observation is akin to Darwin's narrative technique, as both writers tend to watch the actors in their texts rather than write from the perspective of one: "Hardy like Darwin places himself in his texts as observer, traveller, a conditional presence capable of seeing things from multiple distances and diverse perspectives in the same moment."<sup>14</sup> Traditional scientific writing generally depends upon this same narrating voice to disseminate what scientists deem facts, excluding the perspectives of the observed subjects in the accounts of the situations they relay. For Tess, that means the narrative of her life benefits in entertainment value from the audience's knowing other character's doings and ponderings that she does not see or hear. But the

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<sup>14</sup> Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 230.

narrating voice proves harmful in his voyeuristic devouring and distorting of her body to the extent that he sees and feels Tess as flesh more fully than as agent.

### **Aesthetic and Scientific Gazes**

The narrator observes Tess with two types of ultimately harmful gazes: an aesthetic gaze that sexualizes her in the framework of a sex-shaming society and a scientific gaze that secularizes the nature to which she is tied, forms generalizations about women, and maintains a palpable authority in those assertions. Both of these gazes blur distinctions between Tess and her environment such that the objectification of one becomes inextricable from the situation of the other, and descriptive and didactic language combine to form an erotic image of Tess that is shamed in its moral cultural context and belittled by categorization.

In both religious and literary tradition, women have been associated with natural forces, but in Hardy's novel, the association often devolves into absorption. Tess is not merely connected to nature; she *is* Nature. Beer stresses that Darwin personified Nature as female in large part to differentiate it from God. Darwin's feminization of nature was vital to his avoidance of creationist language, emphasizing the contrast of natural forces against the typical monotheistic masculine pronoun.<sup>15</sup> In secularizing this female nature, likening her to mother goddesses of ancient myths or "uncivilized" systems of belief, he contributes to the primitivization all things feminine or close to the natural environment. Hardy adopts this concept and expands upon it to deem women worshipers of old nature gods: "women whose chief companions are the forms and forces of outdoor Nature retain in their souls far more of the Pagan fantasy of their remote forefathers than of the systematized religion taught their

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<sup>15</sup> Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 65.

race at later date.”<sup>16</sup> The certainty of the statement carries the same authority of Darwin’s generalizations about sex and species. According to the narrator, women’s connection to natural forces makes them essentially blasphemous. The “Pagan fantasy” practiced by their “remote forefathers” insinuates that women’s overzealous imaginations are responsible for reducing them to antiquated beliefs.

The feminine force of nature clashes frequently with Christian ideals in Hardy’s work. When Tess finds her baby has fallen ill, she obsesses over the child’s baptism, accepting that she must burn in eternal hell for her own sins, but refusing to allow her child the same fate: “But now that her moral sorrows were passing away a fresh one arose on the natural side of her which knew no social law...The baby’s offense against society in coming into the world was forgotten by the girl-mother; her soul’s desire was to continue that offense by preserving the life of the child.”<sup>17</sup>

In this scene, Hardy suggests that the maternal instinct to care for her child, above even religious order, is nature’s doing. The insistence on her offspring’s survival, in Darwinian terms, completely overshadows the sense of justice with which Tess was religiously raised. In the end, nature wins out, and the child dies having been given the grace of a last-minute baptism.

Hardy continues to emphasize this dissonance between what nature demands of women and what religion mandates as Tess breaks the necks of wounded birds to save them from suffering, finding herself “ashamed...based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature” for

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<sup>16</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, 130.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

having wished herself dead the night before.<sup>18</sup> Hardy's capital-N nature falls as the last word in the final paragraph of the chapter, punctuating a particularly vivid scene. It is also interesting to note that in the nineteenth century, even outside of Darwin's writing, this proper-noun Nature also prevaillingly referred to "The creative and regulative power which is conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of its phenomena" and "This power personified as a female being." That capital-n Nature as a piece of the English language has been gendered as overwhelmingly female and endowed with a god-like power—and consistently so across centuries—renders its frequent use in *Tess* particularly fascinating from an ecofeminist perspective.<sup>19</sup> When Hardy does not explicitly connect woman to nature in his prose, he does so implicitly in his word choice, but the power seems to have more control over Tess than she wields over it.

Nature continues to drive Tess's actions, while man-made rules of society give her conscious cause to chastise herself. By page 430, Hardy generalizes that all women are imbued with this tendency to act according to nature in spite of religion: "What woman, indeed, among the most faithful adherents of the truth, believes the promises and threats of the Word in the sense in which she believes in her own children, or would not throw her theology to the wind if weighed against their happiness?" Nature then succeeds in manipulating women more than humans' manipulation of belief can control women's behaviors or truths.

Beyond his distancing Tess from God, the problem with our narrator's perspective is that his gaze is both didactic and greedy, so the link he presents between woman and nature

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<sup>18</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 327.

<sup>19</sup> From *Oxford English Dictionary*, "nature, *n.*" See the entry in its entirety for an array of euphemisms for female anatomy and sexuality.

is not the traditional one of fertility, but is simply erotic allure. What is beautiful and sensual about Tess and her natural surroundings is relayed to the reader in terms of euphemistic description. The beautiful in Hardy's novel is not the sublime; in accordance with Darwin's theories of sexual selection, the aesthetic is the erotic.<sup>20</sup> As a result, often when Hardy's poetic bent draws out lyrical descriptions of his heroine, the language is so blatantly charged with sensuality that it distracts from her action.

In his essay "Candour in English Fiction," Hardy argues that the novel has become limited to dishonest representations of life by oversensitive editors.<sup>21</sup> He calls for less censorship and greater space for true art that depicts "the position of man and woman in nature, and the position of belief in the minds of man and woman—things which everybody is thinking but nobody is saying—might be taken up and treated frankly."<sup>22</sup> The issue of the publication of novels first in magazines, intended to be suitable for all ages, selling to the largest audience, means the novel proved a problematic vessel for the kind of truth Hardy wanted to tell. To maintain a respectable product, Hardy layers his language in highly sensory, highly sexual imagery that blurs feminine flesh and the natural world to such an extent that the source of the sensuality is poetically vague. Accordingly, the narrator is able to use nature and its symbiosis with Tess's body and mind to project erotic descriptions of his heroine without completely overstepping boundaries of appropriate language for published fiction. Consistently, the narrator generates those images dripping with innuendo from intertwining the natural with the feminine, sexualizing that inter-existence of woman and

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<sup>20</sup> Darwin, Charles, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873).

<sup>21</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Candour in English Fiction." *The New Review* (January 1890), 15–21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Earth. Juxtaposing the spiritual, the sexual, and the natural, all on the same page, he describes Tess in terms of her internal and external environments:

On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene. At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story. Rather they became a part of it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were. The midnight airs and gusts, moaning amongst the tightly-wrapped buds and bark of the winter twigs, were formulae of bitter reproach. A wet day was the expression of irremediable grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being whom she could not class definitely as the God of her childhood and could not comprehend as any other.<sup>23</sup>

Hardy's moves in metaphor and metonymy here demonstrate simultaneously the humanization of nature, the naturalizing of woman, and organized religion's loosening grip on conceptualizations of nature, wedging that distance by associating nature with guilty feminine sexuality. Tess's figure becomes an "integral part of the scene," her movements and physical presence tied to the visual milieu of a rural landscape. At first, this description carries a tone of romantic aesthetic, but when the wind's moans turned to "bitter reproach" and wetness associates with "irremediable grief at her weakness," the natural aesthetic turns erotic, and Tess's body and her environment become so intertwined that a single source of the sensuality is impossible to determine. The extension of her physical figure into the elements of nature as Hardy illustrates suggests these moans and wet days belong to her body as much as to the wind and trees.

