

POLISH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

**Journal of the Polish Association for the Study of English
(PASE)**

No. 11.2

Critical Posthumanism and Relationality

Guest editor Katarzyna Ostalska

Polish Association for the Study of English

ISSN 2545-0131 (print)

ISSN 2543-5981 (online)

Warsaw 2025

Publisher:

Polish Association for the Study of English
ul. Hoża 69, 00-681 Warszawa
ISSN 2545-0131 (print)
ISSN 2543-5981 (online)

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Critical Posthumanism and Relationality

“Relationality and Posthumanity” The COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

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The exhibition *The World Through AI: Exploring Latent Spaces* at Jeu de Paume, in Paris in 2025 rendered in an evolutionary way the spatial development of more-than-human entanglements with AI captured from a declarative non-anthropocentric standpoint. As the exhibition’s title suggests, the focal point is not human projections or anxieties concerning AI but the vision of the world that is processed, recorded and analysed by the machines in which the human presence is a small part of the larger network of capital, information, cultural and infrastructural relations, to name just a few. The curators of the exhibition capture this grid as follows:

What exactly do we mean by ‘AI’? How can we map this “hyper-object,” in which theories and technologies, energy resources and geological materials, human labour and digital data, institutions and infrastructures, state policies, corporate ideologies and financial capital are intricately interwoven?

Morton’s concept of “hyper-object,” understood as all-permeating, beyond scale, global, “viscous” phenomenon seems to resonate well with the idea of mapping artificial intelligence. *The World Through AI: Exploring Latent Spaces* might be read as the de-centralising of the human position and shifting the power balance to AI’s entanglements with the more-than-human world into the territories where interactions are crucial and formative but not always overtly discernible. Very much in this vein, Collective Intelligence (CI) signifies the relational capacity to generate the co-operative output to the creation of which contributed more-than-human organic and non-organic beings and entities. To a large extent, Collective Intelligence is the embodiment of the posthuman relationality put into practice in the 21st century.



(Fig. 1)

The section devoted to Collective Intelligence at *The World Through AI* encompassed, among others, two separate works (Fig.1) by Agnieszka Kurant (born in Lodz in 1978): the colourful “chemical gardens” (in the words of an artist) in the background called *Nonorganic Life 2* (2023) and the grey sculpture in the foreground entitled *A.A.I (System’s Negative) No. 6* (2016). Kurant’s *Nonorganic Life 2* renders the seemingly oxymoronic concept that defies the idea of life as exclusively organic, embedded in carbon and not in pixels. The posthuman relationality comprises minerals (i.e. from which computers are produced), the soil, microbes, human and non-human animals and many more entities, such as water for cooling the server factories. In *Nonorganic Life 2* the entanglements of the collective inputs, ranging from machines, human effort and mineral processes

have contributed to creating the artistic, collective vision of life that goes beyond bio-centrism. Kurant's *Nonorganic Life 2* is teeming with the mobile, Bennettian vibrant matter. To create this work of art, the artist has interacted with metals that make up computers (i.e. cobalt and copper), aluminium upon which crystalline composition was imprinted, and then painted with manganese, calcium, chromium, iron (TWTAI 2025: 106-107). Such pixelated, volatile artistic practices (Fig.1) bathed in green, red and blue appear to some extent to "mimic" carbon-based life but at the same time they remind one that what is considered to be "silicon-based" is still rooted in the earth minerals.

In a similar vein, Julian Charrière's *Metamorphosis LI* (2016) (Fig. 2) creates an assemblage made from the melted computer metals and the soil reversing the cycle of de-mineralization and industrial refuse process (TWTAI 2025: 58). The assemblage deconstructs what is considered "natural" and "cultural," "rare and precious" and "rubbish," showing the arbitrariness of these tags and their mutual entanglements.



Fig.2

Referring to computers made of minerals, Parikka observes that they transcend human time and scale, being “crystalized as part of the contemporary political economy: material histories of labor and the planet are entangled in devices, which, however, unfold as part of planetary histories” (2015: 58) and at the same time “social and technological relations and environmental and ecological realities” (2015: 46). Following this line of thinking, the Collective Intelligence, according to Kurant, can be applied ironically, i.e. to conceal the underpaid human cheap labour force that train AI globally (TWTAI 2025: 106). Clickworkers are low-wage recruits who categorise images, so that AI could be trained in recognising them. The foregrounded grey sculpture *A.A.I (System’s Negative) No. 6 Artificial AI* reminiscent of plant, animal and human matter entanglements (Fig. 1) embodies the combined, anonymous effort of clickworkers all over the world encapsulated in the zinc mould of the inside the thermite colony (TWTAI 2025: 106). Critical as the implication is, one cannot, however, resist the pure aesthetic pleasure of *A.A.I (System’s Negative) No. 6*, where more-than-human entities seem to be joined in their shared embrace, which further renders the human-machine-more-than-human fascination, not devoid of (energy-charged) eco-guilt. Moreover, one can further speculate whether anthropomorphised by the comparative ground thermites (standing for clickworkers) do not appropriate nonhuman animals’ work relations via anthropocentric analogies? As Braidotti warns, posthuman relationality (more-than-human “collectivity, relationality and hence community building”) cannot exist without posthuman ethics, “embodied and embedded” and with a “sense of accountability” (2013: 49) that rejects alleged human exceptionalism and speciesism. Starting from the present-day forms of the Collective Intelligence, the following article aims to go back to the earlier scientific research in biology and quantum mechanics to provide the background for understanding how posthuman relationality evolved and altered over the last decades.

The Symbiotic Planet

Lynn Margulis in her revolutionary study *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (1999) stresses that relationality is a symbiotic, evolutionary force which, thanks to different forms of interaction with more-than-human organisms, brings new species into life. In other words, Margulis applies the

concept of symbiosis (invented by Anton deBary in 1873) and symbiogenesis (attributed to Konstantin Merezhkovsky) (1999: 43) to the theory of the evolutionary emergence of species by “physical contact” (as she defines symbiosis) (1999: 9). Arguing that symbiosis is the force behind the evolution, Margulis claims “we are all symbionts on a symbiotic planet” (1999: 7). In this vein, Gilbert in “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals” compares humans to lichens (symbiotic organisms consisting of fungus and algae), which combined their strengths to create a multispecies body. None of the (human/nonhuman) organisms is an individual, claims Gilbert, but they all function relationally like lichens, co-operating with viruses, bacteria, other species that make up their corporeality. “We are all lichens,” Gilbert sums up (336). “In We are all Lichens 2,” Gilbert calls symbiosis “the signature of life,” adding that an organism is “a consortium of several different species.” He argues that due to molecular research on symbiosis, “genomic” individuality has been abandoned in many disciplines, such as anatomy, biology, immunology, and physiology.

Gilbert’s research has been popularised by Donna J. Haraway, who included the motto “We are all lichens” in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016: 30). In her study, Haraway pays tribute to Margulis’s symbiosis, at the same time proposing her own concept of symbiotic assemblages (holobionts) (2016: 60). Rather than autopoiesis (“self-organising”) Haraway opts for sympoiesis as an expression of relationality, as “making-with” and “wordling-with” (2016: 58). Multispecies relationality can take many different forms, for instance, interspecies kinship: “Make Kin, Not Babies!” as Donna J. Haraway puts it (2016: 103). Instead of reproducing, Haraway encourages to create bonds with the more-than-human world, acknowledging their personhood, “the stretch and recomposition of kin” and the shared genetic lineage of all earth creatures (2016: 103). Such interactions need to be “relentlessly relational, sympoietic, and consequential” (2016: 49). On the other hand, Haraway rightly observes that symbiosis does not necessarily mean all the sides will gain equally on such exchange since such dynamics rests upon countless numbers of participants (2016: 66). What is more, not all relations are based upon reciprocity and co-operation, some of them promote competition and exploitation. With the above in mind, Haraway advocates to “relationally unmake” structures that are based upon unjust power balance, i.e. Capitalocene (2016: 50).

Posthuman, Relational Ontology of Mattering

Posthuman relationality views people as inseparably entangled (on equal footing) with more-than-human beings, organic and nonorganic entities. Agentic and active matter persistently re-constitutes human and nonhuman beings, beyond the binary boundaries of the subject and object, the observer and the observed. Barad rightly observes that “‘We’ are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (2003: 828). Barad does not discriminate between human and more-than-human bodies, all of them perceived as “material-discursive phenomena” without “inherent boundaries and properties” (2003: 823). She claims that what makes human and more-than-human bodies appear as different is discursive exclusion and not any innate essence. Starting from the assumption that discursive practices are “specific material (re) configurings of the world” (2003: 828), Barad creates her relational ontology, in which meaning is entangled with matter and matter is entangled with meaning and they both are reconstituted simultaneously (2003: 822). She explains that a relational ontology based upon posthuman refiguration of material-discursive practices challenges divisions into words and things, nature and culture, knowing and being, outer and inner, “materiality in the fullness of their becoming” (2003: 812). Posthuman relationality operates upon relational ontology, becoming rather than being, posthuman ethics and making kin with more-than-human beings, machines, AI, minerals, NH animals, and many more.

The Special Issue of *The Polish Journal of English Studies* is devoted to “Relationality and Critical Posthumanism.” Each article included in the journal approaches this theme from its own, idiosyncratic angle, redefining the core ideas of posthuman relationality outlined here in its own manner and in new directions. The article “Cartographies: Relational Ecologies and Decolonial Belonging in the Works of Olga Tokarczuk and Amitav Ghosh” by Samiul Azim, Akidul Hoque, Farida Parvin places the readings in a postcolonial context, subverting the imperial past, as if Haraway would put it, “relationally unmaking it” and moving toward posthuman futurities, entangled with more-than-human beings and entities, climate and environmental justice. According to Tokarczuk, the acknowledgement of our entangled, differential, interconnected lives activates ethical practices on how to shape diverse futures (“Tender Narrator”). Tokarczuk in “Tender Narrator” declares:

Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time...It is a way of looking at the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and co-dependant on itself.