The erotic anthropomorphism that permeates this novel often reduces Tess to only that which allures the narrator. Mainak Dutt devotes an entire chapter to flower imagery in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in a critical analysis of nature's role in Hardy's novels, noting a particular proclivity for describing Tess's mouth as "flower-like," her "lips parted like a half-

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<sup>23</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 106.

open flower.”<sup>24</sup> Dutt deduces that the recurring theme of floral comparisons serves as a symbol of Tess’s singularity and singleness, her existence as separate from husband and family; however, I would argue such a reduction ignores the blatant sexual symbolism that the flower and fellow “tightly-wrapped buds” exude. Moreover, in focusing so much of the descriptive language on Tess’s mouth, the weight of narration often falls away from what that mouth is saying. In such cases, the narrator’s distraction costs Tess her agency. As a result, the aesthetic/erotic gaze generates a particular image of Tess, and the scientific gaze goes on to categorize it.

Throughout the novel, Tess’s life is divided into Phases, the structure of her story already indicative of a scientific subject, and we see the narrator frequently applying scientific paradigms to make generalizations of her sex and class as one might write of genus and species. This narrator, through figurative and descriptive language, consistently sees the feminine, and Tess in particular, as one with the natural world. Hardy emphasizes this as a gendered circumstance, differentiating the sexes in their relationships with nature, insisting that woman and woman alone experiences this shared existence with the terrestrial:

But those of the other sex were the most interesting of this company of binders, by reason of the charm which is acquired by a woman when she becomes part and parcel of outdoor nature, and is not merely an object set down therein as at ordinary times. A field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it.<sup>25</sup>

According to what third-person narration presents as fact, the field-man retains the second part of his hyphenated descriptor as his primary identity, but the woman becomes a part, “has somehow lost her own margin,” becoming less even in union with something so large. Loss

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<sup>24</sup> Dutt, Mainak, *Nature and Human Nature* (Bahri, 1990), 67.

<sup>25</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, 110.

is explicit, of defining features and qualities that differentiate humans and elevate them from the natural world, but all he states they gain is charm. Aside from the sexism implicit in the assertion, the use of this vague “charm,”<sup>26</sup> indicative of the quality of attractiveness to the male gaze, and the air of superiority that oozes from the reductive, didactic language, we get the sense that this bodiless voice is neither genderless nor classless. While the narrator avoids the first person “I,” the choice of the word *interesting* in itself reveals a subjective voyeur. As a result, the reader is left to understand these generalizations as universal truth and this perspective, though implicitly male, upper class, and opinionated, as objective.

### **The Fiction of the Unmarked Body**

Richard Kerridge in “Ecological Hardy”<sup>27</sup> and Donna J. Haraway in “Situated Knowledges”<sup>28</sup> call this assumption of objectivity wherever the narrator neglects to use the first-person the *unmarked body*. The unmarked body is “ghostly and irresponsible,” the pretense of pure objectivity popularized in Western scientific traditions by the disembodied white male viewpoint. The third-person omniscient narrator occupies this position in Hardy’s novel, seeming to float between the psychologies of various characters and that of the disembodied voice without admitting the fallibility of its perspective. An ecofeminist critique requires first a recognition that the unmarked body is, in fact, gendered and therefore subjective. Second, it demands the subversion of that narration in order to dispel the myths of environmental and feminine subservience it propagates. The unmarked body holds dangerous

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<sup>26</sup> For an interesting comparison, see Woolf’s use of *charm* as quoted on page 43 of this thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Kerridge, Richard, “Ecocritical Hardy” in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (University Press of Virginia, 2001), 131.

<sup>28</sup> Haraway, Donna, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988), 575-599.



authority, in the novel and in reality, over the lives of others and the establishment of fact. Rather than pure observation, the narrator's watching is followed by categorization, rendering the observed subjugated by the observer. This is an act of marking.

What does it mean to be marked, then? For the purposes of this paper, the marked bodies *have bodies* and are objects of observation subjected to a power dynamic with the observer. A hierarchy manifests, just as man pretends to dominate the natural world by simplifying it through science, when one character is categorized according to another's vision. Sex, class, and distance from the natural determine the character's place in the hierarchy. Accordingly, the female rural laborer represents the most marked figure and the most explicitly characterized by her corporeal presence. Above her in status and observational situation are the characters characterized as male, middle and upper classes, and formally educated. The narrator describes Alec D'Urberville as fully bodied, with "full lips, badly moulded" and "touches of barbarism in his contours."<sup>29</sup> His sex and financial situation set him above Tess but below Angel Clare, as Alec's animalized appetite for Tess's body contrasts with Angel's restraint and high education. George Levine alludes to the unmarked body, that which Angel represents early in the novel and the narrator occupies at all times, as a product of class:

Moreover, the long Western tradition of aspiration toward an ideal extracorporeal condition obviously must be read in relation to questions of class: only the wealthy can afford to imagine the superiority of the unmoved mover to the worker. Scientific epistemology is bound up in a traditional religious and aristocratic enterprise.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Levine, George, *Dying to Know* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6.

Interestingly, this indicates a close relationship between Angel's voice and that of the narrator, indicating that they share a distance from Tess in their class status that does not go unnoticed.

Tess takes note of Angel's elevated, nearly disembodied state, and "At first Tess seemed to regard Angel Clare as an intelligence rather than as a man."<sup>31</sup> She also perceives that his work at the dairy is a choice to become marked by labor, a decision to leave the comfort of his class, if only temporarily, to become closer to nature, and as a result, further from God:

It was true that he was at present out of his class. But she knew that was only because, like Peter the Great in a shipwright's yard, he was studying what he wanted to know. He did not milk cows because he was obliged to milk cows, but because he was learning to be a rich and prosperous dairyman, landowner, agriculturist, and breeder of cattle. He would become an American or Australian Abraham, commanding like a monarch his flocks and his herds, his spotted and his ring-straked, his men-servants and his maids. At times, nevertheless, it did seem unaccountable to her that a decidedly bookish, musical, thinking young man should have chosen deliberately to be a farmer, and not a clergyman, like his father and brothers.<sup>32</sup>

The class discrepancy Tess senses is then a result of both culture attained in education and economic status attained in property. Her remark that it seems "unaccountable" that he should choose to dip below his class potential ends on the note of religious distancing by no accident. Angel's growing closer to Tess, closer to the lower class, and closer to nature all require his denying the opportunity to serve a monotheistic God of organized religion. Because of the eroticized imagery of Tess and her association with non-Christian worship, when she becomes the focus of Angel's desires, he loses both cultural capital in religion and economic capital in class.

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<sup>31</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 154.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Whether chosen, as in Angel's case, or fated, as in Tess's, the illustration of hierarchy by marking appears most explicit in Hardy's novel through the obsession with feminine purity. The novel's subtitle *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* exudes enough irony to suggest Hardy intended to critique the purity myth that his characters propagate. Religious culture brought about virginity as an invisible trait of sexual selection, and as such, the categorization of one body by another becomes the dramatic irony of Hardy's narrative.