Remaining within the sphere of “relational unmaking”, “Cannibalistic Capitalism in Agustina Bazterrica’s *Tender Is the Flesh*” by Bartosz Jastrzębski explores the detrimental workings of Capitalocene (Moore), which monetises the natural world as the capital resource, damaging the relational balance of organic and non-organic multispecies networks. Capitalocene destroys “mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life” (Tsing 4), and by doing so, it opens the path to all kinds of abuses and power imbalances. Bazterrica’s novel, the human-eat-human world of late capitalism, is reaching the point of its own exhaustion. “Beastly Humans, Humane Beasts: The Blurring of Human-Animal Boundaries in Fairy Tale Retellings for Adults” by Kricie Ann Jonsson further elaborates the notion of transgressions done by human animals to non-human ones. The article criticises speciesism, which justifies any atrocities committed in the name of “humanity”. With her theory of the symbiotic evolution, Margulis provides the ground for the posthuman critique of speciesism and challenges, at the same time, the alleged superiority, uniqueness, and centrality of human beings. Claiming that *homo sapiens sapiens* does not occupy the highest and privileged position in the evolutionary chain, Margulis (1999: 4) proves that evolution does not discriminate between species and all of them are of equal importance. She maintains that:

All beings alive today are equally evolved. All have survived over three thousand million years of evolution from common bacterial ancestors. There are no ‘higher’ beings, no ‘lower animals,’ no angels, and no gods. (1999: 4)

Challenging speciesism, Kricie Ann Jonsson explores the narrative possibility of establishing non-hierarchical relations between HA and NHA in retellings of the fairy tales. Still, in the vein of speculative narratives for adults, “Posthuman

Love in *Her* and *Ex Machina*” by Maciej Piaskowski moves posthuman relational divagations into the sphere of AI, techno culture, and emotionality. Since human relations with computers, machines, AI have become as intimate as never before, the question arises how this affect can be transferred into the digital world and vice versa. Would machines gain autonomy in the emotional exchange or would they become objectified as much as animals have been for centuries, becoming pets or human toys. Finally, can humans, as suggested by Barad, see themselves and machines as the mutually entangled in the process of discursive-material mattering or the attachment to one’s ideas of human corporeality will prevent any meaningful relationality? Katarzyna Nowak in her article “Affect, Hope and Collective Consciousness as acts of radical rebellion in Wachowski’s *Sense8*” approaches posthuman relationality based upon affect and solidarity as a promising futuristic project in fostering collectiveness and cooperation which manages to become a viable, non-competitive alternative for the social development.

Last but not least, the notion of corporeality in the game *Soma* (body) is studied in detail via posthuman and transhuman readings by Karolina Sawa in her article “Fragmented Minds: SOMA and the Reconstruction of Identity”. The video game *Soma* (2015) contemplates the transhuman idea of the mind uploading into the computer or a body of a different person. Karolina Sawa asks vital questions about the continuity of posthuman subjectivity and the integration of past memories into a corporeality that is not an organic one. Her article also offers a critical comparative study of posthuman and transhuman divergencies and shared areas.

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Relational Ecologies and Decolonial Belonging in the Works of Olga Tokarczuk and Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract: This article investigates the literary cartographies forged by Olga Tokarczuk and Amitav Ghosh through a comparative analysis of their works, focusing on how mythscapes and memoryscapes engender relational ecologies and decolonial forms of belonging. Against the backdrop of ecological crisis, mass displacement, and epistemic fragmentation in the Anthropocene, both authors craft narrative terrains that unsettle Enlightenment historiography and anthropocentric paradigms. Drawing on posthumanist theory (Barad, Braidotti), multispecies ethics (Haraway, Tsing), and postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan, Nixon), this study employs close textual analysis to examine how myth, memory, and more-than-human agency configure new forms of community. It combines close reading with comparative ecocritical methods and formal analysis, situating the texts within archival, historical, and affective registers to trace how narrative form mediates ecological knowledge. Tokarczuk's *Flights* and *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* interlace Polish folklore and ecofeminist motifs to challenge human sovereignty, while Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* weave indigenous myths into narratives of environmental precarity and colonial displacement. These texts function as posthuman cartographies—maps of entangled life-worlds where human and nonhuman agencies co-constitute history, kinship, and place. Through fragmented aesthetics, polyvocal narration, and diasporic geographies, Tokarczuk and Ghosh resist the cartographic logics of empire, instead envisioning planetary solidarities rooted in relational ethics. This article argues that their literary forms do not merely reflect ecological entanglement but enact

it, generating speculative imaginaries for decolonial futures. By offering empirically grounded interventions into debates on posthuman ethics and decolonial memory, the article advances methodological and pedagogical frameworks for literary studies and suggests policy-relevant imaginaries for cultivating planetary solidarities. In reconfiguring the spatial, temporal, and ontological coordinates of belonging, their works provide crucial insights for re-imagining narrative ethics and global ecologies in a time of planetary instability.

Keywords: posthumanism, decolonial ecocriticism, mythscape, memoryscape, relational ecology, multispecies kinship

Introduction

Myth and memory have become reconceived in recent scholarship as dynamic cartographies of knowledge, linking past, place, and identity across time. Following Duncan Bell's account of the "mythscape" as a discursive realm where collective myths are continually forged and refashioned (Bell 2003), this paper reads Olga Tokarczuk and Amitav Ghosh as practitioners of narrative cartography. Likewise, memory studies scholars describe a *global memoryscape* in which recollections and narratives circulate through ever-complex, transnational networks (Phillips and Reyes 2011, 108-111). Together, mythscapes and memoryscapes serve as layered maps of cultural, ecological, and spiritual knowledge that can disrupt linear, Enlightenment histories. They encode alternative epistemologies – oral lore, ritual recollection, ancestral tales – that survive alongside official archives (Bell 2003, 63). In an era of ecological crisis and global migration, these cartographies matter profoundly: they shape how communities remember environmental losses and imagine future relations to land, species, and each other.

This study focuses on two globally influential authors – Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk and Indian writer Amitav Ghosh – whose literatures vividly entwine myth and memory with posthumanist and ecological themes. Tokarczuk's works frequently blur the boundary between human and animal, or history and fairy tale, conjuring *animist* forests and eschewing human supremacy. Critics note that in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009), Tokarczuk "lets mythical figurations appear, such as the Fury and the Wolf, whereby the destructive powers of nature are unleashed" (Mortensen 2021, 227). Similarly, Ghosh's novels weave local mythologies and histories into narratives of climate and colonial

upheaval – for example, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) interlaces the Sundarbans legend of the goddess Bon Bibi as an environmental “green text” binding people to place (Soni 2022). Both authors respond to urgent contemporary contexts: intensifying climate change, ecological collapse, and massive displacement challenge conventional human-centered storytelling. As Ghosh himself warns, in the Anthropocene the old “calculus of probability” (gradual change and predictable causality) has become unsustainable, and Tokarczuk’s works likewise insist that our assumptions about nature and human agency be radically rethought.

In light of this crisis, mythscapes and memoryscapes offer new ways of (re) mapping reality. This paper probes how Tokarczuk and Ghosh employ myth and memory to challenge Enlightenment humanism, linear history, and nationalist narratives. In what ways do their stories constitute posthuman cartographies – stories that map relational networks of humans, nonhuman beings, and landscapes? How do nonhuman agents and ecospiritual ontologies (spirits, cosmic forces, animal protagonists) reconfigure community, kinship, and belonging? And crucially, how do these literary practices resist or rework Eurocentric epistemologies and colonial worldviews? These questions address the urgent need for new narrative forms in an age of “everything change” – times when existential threats like climate disasters and pandemics reveal the limits of anthropocentric histories and fixed borders (Neumann 2019, 91).

To frame this inquiry, we draw on a range of interdisciplinary theories. Critical posthumanism and new materialism (Barad 2007; Braidotti 2013) remind us to decentre the human subject and to recognize the entanglement of all bodies and forces. For instance, Karen Barad reconceptualizes agency not as a property of isolated individuals but as “a dynamism of forces” in which entities emerge through mutual *intra-action* (Barad 2007, 141). Donna Haraway’s (2016) notion of multispecies kinship emphasizes *sym-poietic* (co-constructed) worlds where humans and others co-evolve. Anna Tsing’s (2015) account of “contamination” in global supply chains foregrounds unpredictable assemblages of life. Postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Nixon 2011) situates all this within histories of empire and development, insisting that we contest “Western ideologies of development” that have alienated people from land (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 19). In Huggan and Tiffin’s words, postcolonial ecocriticism values the “non-instrumentality” of literature and its power to mobilize ethical awareness (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 33). Our methodology is comparative literary analysis, inflected by these frameworks: we closely read selected works by Tokarczuk

and Ghosh, interpreting their use of myth and memory as generating relational ecologies and decolonial modes of belonging. In doing so, we seek to reveal how their narratives form cartographies that stretch beyond nationstate borders and anthropocentric subjectivity, and that open onto plural histories and lifeworlds.

Literature Review

This review synthesizes theoretical frameworks essential for analyzing how Tokarczuk and Ghosh employ mythic and mnemonic narratives to envision post-human and decolonial ecologies. Rather than surveying disconnected fields, we foreground concepts that directly enable a comparative reading of their literary “mythsapes” and “memoryscapes” as subversive cartographies.