When Alec rapes Tess, the narrator lingers not on her trauma, but on the trace of it:

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order.<sup>33</sup>

The loss of her virginal purity explicitly marks, and according to the narrator, necessarily dooms Tess. She suffers the mark of the event from Alec and acquires the additional mark being categorized as marked, as doomed, as ruined, from the narrator.<sup>34</sup>

Angel, the least marked of the lot, assumes that his perception is infallible, just as the unmarked narrator claims its perspective as fact. He is baffled to find himself wrong, and blames his misconception on nature: "She looked so absolutely pure. Nature, in her fantastic trickery, had set such a seal of maidenhood upon Tess's countenance that he gazed at her with a stupefied air."<sup>35</sup> The source of Angel's shock is less so Tess's sexual status than the disproven generalization that "After all, there are few purer things in nature than an unsullied

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<sup>33</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 91.

<sup>34</sup> See Rooney, Ellen, "'A Little More than Persuading': Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence" in *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 87-114 for Rooney's treatment of perceptions of rape as a result of the dominant masculine perspective.

<sup>35</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 282.

country maid.”<sup>36</sup> The country maid, in the social science of class stereotypes, is supposed to be a virgin, and this realization that the object of his affection does not fit the paradigm suffices to end his commitment to their marriage.

As Tess’s body serves as metaphor for and “parcel” of the natural environment, the purity myth of the Anthropocene is the fetishization of allegedly untouched natural spaces, areas kept pristine without visible evidence of human meddling. The preservation of national parks, for example, uses rhetoric not unlike the illustrations of Tess to justify the importance of saving pieces of land from physical disturbance by humans. Maintaining their beauty was offered as the argument for preservation long before maintaining ecosystems rose as a valid priority. But just as Angel praises the purity of Tess in his ignorance of her actual status, mankind considers natural parks pristine without realizing they are already touched, at minimum, by the exponentially increased levels of carbon dioxide owed to human industry and activity. They have already been contaminated, modified, ruined, altered in a way that earns negatively-connoted categorization by the scientific authority only when noticed. Beyond that, these places of pristine, idealized, “pure” nature are actually carefully maintained, non-native species eradicated, the wildlife populations controlled. Columbus was not the first human to “discover” America, but there is an eroticism in being the first, or at least in claiming to be the first to touch or take the space of land or the body of woman, even if it is not the truth. Accordingly, the illusion and the obsession remain with both environment and female, and Hardy’s plot pivots on the idea that Angel has been duped.

### **Forms of Violence**

The erotic appeal of feminine purity to the male gaze is closely linked to forms of violence in Hardy’s text. When Angel leaves Tess, the duplicitous non-virgin, he goes in

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<sup>36</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, 311.

search of virginal land in Latin America to exploit. The emotional turmoil Tess is left with parallels that which she experiences after her rape, suggesting that Angel's distance, his abandonment, is just as devastating an act of violence as Alec's assaulting her. Olga Vélez Caro describes a school of ecofeminist thought greatly concerned with forms of violence—domination as violence, limitation as violence, marginalization as violence—and claims that women and nature suffer from violence in these various forms as profoundly as they do its physical manifestations.<sup>37</sup> Angel then offers a representation of the rhetorical violence exhibited by inaction and assumptions of domination by understanding, while Alec plays the brute of physical damage. If Tess's body is the natural world, Angel is the distant, ineffective intellectual, and Alec is the machinery of capitalist industrialization. Their desire for her body leaves her vulnerable to emotional and physical harm, and only through her own act of uncivilized violence can she gain a sense of retribution—even then, only against her physical assailant.

Because evolutionary theory, organized religion, and volatile human emotion are all at play in *Tess*, Hardy develops a complicated sense of justice. The sins of rape and murder are punished by the death of both guilty parties, one spurred by emotion, the other executed by the law. The rhetorical violence, however, remains unpunished by the novel's end. Angel Clare tromps off into the sunset with Liza-Lu, the pretty virgin he wanted all along:

“Justice” was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess. And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained there a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Vélez Caro, Olga Consuelo, “Ecofeminism: New Liberation Paths for Women and Nature” *Exchange* 44.1 (2015), 64–82.

<sup>38</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 465.

In this way, even though the scope of the narrative is concentrated on Tess's lifespan, it is clear that the end of her story by no means equates to the end of all humanity. The last remarks on Tess's life echo an earlier large-scale perspective that minimizes Tess's existence as she ruminates and reflects after her trauma:

Meanwhile the trees were as green as before; the birds sang and the sun shone as clearly now as ever. The familiar surroundings had not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain. She might have seen that what had bowed her head so profoundly—the thought of the world's concern at her situation—was founded on an illusion. She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. To all humankind besides Tess was only a passing thought. Even to friends she was no more than a frequently passing thought.<sup>39</sup>

While Hardy closely follows his heroine's story, he still makes a point to broaden its frame, to contextualize her story in deep time. That is not to say he outlines her particular existence in the geological record; rather, he reminds his reader now and again that Tess (or any other) human life is relatively insignificant in the course of the earth's history. Individually, vanity doles out an entire novel's worth of a story to each of us, but as a species, as a whole, humans mark a miniscule percentage of the planet's story. Beer comments that this sort of Darwinian scaling is common throughout Hardy's work:

In Hardy's novels all scales are absolute, but multiple. So he includes many time-scales, from the geological time of Egdon Heath to the world of ephemerals... The emphasis upon systems more extensive than the life span of the individual and little according to his needs is essential to Hardy's insight. Much of the grandeur of his fiction comes from the acceptance of people's independence and self-assertion—doomed and curtailed persistently, but recuperating. But further underlying that emphasis upon the individual is the paradox that even those recuperative energies are there primarily to serve the longer needs of the race and are part of a procreative energy designed to combat extinction, not the death of any individual.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 224.

With a broadened perspective, justice is less concerned with Tess's survival or happiness than with Nature's law of the survival of the fittest. The scene of her death proves unemotional, the sentences as curt as "It was a black flag" indicating normalcy, a lack of drama, a natural process.<sup>41</sup>

David Galef, in his introduction to *Tess*, asserts, "For all the glory of flora and fauna in his world, Hardy is more Darwinian than sentimentalist; he subscribes to the famous vision in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: 'Nature, red in tooth and claw.'<sup>42</sup> The universe is a pitiless place, with age-old patterns of behavior repeating themselves to extinction."<sup>43</sup> And perhaps this pessimism prevents any type of justice to truly satisfy the reader. Tess is victim, again and again, and she is consistently punished for it. Perhaps, even, as the narrator suggests at Tess's rape, justice is hereditary, and Tess pays for the sins of her ancestors with her ill-fated life:

One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter.<sup>44</sup>

If seemingly unjust suffering is an inevitability for woman or for nature, no matter the mechanism for justice, we have little hope of altering its course. Bruno Latour describes this learned helplessness in "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,"<sup>45</sup> and the pessimism of

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<sup>41</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 465.

<sup>42</sup> Tennyson, Alfred, *In Memoriam* (London: E. Moxon, 1850).

<sup>43</sup> Galef, David, in the introduction of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Latour, Bruno, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45.1 (2014), 1–18. See Latour's discussion on pg. 2 of the myth of objectivity as an obstacle to human agency in the Anthropocene.

*Tess* may demonstrate that Hardy anticipated early on that the greatest challenge to environmentalism would be human damage coupled with inactive hopelessness. As the story of rapid and destructive climate change unravels before us, we have to reconcile our sense of time with the responsibility (and capability) sprung on us to mitigate the damage of our ancestors and preclude that of ourselves. Giving the earth agency and a twisted sense of justice, perhaps human kind has to pay for human kind's sins. The exploitation of the planet does not go unpunished, and even the innocent suffer the consequences of previous generations' shortsightedness.

As Hardy's Darwinian narrator relays the life of a dairymaid—a woman of a dying species—from puberty to death, the authority of a gendered, classed voice frequently skews our understanding of Tess's experience. While the narration carries much of the commentary that provides critical critique and Anthropocene-sized scales, it also generates a conception of Tess through a greedy, biased gaze. By exaggerating the impact of the aesthetic and scientific gazes on woman and nature, Hardy problematizes the traditional third-person account that he uses. To demonstrate that both woman and environment suffer subjugation from different masculine forces, Hardy replicates in plot what he does in the apparatus of narration, formulating Alec and Angel to embody forms of human greed and their associated varieties of violence. As a critique of classed, gendered "objectivity" and the damage man has wrought on woman and nature, Hardy's novel and its narrator produce an effective argument by means of representation, but at that, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* stops. Later in literary history, these same issues would again be recognized and explored, but narration technique would evolve into an alternative, both challenging and changing the objective nature of realist representation.



### III. Chapter II: *To the Lighthouse*

#### A New Objectivity: Woolf's Post-Darwinian Narrator

#### **Objective and Subjective in Antithesis**

Lorraine Daston's *Objectivity* traces the development of the notion of the objective as it emerged from nineteenth-century life science methodology, but these ideas have implications for the way we read literature. In 1817, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who ruminated on this concept in the realm of romantic poetry, planted the distinction between subjective and objective that would become standard even after the two terms traded meanings *circa* 1850: "Now the sum of all that is merely OBJECTIVE, we will henceforth call NATURE, confining the term to its passive and material sense, as comprising all the phenomena by which its existence is made known to us. On the other hand the sum of all that is SUBJECTIVE, we may comprehend in the same of the SELF or INTELLIGENCE. Both conceptions are in necessary antithesis."<sup>46</sup>

Historically, even as definitions of objective and subjective changed, the notion that one was always in absolute opposition, in "necessary antithesis," with the other, remained constant. Consequently, a seemingly objective narration would appear to readers, by necessity, free of subjectivity, and subjectivity became a threat to objective pursuits: "If objectivity was summoned into existence to negate subjectivity, then the emergence of objectivity must tally with the emergence of a certain kind of willful self, one perceived as endangering scientific knowledge."<sup>47</sup> The suppression of that self became the highly-debated focus and unachievable goal of life science methodology of the nineteenth century, and

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<sup>46</sup> Coleridge, Samuel. *Bibliographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton University Press, 1983), 254-55. Quoted by Daston in *Objectivity*, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Daston, *Objectivity*, 37.

simultaneously, realist fiction brought this same obsession to its efforts to represent life as it is. As scientists and realist authors wielded the third-person to situate observers outside the observed, the formulation of fact began to blur with the creation of fiction. The reality presented in realist or scientific writing is always mediated, and the choice of this mediation became, largely, by a disembodied male voice. The objective voice was coded masculine because it was, in actuality, men who originally dominated the position of the scientific knower. The subjective voice was coded feminine not because women exclusively wrote in first person, but because objective and subjective came to be thought of as opposing forces. Accordingly, feminist criticism takes issue with this myth of objectivity in both its glorification of male authority and the repression of women's agency that the objective voice renders in literary and scientific writing. We have seen Hardy characterize a greedy masculine gaze and the impact of varieties of violence on women and nature, but what can be achieved when an author moves beyond a representative critique to offer an alternative?

It seems natural that Woolf should come after Hardy in this project, not just historically, but ideologically. Whereas in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy problematizes the traditional objectivity popularized by nineteenth-century life science methodology, Woolf takes the extra step in *To the Lighthouse* by offering an alternative to that very definition of objectivity and a different means of narration that includes multiple limited views instead of one omniscient one.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* opens with a conditional statement that immediately places human activity under the authority of nature: "‘Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow,' said Mrs. Ramsay." Without any other context, we know the world in which Woolf's characters are living is dictated in part by weather. The titular journey that is to be

taken requires the cooperation of a non-human agent. She adds, for clarification, “But you’ll have to be up with the lark,” contextualizing time with natural rhythms rather than standardized measurement. The narrator then announces, “To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch” such that both his certainty and ecstasy are explicitly defined within his experience.<sup>48</sup> This opening page of the novel contains in its first three sentences two of the primary facets around which Woolf builds an ecofeminist vision of storytelling: human action defers to natural forces, and biases are attributed to those who hold them.

### **A New Objectivity**

Scholars agree that Woolf developed the narrative technique used in *To the Lighthouse* with the intention of offering a feminist alternative to the problematic male authority that lingered in scientific methodology and nineteenth-century literary practices. Christina Alt devotes an entire book to Woolf and nature in which she argues that the author actively rejected the fictional objectivity espoused by her predecessors and considered those literary methods of description that espoused contemporary scientific attitudes to be limited modes of representation.<sup>49</sup> Justyna Kostkowska claims Woolf “felt the creative pressure to develop alternatives to the single, centralized authority (male and all-knowing) after spending months observing nature.”<sup>50</sup> While Woolf’s *why* for this alternative is well-researched, the

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<sup>48</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Alt, Christina, *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 168.

<sup>50</sup> Kostkowska, Justyna, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers: Environmental Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith* (Pelgrave Macmillan, 2010), 17.

*what* of that alternative as determined by current scholarship still categorizes her narration technique within either/or categorization instead of a more nuanced both/and approach. Critics often place her work in conversation with the terms objective and subjective, but their language differs on the evaluation of Woolf's relationships to these terms: Did she do away with objectivity? Did she use the subjective as a synonym for the feminine perspective?

Panthea Reid argues that Woolf's own diary was "organized not by a mechanical recording of events but by the interplay between the objective and the subjective," and considers this to be the place in which Woolf conceived of her narrative style.<sup>51</sup> The word *interplay* falls just short, however, of the *interdependence* I want to highlight in this essay. Critics have since credited Woolf with having developed in writing a distinctly feminine way of observing and representing the world, but interestingly, the gendering is theirs, not hers. Woolf wrote in 1924 that her diary would represent people in "splinters & mosaics; not, as they used to hold, immaculate, monolithic consistent wholes."<sup>52</sup> The subsequent critical distinctions between this feminine all-encompassing, multi-perspectival form of experiencing the world and the masculine, linear method translate to the distinctions we find reading Hardy's narration in contrast to Woolf's. Even though scholars agree that Woolf's writing combats the standard of masculine authority, most critics argue that rather than fully ungendering the narrative voice, Woolf succeeded in feminizing it, even as the stream-of-consciousness includes masculine characters' thoughts and experiences. The problem with this argument is that it still buys in to the feminine coding of subjectivity.

In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that Woolf's narrative technique brings subjective and objective out of antithesis, freeing the terms from binary gendering and

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<sup>51</sup> Reid, Panthea, "Virginia Woolf" *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2016).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Reid quotes Woolf.

ultimately restoring agency to women and nature. According to Daston, “To be objective is to aspire to a knowledge that bears no trace of the knower—knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving.”<sup>53</sup> This definition explains why the unmarked body, the un-fleshed voice we explored in the previous chapter, first held the seemingly objective perspective in the literary tradition, but it also justifies Woolf’s urge to deconstruct Victorian objectivity—it was an impossible expectation. Any information conveyed in written form, even in numbers, cannot pretend to lack traces of its knower. Turning observation into text requires some form of human language, often involves measurements or comparisons standardized by human experience, and nearly always carries unclaimed bias in class, gender, and culture at minimum. Woolf challenges this fiction of the objective by providing multiple biases rather than removing all but one set. Because the trace of the knower can never be totally absent from the knowledge, she opted to include all biases in her narration, a set of perspectives so saturated with subjectivity that it becomes the new objective. The result, ironically, is a narrator that reveals very little of itself.<sup>54</sup>

The basis of Woolf’s alternative narrative style is not so much rejection of the goals of objectivity so much as it is a dismissal of the traditional binary that set objective truth and subjective experience in opposition. Woolf’s critique by replacement of nineteenth century epistemology addresses both the ontology of knowledge and the methods of revealing truth. With Lily Briscoe as her faithful conduit, Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* suggests that intimacy, rather than distance, is a viable means of knowing, and that knowledge in the Western, scientific sense may not serve all human ends:

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<sup>53</sup> Daston, *Objectivity*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Although throughout previous sections of this paper I have used a gendered pronoun for the narrative voice, here I want to highlight that Woolf removes the gendering from the narrative perspective, making her storyteller just vaguely human, rather than overtly male or female.

Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee.<sup>55</sup>

She begins with a question expressing curiosity for the hypothetical, a hypothesis of sorts that imagines its method necessarily emotional, the height of subjectivity, for testing. She qualifies loving "as people called it" as a result of human categorization, recognizing that even within this already subjective method, there are multiple human experiences at stake in giving it a name. Then there remains the vagueness of becoming "one." Knowing, in the biblical sense, carries tones of sexual unity, but then unity, as she claims to desire over knowledge, carries traditional tones of marriage. As the thought develops, the fallibility of human language as a means of accurate conveyance grows evident for its plurality of interpretations, and Lily argues, in fact, that the type of knowledge she yearns for is beyond language. She circles back, deciding that yes, intimacy *is* knowledge, and the conclusion comes to her as her head makes physical contact with Mrs. Ramsay. Interestingly, this contact renders her unable to look at Mrs. Ramsay, such that this mode of inquiry defies the need for observation. The physical situation of Woolf's character's in this moment of critical contemplation emphasizes the role of distance associated with modes of knowing. The objective watches and judges from afar, while the subjective is not limited to a fixed position and may ascertain more or different forms of knowledge by proximity.

By reframing our understanding of objectivity away from what it looks like and toward what it *intends to do*, Lily's suggestion makes perfect sense. Because no "trace of the knower" can ever be totally erased from knowledge, what remains of objectivity is its aim to convey as accurate a reflection of the real as humanly possible. The scientific solution to

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<sup>55</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 51.

human limitation in the nineteenth century was to pretend to have overcome it, to take the God-like position of distant observation and authority and shroud its biases in third person. Woolf's vision of accuracy allows subjectivity to be the voice of accuracy; she posits that writing can fulfill the goals of objectivity by openly subjective mediation.

It is no surprise then that Woolf should make her heroine in *To the Lighthouse* an artist, the polar opposite of the male scientist. Hardy's narrator had an endgame of *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*—faithful presentation suggesting an unbiased truth, one proven impossible by the narrator's own meddling. But Lily Briscoe's pursuit is art, not accuracy. She indulges in the subjective by vocation. She *is* the willful self, embodied. Yet, because of Woolf's narrative technique, the perspective this highly subjective character provides, in the context of the novel overall, somehow seems a more faithful presentation.

If objective and subjective do not have to (or simply cannot) be in antithesis, if the subjective can—or must—explicitly be a component of the objective, then the compilation of glances Woolf gives of her characters' experiences offers not only a more ecofeminist style of storytelling, but a more complete narrative than a single authoritative voice can convey. To learn through proximity and union, in great contrast with nineteenth century epistemological ideals, seems, ironically, to give the most objective account in realist fiction—a mosaic rather than a monolith.

### **Attributing Biases**

The narrative voice Woolf employs in *To the Lighthouse* combines the techniques of free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness to provide a multi-perspectival storytelling. Rather than one bodiless voice acting as the authority on all that passes in the plot, the narrator hovers between the minds and experiences of the characters, transparently

identifying when it has shifted positions and to whom exactly. If Hardy's narrator was concerned with judgment and poetics, Woolf tasks her narrative voice with active clarification. In addition to the traditional *he/she said, thought, wondered* attributes, small but frequent prepositional phrases act as diligent tags on nearly every sentence that contains opinion to make explicit the subjectivity of the statement. Just as the very first page cites "To her son these words conveyed..." the rest of the novel takes pains to demonstrate, not just with the tradition of quotation marks and "he said"/ "she said," the thoughts, feelings, and words of each character from his or her situation in the scene. Accordingly, the narration is able to attribute biases to their origins with little to no interjection from a perspective belonging purely to the disembodied narrator.

By admitting its bias, subjectivity can be forgiven. What I mean is that these prepositional phrases serve the reader as disclaimers of sorts, not only signaling that yes, indeed, the statement in question is a subjective one, but also specifying whose subjectivity is at play. Like providing the starting weight of a container to tare a scale, they tune us into the base-level biases of the characters, such as gender, age, or origin, and additionally take into account the concrete information of the text. The omniscient narrator in this sense is truly omniscient, able to differentiate between multiple perceptions of simultaneous realities.

That is not, however, to say that the narrator is fully absent. Just as these tags serve to connect subjectivity to its owner, the use of third person in those tags demonstrates a presence outside the scene observing and relaying it. The third-person narration of both *Tess* and *To the Lighthouse* determines their form: a story told by a storyteller. Mediation is necessarily a component of the storytelling process, and the narrator is the authors' most powerful means of mediation in the novelistic form. The level of influence that voice has



over the readers' perceptions varies greatly between the two respective novels. For Woolf, this is highly intentional. While her characters are allowed to generalize, the narrator is careful not to offer the sort of disembodied opinions in which Hardy's narrator freely and frequently indulges.

Even when a sentiment is shared between multiple characters, the narration does not present it as fact: "'Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed,' for each thought, 'The others are feeling this. They are outraged and indignant with the government about the fishermen. Whereas, I feel nothing at all.'"<sup>56</sup> The irony, of course, is that every mind on the page is exposed, not to the other characters, but to the reader via the narrator. But given this exposure, we realize that the shared sensation in the room, while *common*, is not presented as *universal*.

To maintain a sense of fluidity in the multi-perspective narration, the physical space serves as the common component to shift between voices.<sup>57</sup> Woolf employs the characters' environment as a tool for transitions, such that shared landscape provides a means for the narrator to smoothly move between physical space and consciousness and for the characters to observe each other. Watching Lily and William from a distance, Mrs. Ramsey wonders at the last lines of chapter XII, "Ah, but was that not Lily Briscoe strolling along with William Bankes? She focused her short-sighted eyes upon the backs of the retreating couple. Yes, indeed it was." The physical space, shared even at a distance difficult for short-sighted eyes, is the transitional hook that catapults the reader past the chapter break into another character's consciousness: Chapter XIII begins, "He had been to Amsterdam, Mr. Bankes

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<sup>56</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 94.

<sup>57</sup> See Kostkowska's discussion of this in *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 34.

was saying as he strolled across the lawn with Lily Briscoe.”<sup>58</sup> The swing in perspective from observer to observed directly inverts the traditional realist tendency to let the observer serve as sufficient witness to for the scene, speaking about and for the observed; here, the outsider’s perspective swivels into the insider’s view. Woolf replaces the man at the microscope looking down at the scene with a narrator moving laterally within it, and Kostkowsa notes that this imitates the ecological web to which Woolf so frequently referred in her critiques of science.<sup>59</sup> The space facilitates the flow of focus as if along connected, intersecting threads.