Myth, Memory, and Subversive Cartography

The study of collective memory recognizes it as a contested site, a dynamic memory boom where narratives of the past are actively negotiated (Wertsch and Roediger 2008, 318). Pierre Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* and related work on “memoryscapes” (Phillips and Reyes 2011) understand these as performative cultural landscapes. Duncan Bell’s (2003) complementary notion of the “mythscape” is pivotal here, defining it as the temporal realm wherein communal myths, distinct from personal memory, are continuously articulated and contested. For Bell, myth functions as a more open-ended, symbolic narrative that can encode alternative visions of time, space, and community (Bell 2003, 299–301). This theoretical pairing is directly relevant to Tokarczuk and Ghosh, whose novels construct precisely such fluid narrative landscapes. Their mythsapes become vehicles for counter-histories and heterochronic perspectives that challenge linear, progressive time – a feature noted in subaltern and indigenous cosmologies (Trouillot 1995, 152). Thus, the contestation inherent in collective memory and myth is not a tangential issue but the very mechanism through which both authors destabilize anthropocentric historiography and map cyclical or layered temporalities.

The Posthuman and Decolonial Turn: A Theoretical Convergence

To understand the ecological vision in these reconfigured mythsapes, we engage posthumanist and new materialist thought, which dismantles human

exceptionalism. This trajectory developed through key interventions: Donna Haraway's early work on cyborgs and companion species (Haraway 2016, 97), which called for multispecies kinship; Jane Bennett's (2009) vital materialism, attributing agency to nonhuman matter; and Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism, which entangles matter and meaning. Rosi Braidotti synthesizes a posthuman subjectivity defined by embodied, relational networks (Braidotti 2006, 197). These ideas find practical resonance in Anna Tsing's (2015) ethnography of precarious, multispecies lifeways in capitalist ruins. However, applied uncritically, such frameworks risk universalizing and eliding colonial power structures. Therefore, our analysis deliberately aligns them with decolonial perspectives that assert the value of multiple ontologies and epistemologies (Mignolo and Escobar 2013, 71). This synthesis is crucial for reading Tokarczuk's Polish-European contexts and Ghosh's South Asian postcolonial settings, ensuring that their posthuman imaginations are grounded in specific historical and political ecologies.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism as an Integrative Framework

Postcolonial ecocriticism explicitly bridges these theoretical currents, providing an integrated lens for our comparative analysis. As Huggan and Tiffin (2010) establish, it critiques "developmentalism" and the "slow violence" of environmental injustice disproportionately inflicted on marginalized communities (Nixon 2011, 45). Its core commitment is to examine how literary form performs ethical and political work, valuing narrative's "non-instrumentality" in awakening readers to socio-ecological entanglement (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 33). This tradition directly situates Tokarczuk and Ghosh alongside figures like Arundhati Roy, who fuse aesthetic innovation with activism. It provides the critical apparatus to assess how each author's mythopoetic strategies serve as narrative resistance against anthropocentric and neo-colonial exploitation.

Existing Scholarship on Tokarczuk and Ghosh: Foundations and Gaps

Current analyses of the two authors, while insightful, remain siloed and highlight the need for the integrated approach proposed here. Tokarczuk's scholarship consistently notes her ecofeminist and posthumanist impulses. Michna (2020, 145) praises her "tender narrator" and the blurring of human-animal boundaries. Mortensen (2021, 227), for instance, demonstrates how *Drive Your*

Plow Over the Bones of the Dead uses mythic archetypes (e.g., the Fury) to frame nature's revenge, unsettling anthropocentrism. However, debates persist about potential romanticism or simplistic dichotomies in her approach (Falcon 2022, 19; Doğanay 2025, 82), tensions our analysis will engage. *Amitav Ghosh*: His work is central to debates on climate fiction. His critique in *The Great Derangement* (2016) of the modern novel's failure to address the climate crisis champions a return to non-Western, mythic storytelling modes (Ghosh 2016, 77). Analyses of novels like *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Land* and *Jungle Nama* examine his use of indigenous myths (e.g., Bon Bibi) as "green texts" that encode conservation ethics and model human-nonhuman reciprocity (Jean-François et al. 2022, 24). Yet, scholars question the efficacy of his blend of realism and the speculative. Despite these rich discussions, a systematic comparative study linking Tokarczuk and Ghosh through the constitutive concepts of mythscapes and memoryscapes from a combined posthuman-decolonial perspective is absent. This article fills that gap. Building on Mortensen's (2021) and Soni's (2022, 489) insights, we rigorously apply the integrated framework outlined above to articulate how both authors, through their distinctive narrative strategies, chart new modes of belonging in a more-than-human world. In doing so, we remain attentive to critical debates about romanticization and the political risks of posthuman narratives, aiming for a nuanced account of their literary cartographies (Caracciolo 2020, 86).

Mythscapes and Memoryscapes: Temporal and Narrative Reworldings

Tokarczuk and Ghosh deploy mythic time and layered memory precisely to unsettle linear, Enlightenment chronologies and to open new "cartographies" of the past and future. Following Bell's formulation of the mythscape as the "temporally and spatially extended discursive realm", where collective myths are continuously forged and refashioned (Bell 2003, 72–73), both authors weave folkloric, religious, and ancestral narratives into their storytelling. Tokarczuk, for example, interlaces Polish folklore and a sense of deep time into novels like *Flights* and *Primeval and Other Times*, where episodes of contemporary history coexist with echoes of primeval rituals and spectral animal apparitions. She observes that myths never really happened but are always going on, persisting not only through the adventures of ancient heroes, but in the most popular stories of today (Anders 2021, 105). This insistence on myth as the "building material" of meaning (Tokarczuk 2019) allows Tokarczuk's narrators to collapse past

and present – in effect treating history as a *mythscape* in Bell’s sense – and to suggest that human destinies are entangled with inscrutable forces. Likewise, Ghosh frames regional legends within sprawling historical narratives. *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, for instance, juxtapose colonial-era chronicles of trade and migration with local myths of Bon Bibi or Manasa Devi, recasting seemingly coincidental events (a shipwreck, a snake bite, a refugee crossing) as part of long, mythologized circuits. As literary critic Paddaja Roy argues, in *Gun Island* Ghosh “employs the legend of Bandooki Sadagar or the Gun Merchant and connects it to the myth of Chand Sadagar to provide a narrative structure in *Gun Island*. Myths and legends are employed to build up a narrative platform for broaching the question of the Anthropocene”, by which the boundaries between mythic time and geological time blur (Roy 2024, 190). In this way, mythic events (a goddess’s vengeance, magical cures) operate on the same temporal plane as hurricanes, rising tides, and capitalist globalization.

This mythopoetic narrative strategy reframes colonial and national histories as incomplete maps. It challenges the “single, linear History” of nation-states by positing multiple, oft-contradictory temporal strands. Scholars have noted that such plural chronologies align with the posthuman predicament: Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that anthropogenic climate change “spells the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (Chakrabarty 2009, 201). In effect, Tokarczuk’s and Ghosh’s novels enact this collapse by refusing strictly “human” chronology. For example, *Flights* interrupts biographical narrative with a short story about a Polish traveller’s body preserved in a Polish museum, drawing together medieval pilgrimage and modern medical research. Similarly, Ghosh’s *Ibis Trilogy* spans the Opium Wars to mid-19th-century diasporas, yet it is punctuated with chapters on starfish, banyan trees, and opium dens that evoke mythic cycles of decay and rebirth. These narrative juxtapositions create a *memoryscape* – a woven field of recollections and cultural imaginaries – that extends beyond any one community or era. The very term “*memoryscape*” suggests (by analogy with Bell’s *mythscape*) a terrain of memory: a fluid, multi-sited space where stories overlap. As Gülüm et al. note in a recent survey of memory studies, scholars have begun to move “from memory place to mnemonic space to planetary memory”, viewing memories and environments as “embedded, co-constitutive and co-constructed” (Gülüm et al. 2024, 364). Tokarczuk’s and Ghosh’s work exemplifies this shift: collective traumas (colonial violence, war, ecological disaster) are transposed into landscapes

and beings (rivers, mountains, animals) that themselves “remember” – or at least bear the imprint of – earlier ages.

Migratory geographies further complicate these temporal reworldings. Ghosh’s narratives often travel by sea and river, tracing the courses of human migration (indentured labourers across the Indian Ocean, refugees fleeing war-torn homelands, traders crossing the Atlantic). These oceanic currents carry myths and memories as much as goods, so that *Sea of Poppies* imagines the ocean itself as a locus of shared history and foreboding. In parallel, Tokarczuk’s *Flights* is structured as a series of journeys – through airports, along borders, between legal and magical realms – each disorienting the reader’s sense of time and place. In *Flights*, for instance, the recurring motif of the breath (a time-based physiological process) connects a medieval Magyar princess, an eighteenth-century Mongolian rider, and a modern-day philosopher, thus knitting together distant lands and epochs. Such fluid subjectivities dissolve rigid identities. Characters often “fall off the radar” of national narratives, as Tokarczuk (2019) herself puts it, traversing zones (both literal and imaginative) where linear history gives way to “the multiplicity of voices” (Novák 2024, 416).

Critically, this mythic-mnemonic approach is not without tensions. On the one hand, it offers a dehierarchizing temporality – an alternative to nationalist or capitalist one-way history. On the other, myths can be ambiguous carriers of ideology. Tokarczuk’s evocation of Slavic pagan myths, for example, risks being read as a nostalgic re-tribalization if not self-consciously contextualized and indeed, Tokarczuk often undercuts pure nostalgia with irony or contemporary skepticism. And while Ghosh’s insertion of local legends into global histories decouples world events from Eurocentric timelines, it may run the risk of “localizing” climate narratives in ways that obscure broader responsibility. Nevertheless, by foregrounding memoryscapes and mythic temporality, both writers unsettle easy chronologies and open spaces for remembering and re-imagining – laying the groundwork for the more explicitly ecological and posthuman turns in their work.