### **Subverting the Male Gaze**

When the narration is at eye-level with the plot, the authority of any given voice can no longer depend on its position. The inclusion of feminine perspectives at the same level of authority as (or at times, even above) their masculine co-characters’ gave Woolf the opportunity to subvert the presumption of the male scientific gaze.

The feminist merit of this type of narration is that it defies the hierarchy imposed by single-perspective classification. The myth of objectivity postulates that if an observer, seated at a height above the observed subject in the anthropocentric, Western social hierarchy, has no obvious stake in the action of the observed, it constitutes an unbiased, authoritative, and accurate means of conveying what it sees. Woolf recognized that was simply never the case, that the unmarked body lived and breathed a life outside its observation that affected and informed the conveyance of those observations. The power dynamic remains, though, that the categorizing observer wields some sort of authority over the observed, even if only for the glance of the moment in which the reader follows its

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<sup>58</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 71.

<sup>59</sup> Kostkowsa, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 34.

watching. Even as the statements in *To the Lighthouse* are asserted with vehemence by those who think them, the narrator's attributing those statements qualifies their authority.

Woolf often situates a feminine observer in the seat of classifier of the masculine observed, flipping the nineteenth-century paradigm on its head, and empowering the authority of a female voice. Interestingly, these women perform their survey from a point in nature, and as Kostkowsa notes, Woolf's narration is a compilation of observations that makes room for female observers without extricating them from their closeness to the environment.<sup>60</sup> The subversive impact of Woolf's work is double, then, as the authority of observation turns from the masculine gaze to a feminine one, and the natural world from which the observational voice once tried to distance itself seems to offer the best view of the scene.

Perhaps the most critical scene to demonstrate the gendered gazes is Mr. Ramsey's prying observation of Lily's painting. She grows uncomfortable, paralyzed almost, by the sensation of being watched while she works. Hardy's narrator, bodiless, watched Tess at work without revealing himself, but flesh and bone, and incessantly voiced opinion, Mr. Ramsey is an explicitly male observer offering (explicitly, thanks to Lily's thoughts on the page) unsolicited commentary and audience. Mr. Ramsey finds himself befuddled by Lily's ability (and desire) to reduce Mrs. Ramsey's great beauty to a small triangle on the canvas—"to a purple shadow without irreverence."<sup>61</sup> In his perspective, the scale of her beauty to nature's is not proportionally reflected in the art. For Lily, even that which she worships translates to a tiny corner of her canvas compared to the immense aesthetic of the landscape.

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<sup>60</sup> Kostkowsa, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 52.

Kelly Sultzbach in *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* devotes a chapter to Woolf and a section entitled “The meaning of a more-than-human life in *To the Lighthouse*” in which she suggests that the role of the natural landscape in the novel is, in part, to serve as a source of the “creativity and rejuvenation that come from acknowledging humans as creatures embedded in a more-than-human world.”<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, the appreciation for humans’ ecological place within nature is tied to the visual representation Lily formulates in her art. Even as Mr. Ramsey seems to understand the scale of human accomplishment and existence is miniscule compared to that of the earth (“The very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare,” he philosophizes),<sup>63</sup> in the case of beauty, in visual value, he gives a highly anthropocentric perspective compared to Lily’s.

Further, while Lily presents the woman-artist, Woolf cues us to associate Mr. Ramsey’s gaze with the male scientist: “But now he turned, with his glasses raised to the scientific examination of her canvas.”<sup>64</sup> What Woolf’s marking and giving flesh to this previously unmarked body does for this scene is reflect more accurately the relationship of gendered observation and biases. Daston relates the obsession with objectivity in science with a suppression of the self, an active disembodiment imagined by scientific observers that found itself, mistakenly, it would seem, in particular opposition with art.

The subjectivity that nineteenth-century scientists attempted to deny was, in other contexts, cultivated and celebrated. In notable contrast to earlier views held from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment about the close analogies between artistic and the

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<sup>62</sup> Sultzbach, Kelly, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 120.

<sup>63</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 35.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

scientific work, the public personas of artist and scientist polarized during this period.<sup>65</sup> This strange logic fell out of that same binary that decided that the subjective was the eternal enemy of objective pursuits, not accounting for the highly subjective nature of science. Using the nineteenth-century trope of the polarized scientist and artist, Woolf goes beyond narrative technique to directly attack the myth of objectivity within the plot. The scientist, the representative of the bias-less viewer, watches the artist, the highly subjective translator of vision. Woolf writes that as he pondered the painting, he “took it scientifically in complete good faith. The truth was that all his prejudices were on the other side, he explained.”<sup>66</sup> Brilliantly, she makes her incarnation of the scientific gaze admit to the subject of his observation that he holds prejudices affecting his opinion. The very structure of the narration style informs us that there are two sets of subjectivity in play in the scene, but Mr. Ramsey’s confession of his own interests interfering with his observation drive the point further.

While Lily’s subjectivity allows her literally to paint a more complete picture of that which she observes, art in this discourse reveals more than Sultzbach’s suggestion that nature converses with individual creativity. Art, in this scene, is tightly tied to culture. If culture is to reflect civilization, then art, as its artifact, as evidence of human relationships with nature, should minimize the dominance of humans and express a more ecologically accurate scale of beauty that centers on more than the characteristics of sexual selection that make humans so attracted to their own species. Bonnie Kime Scott argues that ecocritical approaches to Woolf reveal a union between nature and culture by de-centralizing the normally dominant perspective:

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<sup>65</sup> Daston, *Objectivity*, 37.

<sup>66</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 53.

Whereas Western culture, and even the area of study designated the humanities, has long focused on a culture dominated by humans—usually white, usually male, often a colonial ruler—theories complicit with current ecofeminist and ecoliterary interpretation challenge related hierarchies of power. In many ways, post-patriarchal, postcolonial, post-humanist, and post-human, eco-Woolf encourages a view of the world that human men and women share with other sentient and uniquely talented beings as a fluid place with permeable boundaries. Nature and culture become one. The material world is complexly interwoven and interdependent but fragile, and more than ever in need of its ecoliterary interpreters to sustain it.<sup>67</sup>

With these gendered appreciations of natural beauty, Woolf seems to suggest that the male gaze is so skewed by sexual selection that it actually perceives in a different scale the aesthetic of the human form as more important than the environment of which it is a part. Mrs. Ramsey demonstrates her frustration with her husband, who, busy considering the beauty of his wife, is apparently inept in appreciating her flowers: “At that moment, he said, “Very fine,” to please her, and pretended to admire the flowers. But she knew quite well that he did not admire them, or even realise that they were there.”<sup>68</sup> This type of unsatisfactory attention to natural beauty unrelated to the feminine figure accounts for the poetic intermingling of the landscape and the human erotic employed by Hardy’s narrator. The attractiveness of the environment to a scientific spectator may be inseparable from its parallels to human features, making personification not so much a literary tool as a marker of an observer who has no better language to describe the non-human.

But Woolf’s work is not without the erotic. Sulzbach argues:

One of the ways Woolf reframes collective lesbian desire is through imagining alternative modes of erotic encounter with nature. As Derek Ryan also surmises, ‘Where the sexual politics of Woolf’s novels are concerned, then, the lines of becoming shared between human and nonhuman are crucial.’<sup>69</sup> Mrs. Ramsay’s

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<sup>67</sup> Scott, Bonnie K., “Ecocritical Woolf” in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2016), 329.

<sup>68</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 71.

<sup>69</sup> Sulzbach quotes Ryan’s *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

surrender to the stimulus presented by her surroundings—the crickets, the sea, the light across the floor—stirs new impulses of desire and satisfaction.”<sup>70</sup>

The great difference in the representation of the erotic in *To the Lighthouse* is not, then that Woolf extricates woman’s sexuality from the natural world; rather, she empowers the woman to eroticize herself. While other characters may remark on Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty, Woolf allows her the space to make her own comment, and the language of her thoughts lingers on the natural with a familiar anthropomorphic poeticism:

She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like the light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself.<sup>71</sup>

Mrs. Ramsay, the object of both masculine and feminine gazes, gives herself this languishing description of sharing form with nature toward a beauty that, unlike Hardy’s, is not Darwinian, but a return to the sublime. She venerates herself and her connection to nature, expressed as physical, as intimate as the knowledge and unity for which Lily Briscoe yearns.

### **Representing the Impact of Violence**

What Woolf so elegantly illustrates in the proximity-dependent transitions of her narration is the same link between human beings that becomes their devastation in the wake of violence. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of the individuals and the importance of each voice, she produces a highly ecological novel. In such a system, violence is not a unidirectional act with consequences for only one set of players. The inclusion of the perspectives of the both observer and the observed, the categorizer and the categorized, allows the latter to react and leaves room for more complicated representations of violence.

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<sup>70</sup> Sultzbach, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination*, 127.

<sup>71</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 63-64.

When Mrs. Ramsey denies her husband affection, we hear the pain it causes him and the power she wields in withholding. Hardy's narrator only ever gives Tess agency in physical violence, the more brutish, animalistic act of killing. But Woolf's women engage in conscious violence against men, with wit, strategy, and success. When victims themselves of rhetorical violence, they do not shrivel and wail or earn the reader's patronizing pity; instead, Woolf plants us inside their heads, pulling the psychological reaction of the character into the scope of the insult.

In her critique of masculine generalizations, Woolf proves that sexism is also a form of rhetorical violence, but she also grants her female characters strength in confronting it. Lily Briscoe grows angry at sexist commentary more often than hurt, and we know this because she is allowed to give her own perspective. While Hardy was able to represent the sexism wrought by the male gaze on his female heroine, Woolf uses her multi-perspective to overcome the passivity the masculine narrator's viewpoint implied of Tess. Woolf paints both the experience of objectifying women and the experience of being objectified.

“Women made civilisation impossible with all their ‘charm,’ all their silliness,” thinks Mr. Tansley, recalling the ineffable “charm” with which Hardy's narrator diagnoses field-women.<sup>72</sup> For Tansley, this feminine quality is a limitation, a lack of something necessary for the cultivation of high society, and if “civilisation” is the state of humans living at the greatest possible distance from dependency on the natural world, then charm must be what attaches women to their natural environment. When considered in such a sense, the remark is not particularly scathing, but it strikes the reader instantly as an insult, primarily because it belittles women as a whole, as a category, marking them as a sub-species less capable than men, less successful in the mythical progress of the human race. Andrew's

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<sup>72</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 85.



consciousness echoes this argument as he watches Minta: “she had no control over her emotions, Andrew thought. Women hadn’t.”<sup>73</sup> That both Tansley’s and Andrew’s remarks come across as insults without ever being spoken aloud is a product of the reader’s situation in the narrative. According to Woolf’s construction, rhetorical violence need not even hit its target to do damage; the generalizations aimed at fifty percent of the world population affect the reader in the way they affect women who experience the results of sexism in real life. These ideas, even when unspoken, spur, justify, and normalize behavior that maintains women as inferior, growing more harmful for their pervasiveness.

But when Woolf’s male characters have the gall to verbalize their sexist thoughts, the women respond. Enraged by Charles Tansley’s incessant sexist jabs, Lily wonders not at her sex’s inferiority, but at Tansley’s fragile masculinity: “Women can’t write, women can’t paint—what did it matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it?”<sup>74</sup> She dismisses his categorization, confident in her own skill in spite of whatever weight such a statement from an upper-class male might have once held. The significance of her confidence is an invalidation of both the generalization and of his authority.

By de-centering the perspective of the inflictor of rhetorical violence, Woolf generates a more realistic scale of the implications of sexist rhetoric as impactful for an entire sex, not isolated consequences for just inflictor and victim. This multi-perspective narration also then restores some agency to the victim, some space to push back and deny the generalization’s accuracy. The application of ecological interconnectedness to violence between humans utilizes individual, subjective perspectives to provide a more accurate

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<sup>73</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 77.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

understanding of its effect overall. But what happens when Woolf steps back even further and de-centralizes the human experience of violence and death?

### **Perspective in “Time Passes”**

Scholars have already spilt plenty of ink over the “Time Passes” section of Woolf’s novel. It earns such frequent attention and eager analysis because of its unconventional style, but its brilliance is due not merely to its demonstration of avant-garde technique; instead of purely inventing a new narrative form, the section inverts anthropocentric scales of time and experiences of trauma.

Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy asserts, “In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s internal monologue steps adroitly from human consciousness to mysterious other sources of representation. The best-known example of this is move is surely the ‘Time Passes’ section of *To the Lighthouse*”, suggesting that the stream-of-consciousness Woolf’s narrator inhabits is not even necessarily human itself.<sup>75</sup> Because knowledge inherently carries traces of the knower, I hesitate to adopt McCarthy’s suggestion in full. However, it does seem clear that the lack of human bodies and the minimization of human tragedy by bracketing death exemplify Woolf’s attempt to bring a bodiless consciousness into the house to relay its own observations with special attention to the natural. The most formidable argument against a non-human narrator (English language and personification aside) is the narrator’s description of the house free of human inhabitants in a state of loveliness, “a form from which life had departed.”<sup>76</sup> Nature fills the corners and quiet of the house, very much living, so why, in a novel so concerned with clarification, would the word “life” not extend to the natural?

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<sup>75</sup> McCarthy, Jeffrey Mathes. *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2015), 83.

<sup>76</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 129.

Even so, the “Time Passes” section is unparalleled in its attention to the natural and minimization of the human. We learn in brief asides of the deaths that might have taken pages in a late Victorian novel. First, the revered Mrs. Ramsey earns only a few lines for the last of her life—no moralizing, no talk of heaven, no discussion of bereavement: “[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty].”<sup>77</sup> Then, “[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well].”<sup>78</sup> The narrator even notes that the tragedy of her death is a categorization imposed by humans, and the house, teeming with a different kind of life, does not grieve it.

Andrew’s death is charged with something more, the background of war that places human life in a post-Darwinian scale of destruction: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous].”<sup>79</sup> In the theme of violence with consequences of grand scale, Woolf situates the Ramsay’s seemingly isolated existence in the midst of global violence. With the backdrop of World War I, Woolf posits that physical violence, that systematic, mass machine of war, has implications for the human species as a whole, all the way down to the dynamic of a family unit. In this way war is an ecological force, interrupting the stability of a species’ population and resulting in the death, rather than the survival, of that population’s fittest. That Woolf is able to make these remarks without dwelling on the deaths, the funerals, or the grief of the human characters demonstrates that the natural world lives on in spite of human

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<sup>77</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 128.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

violence against the environment and its own species. Consequently, Woolf achieves a perspective shift in the sense of human importance. She calls us to pause and reconsider Mr. Ramsay's musings from a few chapters prior: "Why, one asked oneself, does one take all these pains for the human race to go on? Is it so very desirable? Are we attractive as a species? Not so very, he thought, looking at those rather untidy boys..."<sup>80</sup>

The narrative style developed for *To the Lighthouse* guides Woolf's readers to critical thought on the nature of the objective. By subverting the traditional objective gaze, complicating the gendering of the subjective, and illustrating representations of violence, Woolf's multi-perspective narration achieves the goal of the objective while breaking its unachievable rule. It accurately portrays reality *without suppressing the subjective self*. The realness of Woolf's portrait of the Ramsay family and the place they inhabit, abandon, and re-enter is a result of narration that embraces instead of eschewing subjectivity in the pursuit of realism. Woolf's careful attention to attributing biases ensures that the subjective announces itself instead of maintaining the shroud of third-person that pervades much of nineteenth-century realist fiction and scientific writing. For women and nature, the subjects normally denied agency or misrepresented by that traditional narrator, Woolf's alternative demonstrates that the most accurate representation of reality requires multiple perspectives and recognizes the agency of each of many voices. When we remove objective and subjective from antithesis and from gender assignment, literature gains a crucial complication and a new completeness.