Relational Ecologies and Multispecies Kinship

The mythic and mnemonic strategies above prepare the ground for a second axis of Tokarczuk’s and Ghosh’s posthuman cartographies: relational ecologies and kinship that transcends the human. Both authors populate their narratives with vibrant nonhuman others – rivers, forests, animals, even pathogens – as agents,

interlocutors, or ancestral figures. In doing so, they enact the kind of multispecies entanglement that contemporary theorists like Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing advocate. As Haraway famously urges us to “make kin, not babies” (Haraway 2016, 103) – to reconfigure political community around cross-species caregiving and responsibility – Tokarczuk and Ghosh similarly construct literary worlds where human characters must acknowledge their debts to the more-than-human.

Tokarczuk’s fiction repeatedly insists on animistic reciprocity. In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, the protagonist, a rural astrologer, becomes an eco-feminist outcast precisely by treating animals as moral subjects: she speaks of wolves and deer as her “clients” and argues that the murdered victims she avenges are in fact the “beatified” animals wronged by hunters. This radical personification is underscored by justice folklore (the Great Goddess atop the hill) and a haunting murder mystery that is resolved only by understanding animal vengeance as a meaningful narrative. In *Primeval and Other Times*, the female boar¹ is charged with communal meaning: its presence and disappearance structure collective memory, ritual expectation, and the local language of love and loss. Although Tokarczuk’s boar is land-anchored and culturally distinct from oceanic cosmologies, this land-based animacy converges thematically with the conceptual move Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes as sea ontologies, where the ocean becomes origins, ancestor, matter, as well as kin (DeLoughrey 2015, 2). Though DeLoughrey’s context is Afrofuturism, her formulation captures Tokarczuk’s ethos: nature is not a backdrop but a family of ancestors and siblings.

Ghosh, too, foregrounds multispecies relationships, often in explicitly aquatic contexts. *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove estuary teeming with tigers, dolphins, crocodiles, and leeches, where human survival depends on reading animal signs. Here, the Bon Bibi myth – a tale of a forest goddess who serves as protector of both human and animal worlds – becomes a ritual of co-belonging. The novel’s outsiders (a science translator, a refugee) must learn from local oral parables and ecological wisdom to navigate the

1 Both the terrestrial and the marine accounts displace human exceptionalism by making nonhuman bodies sites of ancestry and ethical relation. This comparison does not imply direct influence or historical continuity between Tokarczuk and Afrofuturist thought; rather, it highlights a convergent narrative strategy in which nonhuman figures (the boar; the ocean) are enlisted to reconfigure kinship and responsibility beyond the strictly human.

treacherous waters; failing to do so leads to calamity. As critics have observed, Ghosh thus “cuts through simplistic ideas of human-nonhuman relations”, depicting a world where community is literally shared by multiple species (Smith 2018). In *Gun Island*, the slippage between human and nonhuman is even more literal: the demonic snake of legend, pursued by a Western-educated protagonist, comes to embody both climate change (a flooding storm) and the forgotten dignity of displaced creatures. The protagonist’s encounters with coastal fishermen, venomous cobras, and an elderly matron grounded in folklore ultimately form a chain of kinship that spans across human and animal lives.

These narratives align with a growing scholarship on multispecies ethnography and relationality. Scholars like Anna Tsing (2015) emphasize that in a world of disrupted ecosystems, life appears as “assemblages” of multiple species co-evolving in precarious habitats. Tokarczuk and Ghosh dramatize just such assemblages: whether it is in the mangrove’s flux or the Polish moors’ ruins, human agency is shown to be enmeshed with animal agency. For instance, Ghosh’s portrayal of the Gangetic River dolphins (the “divyachari”) and the endangered rhesus macaques treats them not as mere symbols but as community-members whose fortunes are yoked to human folly and colonial histories. This invites a Harawayan reading: kinship here is a way of understanding species boundaries not as fixed but as permeable and political, requiring humans to “stay with the trouble” of Earth’s contingent ecology (Haraway 2008, 150).

Relational ecologies also manifest in oceanic imaginaries. Oceans in Ghosh’s novels are not empty highways but living membranes of memory. The sea carries the ghosts of indentured laborers, the sounds of ritual songs, and the rising pangs of climate change. One of Ghosh’s characters remarks that goddesses and oceanic storms share something – the “incredible connections” between the human and the terrestrial (Roy 2024). In this sense, Ghosh’s work exemplifies what some call oceanic thinking or critical kinship with the sea: recognizing that the ocean is a co-agent in history. The study of oceanic fiction suggests that attending to the fluid space of the deep can transform our very sense of self (DeLoughrey et al. 2015, 120). Tokarczuk’s attention is less explicitly marine, but she too revives the uncanny power of place-based ecologies. Her characters often dissolve into the chaotic communication of weather, plants, and geologic time. In one passage of *Flights*, for example, the narrator muses on the common body burden shared by all travelling humans – from nineteenth-century balloons to modern airplanes – as if the atmosphere itself is a collaborator in human mobility.

Some postcolonial ecocritics have warned that enchanted portrayals of the nonhuman may only serve to exoticize otherness and help the pueblo shake off anthropocentrism. However, in both Tokarczuk and Ghosh, enchantment is linked to an ethical responsibility rather than the escapist romanticism of traditional folklore. For example, in *Bon Bibi's* sanctuary, it is a solemn pact: humans who exploit the Sundarbans must respect its spirits. Similarly, Tokarczuk's old astrologer in *Drive Your Plow* does not romanticize wolves; instead, she condemns humanity's cruelty toward them. Plumwood's emphasis on mutual constraint echoes perfection because relations among creatures are conceptually and existentially limiting (Plumwood 2002, 23). By embracing muteness in messy ambivalence rather than crystal-clear centrism, Tokarczuk and Ghosh demonstrate what belonging can mean through reciprocal responsibilities that encompass humans, animals, plants, and geological forms.

Decolonial Belonging and Posthuman Cartographies

Finally, Tokarczuk and Ghosh locate these mythic-memory and multispecies strands within a decolonial imagination of belonging. Their works contest Eurocentric cartography – both intellectual and literal – by mapping the world from subaltern and transnational vantage points. In doing so, they enact a form of posthuman cartography: one that is relational (built from interdependencies) and decolonial (in that it subverts imperial epistemes).

For both authors, decolonial belonging involves re-situating knowledge. Ghosh explicitly critiques the colonial roots of the climate crisis in *The Great Derangement* (2016): he argues that Western mastery projects (on land and sea) produced a “consensus trance” that rendered many people “worldless” – cut off from local ecological knowledges (Ghosh 2016). His fiction reflects the alternative: characters in *Sea of Poppies* or *River of Smoke* learn indigenous navigation and agro-ecological methods from bhagirathas or opium farmers, recognizing bonds cut by the empire. In *Hungry Tide*, the American biologist Piya rejects academic isolationism to embrace the incommensurable logic of Sundarbans villagers. This narrative valorizes a “mosaic” of knowledges: Islamic, Hindu, Adivasi, Western science, all informed by local memoryscapes. Tokarczuk similarly dissents from national origin stories. Her *Books of Jacob*, for instance, portrays early 19th-century Polish Jews as a diasporic cast of mercenaries, Karaite Jews, Sufi-influenced heretics, and peasant cultists, undermining any straightforward Polish nationalist myth. By focusing on characters

who traverse boundaries – the eponymous Jacob Frank himself claimed Messianic authority outside established Judaism – Tokarczuk suggests that identity is layered and unstable, owed to multiple cultures and eras. This migratory perspective resonates with Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic,” or Arjun Appadurai’s (1990) concept of “diasporic” scape, which emphasize fluid exchange over bounded ethnicity. In short, both authors relocate belonging *subversively* – their maps are drawn not from capital cities but from ship routes, refugee paths, and ecological corridors.

This decolonial turn in narrative form is inseparable from the posthuman critique of Western dualisms. Tokarczuk and Ghosh both resist the legacy of “terra-centrism” by unsettling the very notion of a fixed human subject at the centre of meaning. They realize what Karen Barad calls an *agential realism*, in which phenomena arise through entangled intra-actions (Barad 2007, 26). Instead of viewing land and people as resources and subjects, their texts portray both as “phenomena” – ongoing performances of relationship. For example, the boundary between nature and history is never stable in these works. Rivers have voices and memories; homes are haunted by the future; technology (the aeroplane, the internet) can reveal the real as mythic. This perspectival fluidity is deeply compatible with Critical Posthumanism (Braidotti 2013, 50), which decouples the human from mastery and redefines agency as a distributed quality.

Both authors are also keenly aware that narrative space is political space. Ghosh’s postcolonial ecocriticism underlies his insistence that environmental crises disproportionately affect formerly colonized populations (Jindal et al. 2025, 318). His book *The Nutmeg’s Curse* asks readers to trace how colonial commodity chains (nutmeg, opium, fossil fuels) brought ecological violence into remote communities. By portraying, for instance, a Bengali boatman’s kinship with a ringed Pallas’s cat or a Sundarbans villager’s debt to Bon Bibi, Ghosh calls for *planetary solidarity* grounded in marginality, not in Euro-American futurism. Tokarczuk likewise has voiced (in lectures and interviews) a belief in a panhuman family of stories and myths that reaches beyond the nation-state (Lei 2024, 1758). Her embrace of Afro-Asiatic medieval lore (Zinkireses of Persia) and Native American legends (she cites Navajo ritual in *Flights*) gestures toward a cosmopolitan empathy that challenges both Eastern European nationalism and Western consumerism.

Notably, both writers reject nostalgic primitivism as much as they reject uncritical modernism. Tokarczuk’s characters are not exhorted to “return” to an imagined Golden Age of harmony; rather, they are shown struggling with contradictions (a hunter who preserves a unicorn’s horn but poisons wolves, a

communist collector who fetishizes Native American relics). Ghosh's postcolonial families do not idealize tradition; his Hindu priests sometimes clash with the very fishermen who also worship Hindu deities. These tensions reflect an acute awareness of conceptual flaws in romanticizing the past. As Rob Nixon observes, creating decolonial spaces requires "memories of the future" (Nixon 2011, 2) – stories that acknowledge oppression even as they reassert agency. Tokarczuk and Ghosh meet this challenge by constantly problematizing their own mythic imaginaries. The result is a literary cartography that is neither utopian nor despairing, but conditional: belonging emerges in dialogue with nonhuman others and suppressed histories, rather than as an idealized origin.

In sum, Tokarczuk and Ghosh mobilize mythic memory and multispecies networks to redraw the map of belonging along posthuman lines. Their works depict a world in which humans are never fully autonomous agents, but part of living webs that include gods, ghosts, and animals. Through this vision – grounded in migratory geographies, fluid subjectivities, and oceanic imaginaries – they articulate a form of decolonial belonging that is relational and regenerative. Like cartographers of a decentred Earth, they chart spaces of encounter: where myth becomes terrain, memory becomes soil, and kinship extends beyond the human.

Aesthetics of Relationality: Literary Form and Narrative Ethics

Tokarczuk's and Ghosh's novels deliberately make form serve as ethical praxis. Their fragmentation, polyphony, and hybridity are not stylistic flourishes but instruments of resistance to anthropocentric and colonial logics. As Rosi Braidotti argues, critical writing can "enact the visualization of ethical relationality" by acknowledging "the constitutive presence of otherness within and all around the self" (Braidotti 2002, 165). Tokarczuk's fiction exemplifies this approach: it refuses a single, authoritative perspective and instead layers multiple voices and timelines. In *Primeval and Other Times*, for example, Radomil Novák notes that "there is no single truth, no single perspective" – each character's viewpoint exists in contrapuntal relation to others (Novák 2024, 411).

Tokarczuk's (2010) famous "constellation novels" make this explicit. *Primeval and Other Times* comprises 84 short, fragmentary chapters. Novák observes that despite these digressions, the pieces coalesce into "a strict fugue" whose cantus firmus is a cosmogonic theme (Novák 419). Though the narrative "meander[s] and take[s] various diversions", its four fundamental themes (space, time, God,

people) constantly recur as counterpoints (Novák 2024, 416). In effect, readers must assemble disjointed vignettes “into a single pattern”, discovering “entire constellations in minor events” (Novák 2024, 427). This joining of fragments makes visible the interconnectedness of all things.

This strategy is equally striking in *Flights* (2017). La Torre Lagares (2020) describes *Flights* as “a work of art comprised of 116 vignettes freely interconnected by the sense of nomadism as creative act” (2). The novel deliberately abandons linear plot in favor of these mobile fragments, thereby “instilling and re-signifying the brokenness of the novel in the twenty-first century” (La Torre Lagares 2020, 2). Readers are compelled to piece together a kaleidoscope of impressions – a dying professor’s cosmology, a mysterious inscription, a beauty pageant – into a global mosaic of meaning. In so doing, *Flights* enacts Tokarczuk’s own credo that reality “can be viewed from many angles” and is never “merely realistic” (Tokarczuk 2019, 227).

Form and content thus intertwine as epistemological resistance in Tokarczuk’s work. Writing against the Enlightenment insistence on singular truth, her fragmented style “resist[s] the gravitational pull of the master signifier” (Braidotti 2002, 165). By shattering narrative coherence, she loosens the “despotic grip of language” (Braidotti 2002, 165), forcing readers to confront uncertainty and plurality. Her novels refuse neat closure and instead overflow with wonder and dissent. As one reviewer puts it, Tokarczuk reminds us that we intuitively perceive a world “full of secrets” and “impenetrable” facets (Novák 2024, 110). In this way, fragmentation and multiplicity become ethical gestures: by collapsing conventional boundaries between subjects, it situates the reader within an ontologically entangled web.

Ghosh’s narratives enact similar moves in a different idiom. His novels routinely situate diverse chronologies and genres in dialogue. *Gun Island*, for instance, interleaves a Bengali snake-goddess legend with Kolkata’s colonial past and a contemporary climate refugee’s journey (Ghosh 2019). Roy observes that Ghosh’s use of myth provides “a space to explore identity in the context of eco-precarity”, by giving nature and legend a kind of agency (Roy 2024, 190). Likewise, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) alternates between an American scientist, a Bengali translator, and the goddess Bon Bibi, juxtaposing marine biology with folklore. No single epistemology dominates; instead, science, history, and myth coexist in a continuum that subverts strict modernist causality.

Ghosh also weaves linguistic plurality into his form. Murshed Haider Choudhury notes that in *River of Smoke* “the language of the novel shifts to Chinese-English or pidgin” as the story moves into China (Ghosh 2011, 5). In *Sea of*

Poppies (2008), Indian dialects, French Creole, and English intermingle without translation. Ghosh even dramatizes translation failures – in a letter from *River of Smoke*, a character scolds a correspondent for rendering the French bâton-à-foc literally as “foc-stick”, correcting that the English should be “jib-boom” (Choudhury 2019, 6). These heteroglossic details evoke colonial contact zones and underscore that no single language can enclose reality, reflecting Bakhtinian heteroglossia and a decolonial scepticism of monolingual norms.

By such means, both authors enact what Ila calls counter-hegemonic storytelling – narratives that foreground “marginalized voices”, both human and nonhuman (9) to challenge extractivist ideologies. The result is an ethics of attentiveness and kinship: humans are never the sole protagonists, but are entwined with animals, spirits, and landscapes. Critics might worry that extreme fragmentation could alienate readers or weaken empathy. Yet in the posthuman frame this disruption is precisely the point. These novels do not offer tidy closure but gesture toward ongoing processes. As Nixon (2011) warns, true violence is often “incremental and out of sight” (2); only by unsettling narrative conventions can literature render that slow violence visible. In aligning form with ethical intent, Tokarczuk and Ghosh compel readers into co-creative world-making. Their polyvocal, time-shifting narratives are not just stylistically innovative – they are models of living-with, of re-imagining community in an age of interconnected crises.

Conclusion

Tokarczuk’s and Ghosh’s novels imaginatively reconfigure community, ethics, and identity beyond the confines of nationhood or human exceptionalism. Through mythic narratives and mnemonic geographies, they portray forms of life defined by relationality. In their worlds, a Silesian village and a Bengal delta can inhabit the same cosmos. Myth and memory serve not as safe retreats but as interfaces between cultures: in *The Books of Jacob*, Tokarczuk weaves Jewish, Muslim, and Christian cosmologies, while Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* centers Indian, African, and Chinese diasporas on a tea-trading ship. By entwining these local histories into global patterns, each author insists that all borders are porous and all stories interwoven.

These works advance several scholarly fields. *Flights* repeatedly figures mobility as an ethical and ontological condition, tracing how bodies in motion – whether dissected, preserved, or perpetually travelling – undo the fantasy of a stable,

sovereign human subject. First, in posthuman literary studies, they provide vivid instantiations of “becoming-with” and entanglement. Where theory alone can feel abstract, Tokarczuk’s and Ghosh’s novels ground posthuman ethics in concrete narratives. In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, the narrator’s uncompromising identification with hunted animals dramatizes posthuman “making kin” not as metaphor but as a risky, lawtransgressing practice that destabilizes human exceptionalism. Haraway’s call to “make kin” across species is dramatized in *Drive Your Plow*, and Barad’s notion of entangled agencies is palpable in Ghosh’s cosmologically scaled plots. Secondly, in decolonial ecocriticism, their texts resonate deeply. Both authors decentre Western epistemologies by elevating subaltern knowledges: Tokarczuk foregrounds Silesian folklore and Central European taboo histories, while Ghosh resurrects Indian legends and oral traditions. In doing so, they mirror Huggan and Tiffin’s argument that environmental criticism must integrate the postcolonial perspective. Thirdly, in transnational comparative literature, our analysis underscores the value of cross-cultural dialogue. Tokarczuk (Polish) and Ghosh (Indian) write in different languages and contexts, but their affinities suggest a truly *transcultural ecocriticism*. Comparing Slavic and South Asian narrative ecologies – both shaped by empire, migration, and shared environmental crises – opens new avenues for thinking about global literary networks and solidarity.

This study also points to future directions. One is to engage more deeply with indigenous and marginalized epistemologies. How might African, Latin American, or Pacific myth-scapes resonate with or diverge from those in Tokarczuk and Ghosh? Another is to bridge with plant/animal studies and multispecies ethnography, examining how literature can shape our perception of nonhuman others. For example, one could analyze how Tokarczuk’s tree narrators or Ghosh’s cetacean ports-influence readers’ ecological imaginations. Finally, scholars might map transnational literary ecologies more fully – for instance, tracing how Polish Romanticism or Russian cosmism influenced contemporary ecofiction, or vice versa. In all cases, the principles of posthuman relationality and decolonial critique will guide new comparative work.