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<sup>80</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 89.

## IV. Conclusion

### Active Reading as Activism

As an English major, I have plenty of practice justifying what I choose to study. Of what use is reading fiction in the real world? Telling people outside of the department that I spent a year studying the narrative techniques of two novels earned a lot of uncomfortable nods. At a time when the humanities, and the English major, find their worth constantly questioned, I realized I wanted this thesis to amount to more than the mark of distinction on my degree or a stack of papers to which I could point while applying to graduate school. I wanted it to *do* more.

Accordingly, I aim for this project to serve more than just my own academic interests. I mean for my thesis to serve as a type of criticism that is active—really, a scholarship that is a form of activism. It is a form of literary criticism that intends to change something outside of the literary world by looking at the way we have portrayed women and the environment historically in writing.

As a product of culture, and as an intended realistic portrayal of society, realist fiction is evidence of the nature of human relationships to each other as well as our relationship to the non-human natural over time. Literature, as a reflection of the past and an influence on the present, is already inextricably tied to the real world. Literary criticism, then, should wield implications beyond academia. In order to achieve that, it must be active.

What I mean by active is, in part, a resistance to passivity. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* certainly teaches us not to fall asleep on the wagon or in a wood, lest a nasty fate and the likes of Alec D'Urberville befall us. The metaphor of sleep as a state of innocence or ignorance gave rise to the word *woke* at the center of recent conversations surrounding social

justice movements and activism. The term carries a sense of enlightenment and serves as a marker earned by having evolved out of ignorance into consciousness. Like *feminist*, however, the word in contemporary use has become a fashionable badge, an accessory to flaunt or an identity to claim on college campuses, but it only means to hold certain beliefs, not necessarily to act on them. When we wake up in the morning, perhaps after several slaps of the snooze button, we are not active. We still lie in bed, motionless, contemplating the perils of getting up. Thus, to be “woke” is to be in the stage just out of sleeping, no longer living in an eyes-shut dream state, but not necessarily doing anything to change the reality to which one has awoken.

Given current political policy in the United States, in which women’s rights and environmental protection have fallen under threat, enacting change has gained a renewed urgency. But if intellectuals were problematizing man’s exploitation of woman and nature in the nineteenth century, then why are we still dealing with it now?

Perhaps, as with Hardy’s narrator, problematizing is not enough. To read actively and engage in scholarship as a form of activism means to move beyond the mere recognition of problems by offering an alternative. As Hardy is to Woolf, the passive critic simply notices that harmful paradigms exist, perhaps going so far as to highlight the less-visible structures that form them, whereas the activist literary critic sees these structures *and* makes the effort to alter them in order to mitigate the damage. While being “woke” is the necessary precursor for altering harmful ideologies, enacting solutions requires more.

Over the course of this work, I have found that ecofeminism is a critical tool that has allowed me to discuss how the human relationship—and particularly women’s relationship—with our environment has been distorted, in literature and in reality, and to discuss how we

can think of that relationship differently. Just as students can be moved by what we read, we can be moved by *how* we read. Active, critical reading, and translating that reading into frameworks for thinking, advances the textual existence of argument and turns it into action. The ecofeminist readings I have provided in the previous chapters can directly translate to issues as real and as close as those on any college campus.

For example, one can use the ecofeminist approach to reframe the complexity of sexual assault. Why is it that at a university with more Angels than Alecs, most undergraduate women will have been sexually assaulted by the time they graduate? As Ellen Rooney and Catharine MacKinnon note,<sup>81</sup> the experience of rape is an issue of multiple subjectivities. Even though most assailants in cases of heterosexual rape are male, the masculine perspective still receives more weight for its historical connection to the objective narrator, while feminine associations with subjectivity often render the woman's side of the story fallible. In issues of he-said she-said, how often do antiquated ideas of the objective weigh in favor of the masculine voice? How often is the purity argument engaged against the woman? How often does the erotic gaze misinterpret the mere existence of a woman's body for an invitation?

Further, we can think of all humans as "part and parcel" of the landscape. That makes us players in ecosystems more interdependent than we can see from our own individual spheres. When we think of women's issues as ecological ones, as Woolf does, we can comprehend that rhetorical or physical violence against a few women will have ramifications for the entire community. For example, the misogynistic commentary broadcast in the 2016

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<sup>81</sup> Rooney, Ellen, "'A Little More than Persuading': Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence" in *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 87-114. Rooney quotes MacKinnon's "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: Towards Feminist Jurisprudence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8.4 (1983), 636.

presidential election was internalized by women and girls who were never necessarily intended as its targets. Nevertheless, the damage directed at a few wreaked havoc on the emotions of many, and I watched student productivity plummet in the days following the election. The entire campus suffered the weight of sexism. Eradicating it became more important once it was everyone's problem. If "women can't code, can't calculate" is the new "women can't write, can't paint," then we need to remove gender coding from "objective" pursuits in order to encourage more women in STEM fields. When climate change's rapid unraveling demands that we train more women in the natural sciences, those women must be empowered to voice their perspectives. In finding solutions for the health of a planet, ecofeminist thought prepares us to shed existing assumptions and be more creative. The consequences of our failure will be on the scale of our species.

The most salient benefit of applying ecofeminist criticism for me has been its insistence on asking *who* is telling the story, and to weigh that against what is being told. By practicing this mode of criticism, we can understand how much the storyteller influences the stories we tell ourselves. The role of the narrative is not limited to literature, but teaching the ecofeminist techniques of thinking critically about narrative mediation, especially as it applies to women and the environment, can help us to apply the same critical perspective outside of literature.

The mere existence of the ecofeminist branch of criticism should be a signal to the critical community that the subjection of women and nature in tandem has been and continues to be a problem recognized widely enough to merit its own area of study. Without criticism focused on dispelling this myth of women's and nature's inferiority, then we cannot hope to improve the numbers of women in "objective" fields, in the discussions of how to



combat climate change, or on the winning side of sexual assault cases. If it takes deconstructing the dominance of man, in both its masculine and human senses of the word, to reveal the implications of gendered objective/subjective discourse, then ecofeminism should be the baseline for critical thinking, not a niche of study.

Passivity allows all that Alec and Angel symbolize to continue to dominate the human narrative. In this project, then, I encourage an active critique of literature that proves itself both relevant and useful to contemporary issues. Active scholarship has the potential to provide readings that not only enhance our understanding of literary texts but also improve the quality of life of their readers. Active criticism searches for solutions by reaching across disciplines, as Woolf recognized the ecology of human consciousness, and creating new perspectives that better serve those harmed by existing schemas. This scholarship allows us to reconsider the purpose of literary criticism, and to leverage literature for social and environmental justice.

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