Tokarczuk and Ghosh have shown that literature itself can become a catalyst for imagining alternative futures. By entwining myth, memory, and ecological awareness, their narratives prefigure communities that are simultaneously cosmopolitan and grounded in place, scientific and enchanted. *Flights* turns airports, trains, and anatomical cabinets into experimental maprooms of a deterritorialized planet, while *Drive Your Plow* re-enchants a marginal Polish borderland as a site where animals, weather and astrological forces co-author history. They help us envision a world in

which borders are permeable, nonhumans have voices, and diverse knowledges cohere in mutual respect. Their work thus contributes to a *transcultural* posthumanism – one rooted in many traditions and oriented toward collective survival in a time of planetary change. It remains for readers and scholars to heed their example: to continue weaving such storyscapes and cultivating the multilayered kinships they offer.

Ultimately, both authors highlight the interconnection between mythic memory and ecological instability in the lived realities of their characters. Ghosh's tides "give birth to the forest" only to erase all human boundaries overnight. At the same time, Tokarczuk insists that myths are not some forgotten relics of the past but rather "building materials" for the present. Their combined texts also propose a transformative narrative ethics that is sensitive to vulnerability and planetary interconnectedness. While Tokarczuk and Ghosh provide alternative imaginaries, they also urgently need decolonial modes of inhabiting the world through multispecies kinship, migratory geographies, and cosmological time. It is only fitting that their literary cartographies become acts of reorientation toward Earth's nonhuman entities and toward more inclusive futures of belonging.

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Received: 2025-07-21; reviewed 2025-10-19; accepted 2025-11-02

DOI doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.1091

Beastly Humans, Humane Beasts: The Blurring of Human-Animal Boundaries in Fairy-Tale Retellings for Adults

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Abstract: The goal of this study is to examine how fairy-tale retellings for adults blur the boundaries that separate humans from animals. Uninhibited by the restrictions imposed on children’s literature, these retellings take the genre back to its subversive origins, depicting a more complex and intimate human-animal relationality. Drawing on Ann-Sofie Lönngrén’s more-than-anthropocentric reading strategy, the essay mobilizes a metonymic approach that attends to fairy-tale animals as animals rather than as metaphorical stand-ins for humans. By applying this approach, the study traces the literal presence and relations of humans and animals in these retellings, making visible the dynamics of embodiment, agency, and entanglement that are obscured when animals are reduced to metaphor. This method resists the speciesist tendency to reduce fictional animals to their symbolic functions in the service of human meanings. The corpus consists of adult retellings of “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk” from Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow’s six-volume anthology series. These tales are selected for their shared motif of human disregard for territorial borders – of trespassing: Jack steals treasures from the giant’s castle, Goldilocks breaks into the bears’ home, and Little Red Riding Hood ventures into the woods. This study demonstrates that these retellings blur human-animal boundaries by reconfiguring how characters are depicted through anthropomorphization or zoomorphization, or by fusing them through consumption or copulation. These narrative strategies create various forms of hybridity that denaturalize the categorical distinctions humans use to separate themselves from animals and expose the constructedness of these boundaries.

Keywords: posthumanism, Human-Animal Studies, speciesism, fairy-tale retellings, human-animal boundaries

Introduction

Animals¹ have always lent themselves to the service of humans. They till our land, keep us company, and serve as our food. Crucially, this use of animals extends from the appropriation of their corporeal bodies to the deployment of their metaphorical utility in signifying practices. This is evident in animals' constant presence in literature where they fulfill a symbolic, allegorical, or metaphorical function (Freccero 2022, 289). Across different cultures, animals abound in myths, fables, folk tales, and remain especially persistent in fairy tales.

However, despite this abundance, animals in literature are typically examined for their figurative role – as stand-ins for humans or abstract concepts rather than as representations of themselves (Baker 1993, ix; McHugh 2001, 6; Tiffin 2007, 252). This inclination to examine fictional animals metaphorically rather than as animals in their own right not only “[rules] out one whole area of potential meanings” but is also “consistent with the far wider cultural trivialization and marginalization of the animal” (Baker 1993, 138). The idea that fictional animals' most worthwhile aspect is their capacity to signify human values and experiences reflects an anthropocentric tendency rooted in the humanist notion that the human's place is naturally at the center of all things, essentially superior to animals (Badmington 2011, 374). This ideology is founded on the boundaries – on the categorical distinctions underpinned by binary oppositions constructed to differentiate the human from the animal: culture/nature, reason/instinct, mind/body (Simmons and Armstrong 2007, 18).

Examining fairy-tale animals as animals rather than just metaphors reveals their capacity to unsettle human-animal boundaries. After all, Silvia Storti describes fairy tales as “a world where incest, sodomy, rape, bestiality and cannibalism are commonplace” (2021, 176). As narrative sites where such extreme bodily and relational transgressions take place – populated by humans, animals, and in-betweens like ogres, shapeshifters, and animal brides and bridegrooms – these stories stage kinship, desire, and metamorphosis in ways that destabilize the ontological division between humans and animals.

However, this is not how fairy tales are widely known today. According to Jack Zipes, fairy tales in the oral tradition were often considered subversive – dangerous even – by religious and political authorities and only when writers

1 The term “animal” is used as shorthand for “non-human animal.”

began recording them did the genre take the form through which it would later become institutionalized; by the nineteenth century, increasingly “pristine” and “tamed” versions were being published specifically for middle- and upper-class children (2012, xi). In order to make them child-friendly, fairy tales were sanitized, purged of explicit sexual and violent human-animal entanglements. As moral binaries were reinforced, animals were reframed into didactic metaphors, reinstating an anthropocentric logic: animals remain pervasively present in fairy tales, but primarily as symbolic representations of human values and vices.

Fairy-tale retellings for adults reopen the earlier disruptive possibilities. Uninhibited by the restrictions imposed on children’s literature, they often take the genre back to its subversive origins, depicting a more complex and intimate human-animal relationality. These retellings complicate this entanglement to the point of threatening the lines that separate humans from animals. Thus, the aim of this study is to uncover some of the ways such retellings blur human-animal boundaries and the kinds of hybridity that emerge from this destabilization.

In pursuit of this goal, this essay works toward Ann-Sofie Lönngren’s “more-than-anthropocentric” reading strategy by mobilizing its metonymic component: “following” the fairy-tale animals’ iterations as animals rather than solely as metaphorical stand-ins for humans (2021, 41). Recognizing that literary animals have long been read metaphorically – exemplified by traditions such as the beast fable – this approach instead traces animals’ literal presence and entanglements with humans, foregrounding their respective yet interdependent embodiment, agency, and desires through a metonymic relation grounded in “similarity, presence, and closeness” (Lönngren 2021, 41). This attention to relational proximities makes visible how roles and identities begin to seep through the species boundary – what this essay refers to as hybridity. By acknowledging fairy-tale animals’ capacity for self-signification, this method both resists the speciesist tendency to reduce them to their symbolic functions in service of human meanings and illuminates how the resulting forms of hybridity destabilize human-animal distinctions.

To apply this approach, this essay turns to the work of Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow. These prolific, multi-award-winning American editors spent almost a decade (1993 to 2000) collaborating on a six-volume anthology series of fairy-tale retellings for adults. Their call for contributions was answered by writers from various genres, making each book a collection of diverse reimaginings of classic tales. This study examines six retellings of the following fairy tales from

the aforementioned series: “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk.” These stories are chosen because they share the common motif of human disregard for territorial borders – of trespassing: Jack steals treasures from the giant’s castle, Goldilocks breaks into the bears’ home, and Little Red Riding Hood ventures into the woods – a known domain of non-human creatures such as fairies, witches, and animals. The analysis traces how these retellings unsettle species boundaries by reconfiguring human-animal relations and staging identity crossings that materialize as forms of hybridity.

Analysis

Children’s fairy tales are populated by anthropomorphized animal characters: they speak, wear clothes, and feel human emotions. Aimed at young audiences, this serves several purposes. The incongruity and playfulness engage and entertain the child, making the moral or literacy lesson easier to remember, and the animal stand-in creates emotional distance when the message of the story is quite painful (Ayimbetova 2022, 129). Fairy-tale retellings for adults also employ anthropomorphism in depicting their animal characters. With a mature audience and a more nuanced tale to tell and message to impart, the anthropomorphization of the characters is done in more sophisticated ways. In some cases, animal characters are reconfigured not only to have human traits but also to have their animality toned down: less instinct, more reason; less nature, more culture. From a posthumanist perspective, these ontological adjustments can be a way to underscore how animals are similar to humans, thereby rendering human-animal boundaries more permeable (Jaques 2015, 12).

One way this reconfiguration is achieved through the conversion of animal characters’ physical, mental, or psychological attributes into more human-like traits. This is done in varying degrees. The giant and the bears retain their physical appearance in all the chosen retellings, one iteration of the wolf blends in as a human but has to hide the telltale aspects of his physique, and the other wolf is completely anthropomorphized as a man. The conversion of mental and psychological attributes also varies and is dependent on the retelling’s theme, plot, or setting.

Several of the chosen retellings are set in urban areas or, at the very least, villages populated by townspeople. In “Little Red” by Wendy Wheeler, the wolf is converted into an urbane self-professed man of culture who drives a

black Studebaker in twentieth-century Chicago. He goes by the name Josef Volker, owns a jewelry store, and dresses himself in “black pinstriped suit and red tie, [...] white silk shirt, [...] polished shoes” (Wheeler 1993, 139). However, since the conversion does not make him fully human, he struggles with his hybridity. The literal darkness in him betrays the prim and proper façade: “My swarthyness usually pains me; I have even plucked the black hair from the backs of my hands” (Wheeler 1993, 131). The feral instincts also prove to be difficult to overcome. When a shopgirl catches his eye, he thinks to himself, “I fought the appetite that flared in me, tried to become totally the cultured man I truly am” (Wheeler 1993, 133). He tries to subdue his wolfish proclivities by immersing himself in human culture. He not only shaves his beard twice a day, tweezes the stray hair on his eyebrows, but has also “read the complete works of Shakespeare, I’m a self-taught student of philosophy, I attend the opera and know all the words to ‘La Donna e Mobile’” (Wheeler 1993, 142). However, he gives in to his nature occasionally, justifying it by saying, “As long as you don’t allow your appetites to rule you, these small adventures add piquancy to life” (Wheeler 1993, 137). His shifting behaviors favoring either culture or nature, and his depiction as being both civilized and savage at the same time, blur the human-animal divide.

In contrast to Josef Volker’s inner struggle with his hybridity, the bears in Michael Cadnum’s “Bear It Away” are confronted by an external force when they attempt to cross the distinction borders and become more human-like. In this retelling, the bears’ physical appearance remains the same and they “still sleep half the year” but one day, “something profound had happened to bear nature” (Cadnum 2014, para. 7). When a bear steps on a person’s toe, it “offered effusive apologies,” and another holds the post office door open for someone (Cadnum 2014, para. 7, 9). Eventually, the “bears are writing essays, offering opinions on the likelihood of rain, [...] making excellent neighbors. [...] reading haiku, [...] laughing at our human jokes” (Cadnum 2014, para. 10). In this story, the bears renounce their feral nature, gain a higher level of cognition, and are bestowed the desire and ability to get involved not just in the consumption but also in the creation of culture. However, this blurring of boundaries does not sit right with the unnamed golden-haired girl in this retelling. When she has had enough of bear laughter and bear songs, she hatches a plan to drive the bears back to the woods: “I wanted to teach the bears why they shouldn’t weave rugs and write plays, and give them a lesson” (Cadnum 2014, para. 12). To her, bears are better

mauling people than stocking up on rhyming dictionaries; better a wild bear than a hybrid one curtsying wearing a bonnet.

Another animal character that retains its physical characteristics but whose desires are converted to resemble those of a human, is the giant in Nancy Kress's "Stalking Beans." Giants are typically depicted as having a monstrous appearance and appetite for human flesh. However, in trying to determine whether giants are anthropophagi ("creatures that eat humans, regardless of the eater's species") or cannibals ("creatures that eat the same species as themselves"), Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. acknowledges their taxonomical ambiguity, writing that giants "are complicated because of their quasi-human status" (2021, 15). Kress's retelling reinforces this in-betweenness. "Stalking Beans" introduces an older Jack suffering from financial and marital problems after he and his wife fell from being gentry to peasants. His wife desperately wants a child, but he cannot bring himself to touch her. The giant barely makes an appearance in the story; he does not need to. Knowing Jack's pain and struggles is knowing the giant's. Instead of craving infants' flesh, the giant also badly wants a child and suffers the inability to satisfy his wife. After Jack's dues are paid with the treasures he has stolen from the giant, Jack discovers his affair with the giant's wife has resulted in the conception of a child. The pressing question afterward is: What will the giant do when he learns the baby is not his? Although the story does not explicate the giant's preference for human flesh, he still utters a part of his well-known line when he suspects Jack is in his castle: "I smell blood [...] I smell human blood!" which means he will be able to tell that the baby is human (Kress 1993, 102). In the end, it can be inferred that the baby and the giant's wife are both well while Jack exerts no effort to claim his child due to fear and selfishness: "It might wake and cry. If it squalled too loud, I would have to drop it and run, or put my hands around its neck until it was quiet again, or let it fall down the beanstalk to make good my own escape" (Kress 1993, 104). This depiction of a child-abandoning Jack and a foster-fathering giant blurs the human-animal distinction to such an extent that it prompts the question: Who is the human and who is the savage animal here?

The giant is not the only one who gains a human family member; the other retellings also portray human and animal characters as a family unit. In "Little Red," the wolf Josef becomes a step-father to Regina – the red hat-wearing girl in this version – after convincing her mother to leave her negligent husband. His taking up the roles of husband and stepfather is partly motivated by his desire to quell the animal in him: "They will start me on a new road of

respectability and propriety. I will conquer my appetites and be the man I've always known I could be" (Wheeler 1993, 144). Conversely, in Lisa Goldstein's "Brother Bear," Quick – the golden-haired girl in this version – chooses not to return to her tribe to become a bear's wife:

She did not go back to her tribe that day, or the next. Her love for the bear grew, and was returned. She understood that she had married him, the way men and women in her tribe sometimes married. (1995, 129)

Another iteration of Goldilocks also becomes a part of the bear family in "Goldilocks Tells All" by Scott Bradfield. Goldy gets lost in the Enchanted Forest as a kid, and when she stumbles upon the bears' home, they take her in and she becomes their foster-daughter. Papa Bear tells Goldy, "We gave you a bed to sleep in [...] We gave you food to eat and clothes to wear. [...] I tried to be a good foster-father, Goldy..." (Bradfield 2014, para 47). Expectedly, these hybrid families, just like any other, have their own set of complications. However, what these relationships highlight is that humans and animals are similar enough to be kin and, in line with posthumanist ideas, that humans "perhaps never were utterly distinct from animals" (Badmington 2011, 374).

Another way that fairy-tale retellings reconfigure the depiction of their characters is through inversion: instead of just converting aspects of characters' respective portrayal, their roles are reversed. In "I Shall Do Thee Mischief in the Wood" by Kathe Koja, the wolf is fully anthropomorphized: "His name was Jude. He was a man of business and affairs" (1993, 151). Conversely, the unnamed red-caped girl is zoomorphized as she is consistently compared to animals:

Her face was as a bird's; that avian arch to nose and startled eyes,
round eyes and black as sparrow's, as a crying guinea hen's. [...] her voice as high as the birds she resembled... [...] She's simple.
Mad as rabbits. (Koja 1993, 148-50)

Also in this version, it is the girl, together with her grandmother, who lives in the woods: "Her teeth showed slim and broken when she smiled, they said it was from eating nothing but the roots she dug from the forest where she lived" (Koja 1993, 148). On the other hand, Jude, a travelling man of commerce, is

staying in a tavern close to the forest, awaiting the magistrate's visit, hoping he could do business with him.

In the beginning, the story seems like another version in which the little girl (the prey) falls victim to the hungry wolf (the predator). Jude observes the young girl with cunning eyes, sees the beauty beneath her impoverished appearance and becomes completely smitten by her. When his first attempt to seduce her has failed (he has offered her money), he grabs the opportunity to walk her home into the woods when she cries, "A beast! [...] He waits for me, beyond on the path!" (Koja 1993, 157). He takes advantage of her as they go along the path, and only once they reach a half-cave, half-cottage does he realize who the actual beast is. This is where the story reveals the inversion: the little red-caped girl lures men like him into the forest; the prey is the wolf, and the grandmother is the beast in the woods. And implied by the condition of her teeth - "not broken but immensely worn" - the red-caped girl partakes in the kill (Koja 1993, 160).

The intricate depiction of the characters through multiple layers of inversion - the wolf turned into a predatory man turned into prey, and the little girl turned into an impoverished creature living like an animal turned into predator accomplice - creates a kind of hybridity that allows both characters to be predator and prey, and human and animal all at the same time, thereby leading to the collapse of the lines that divide these dichotomies.

Children's fairy tales are typically used as vessels for morals and values: Be wary of strangers; respect others' properties; wit and ingenuity are valuable skills. However, as Hellen Tiffin observes, the sole focus on the human aspects of such tales

draws attention to our habitual allegorizing of stories we take to be only 'ostensibly' about animals; our blindness to their actual presences as co-beings on the planet; and our determined conversions of their presences into absence. (2007, 256)

The animal characters in children's fairy tales, despite their overwhelming presence in them, are oftentimes rendered absent as they are simply used as a means to create moral and cautionary tales for young human readers. Meanwhile, free from the need to moralize these tales, fairy-tale retellings for adults become a site where relationships between humans and animals can be explored with more depth and complexity - as relationships between subjects rather than symbols.

As much as humans try to draw a line and separate themselves as a species and distance themselves from nature and the wild, there exists a pull that entices them to cross the line, to “search for an understanding of what we share with beasts even as we try to discover what makes us human” (Tatar 2017a, xxvii). This desire to reunite with nature is realized in some fairy-tale retellings by fusing human and animal characters.

One way that this fusion takes place is through copulation. Cultures around the world have traditional stories about animal brides and bridegrooms where the animal spouse is either a shapeshifter or a human cursed to become an animal (Tatar 2017a, xi, xvii). In these stories’ child-friendly versions, the animal spouse typically turns (back) into its human form prior to marital bliss: the swan’s feathery garb is taken and hidden away, the beast is shown true love, and the frog receives a kiss. However, in fairy-tale retellings for adults, the transformation (back) into human form is not a requirement for the consummation of marriage or love affair.

In “Little Red,” Josef Volker – not completely wolf, not completely human – has an affair with Helen, the mother of the red hat-wearing girl Regina. His black wolf fur that he incessantly needs to shave constantly reminds him of his hybridity, which only serves to intensify his desire:

Though it was only two in the afternoon, my beard was already heavy enough to scratch her. It gave me a moment of chagrin to see the red abrasions on her skin, then I decided I liked leaving my mark on her, and nuzzled her again. (Wheeler 1993, 135)

This does not bother Helen at all; on the contrary, this seems to excite her as “[h]er pulse leapt in her neck” and he wants to “kiss her there, open my mouth and feel her heartbeat against my teeth” (Wheeler 1993, 135-36). Meanwhile, in “Brother Bear,” Quick, the golden-haired girl, becomes a wife – in all senses of the word – to a bear whose only anthropomorphized quality is rudimentary language:

She woke to feel a rough hand on her back and she turned to face him. Not a hand, paw. The bear had been stroking her yellow hair.

“Quick,” he said. He continued to stroke her, her small breasts, her belly, her golden fur below that. He growled low in his throat.

[...]

The bear growled again. [...] His great paws moved to her skin, and he caressed her more softly than before. She felt herself opening to him, the way she had opened to a boy in the tribe after her first blood came.

[...]

He entered her with great tenderness. His growling became louder: he sounded fierce, even angry. She clung to him, terrified and exhilarated at the same time. (Goldstein 1995, 129)

Accounts of interspecies copulation may be unsettling as they violate biological and ethical norms. They may cause shock and revulsion, leaving a feeling of contamination – as if a line has been breached. When discussing human-animal sexual acts in storytelling, Tatar states that:

Verbal and visual depictions of erotic pursuit throw us into a hermeneutic crisis precisely because they invoke cultural anxieties about defining and maintaining the lines we draw between nature and culture, between brute beasts and caring humans. (2017a, xxv)

This “crisis” causes disorientation as such depictions go against what has been considered a firmly established boundary. The disgust, shame, and discomfort it evokes are rooted in this divide; in the belief that humans and animals are too different to ever be in this kind of union. Jack from “Stalking Beans” expresses a similar sentiment when he sees the giant’s bedroom. In traditional versions of Jack and the Beanstalk, it is unclear whether the giant’s wife is a giantess herself or just a very tall human. In some versions, she is described as “a great big woman” but some illustrations depict her as having a giant’s features. In “Stalking Beans,” it is implied that she is a big female human; according to Jack: “She is taller than I am by perhaps a foot, and outweighs me by thirty pounds” (Kress 1993, 92). Accordingly, when Jack sees the giant’s bedroom, he is in disbelief realizing just then how different the giant truly is:

He must be gargantuan, different from Maria not just in degree but in kind, as she is not from me. The bed stretches the length of my father’s tilyard. [...] How can Maria, lying in that enormous bed, be large enough to...I don’t want to know. (Kress 1993, 96-97)

Human sexuality is characterized by dualities: “tenderness, affection, and compassion on the one hand and violence, aggression, and rough-and-tumble play on the other” (Tatar 2017a, xxv). The elements on the latter side are aspects that humans relate more to animals than to themselves; the side of sexuality that involves wild, erratic behaviors driven by a huge insatiable appetite. It is what Josef Volker, the wolf in “Little Red,” is struggling with: He tries to restrain the proclivities of a wolf with the sophistications of a man. He thinks that by tuning himself more to business and the arts, he will justify his occasional submission to his nature – to the wolf’s appetite – by having a set of cultivated tastes:

I do take pride in my store. [...] My business is the confirmation that I can deal successfully with the wealthy, the cultured. I’ve spent most of my life perfecting that knowledge. Yes, I have *petites amours*, but they are the prerogative of a sophisticated man. (Wheeler 1993, 137)

It is not unreasonable to believe that Jude, the wolf in “I Shall Do Thee Mischief in the Wood,” is also a businessman for the very same reason, as he also has unbridled lust for women. Being able to switch between these modes – especially being both at the same time – exemplifies the fragility of the divide between human and animal, and culture and nature. A human’s sexual union with an animal consort adds another layer of contestation over these boundaries. Animals, “[a]s our dark doubles [...] stand for everything we disavow in ourselves – ferocity, bestiality, and untamed urges” (Tatar 2017a, xxvi). Thus, the sexual act with the animal forces the human to acknowledge that there (still) exist in her the feral impulses she thought had long been dispelled by culture. It leads the human to realize that she was never “purely human” based on how she defined it in opposition to what an animal is. It is therefore in this sense that “our animal brides and animal grooms function as mediators between nature and culture, enabling us to think through our relationship to ‘otherness’” (Tatar 2017a, xxvii).

This mediation sometimes culminates in assimilation. Quick from “Brother Bear,” after she learns she is with child – cub – “wondered if she were turning into a bear-woman. She studied her arms and legs for fur, ran her fingers over her teeth for sharpness, but nothing seemed changed” (Goldstein 1995, 130). However, the transformation is not in physical appearance. Apart from the comfort of partaking in the bears’ everyday lives, her body has also acclimated to the bears’ annual hibernation and reproductive cycle:

The days become colder, and the bears' fur grew thicker and heavier. One day when she woke she saw that they still slept. She poked and prodded each one in turn but could not rouse them. She burrowed into the warmth of Brother Bear and went back to sleep.

She slept for a long time, waking only to eat some of the food the bears had stored for winter. It was a strange and confused time. [...]

When she awoke fully it was warm outside. [...]

She started to roll over but was stopped by something in the way. She looked down and saw that her stomach had rounded out, grown huge. [...] [S]he would give birth to a bear cub. (Goldstein 1995, 130).

More seasons have passed and Quick and Brother Bear have one more cub; a total of two bear cubs whose fur is as golden as Quick's hair. However, their offspring are not the only human-animal hybrids produced by their union. When towards the end of the story Quick is found by her original human tribe, a man recognizes her as she more or less looks the same as the day she has gotten lost in the forest – only older. He exclaims, "Quick not dead! Quick not dead!" to which she answers: "Quick dead. [...] Quick Gone. [...] Quick bear" (Goldstein 1995, 132). Quick's declaration may not be supported by observable biological changes but it articulates an ontological crossing: hybridity becomes relational – a matter of identity, rather than just reproduction or genetics.

Another way in which human and animal characters are fused is through consumption. It is telling that the fairy tale versions intended for a young audience are sanitized of explicit sexual content but retain the threat posed to children of being eaten. Maria Tatar highlights the importance of food – its presence but more significantly, its absence – in the formation of narratives involving vulnerable children. She explains, "The peasants of folktales may have to worry about famines, but children in fairy tales live perpetually under the double threat of starvation and cannibalism" (2017b, 268). In addition to these threats is predation, as interspecies consumption is also a common motif in fairy tales – perhaps even more common than cannibalism, depending on whether one considers giants and witches human or not. The predator-prey dichotomy provides an important distinction because it indicates who eats and who is eaten. From an anthropocentric perspective, humans stand on top of the food chain as apex predators who "have seen it as their right to kill and eat other species and they

regard any violation of that order as ‘unnatural’” (Tiffin 2007, 244). Humans’ great fear of being eaten stems from such belief that they should be the consumer, not the consumed (Tiffin 2007, 247) – a fear that historically fueled narratives of man-eating beasts as threats that must be eliminated. Therefore, a fairy tale in which at least one human character is the prey, the eaten, is in itself an unsettling of the established boundary between humans and animals.

Consumption in fairy-tale retellings for adults are more complicated. With the existence of hybrid characters, it is much more difficult to discern who is prey and who is predator; who is human and who is animal. In “I Shall Do Thee Mischief in the Wood,” the wolf is a man with beastly motives who, in the end, is eaten by a frail girl and her grandmother, who live like animals in the woods. From the story’s description of the older woman moments before Jude is eaten, it is hard to say if the girl and her grandmother are actual monsters – which is to say, non-human:

And its eyes are a woman’s; are hers, that same round glossy darkness though informed by some tremendous age. Naked in the dimness, hair like her granddaughter’s, matted thick but longer still, waving like the gray moss on the trees as she advanced. (Koja 1993, 160)

They may be simply humans who have resorted to eating human flesh due to extreme poverty. The story does refer to the grandmother when it says, “There is only one beast in the woods” so, if one is to consider them non-human, then they are predators for eating Jude. However, there really are no indicators that they are not human aside from the girl’s appearance, specifically her face, always being compared to birds, which could mean a pointed nose, prominent cheekbones, or sharp chin – nonetheless, still inconclusive. Thus, if one is to consider them human, then they are cannibals for eating Jude. But then again, is Jude completely human if he is an iteration of the wolf? As Jaques observes, “one’s status as human or animal can be merely a matter of perspective” (2015, 47). In this case, the only certain thing is the uncertainty and the near indiscernibility about who plays which role. On top of that is the act of consumption itself, where one is eaten and absorbed and made a part of another. This fusion seems to not only blur but completely erase the lines that separate humans from animals. In the words of Maggie Kilgour, the horror of cannibalism – which can also be applied to predation on humans – is that it is where

the body is made symbolic, the literal the figurative, the human reduced to mere matter. In fact cannibalism involves both the *establishing* of absolute difference, the opposites of eater and eaten, and the *dissolution* of that difference, through the act of incorporation which identifies them and makes the two one. (quoted in Tiffin 2007, 247)

Meanwhile, the act of consumption in “Brother Bear” offers much clearer dynamics. Towards the end of the story, Quick loses consciousness after her old human tribe finds her and attacks the bears. When she wakes up, she does “to the smell of meat. She looked around; the tribe had removed the bear’s skin with knives and was carving the flesh” (Goldstein 1995, 133). Then one of the elders speaks: “Brother Bear. [...] Our tribe and your tribe now one tribe, our flesh now one flesh. We thank Brother Bear for his fur and meat, as he thanks us for ours” (Goldstein 1995, 133). This illustrates the union of two species: a kind of hybridity that is the human flesh sustained by animal meat. The human-animal interconnectedness is greatly summarized in the penultimate paragraph of the story:

Quick understood. Because she had bound herself to the bear for life, because she had had his children, her tribe and the bear tribe were tied together forever. Hunter and hunted, eater and eaten, they would be one flesh for the lives of their children, and their children’s children, without end. Each would eat of the other; their abundance toward each other would never fail. (Goldstein 1995, 133)

Similar to Tiffin’s perspective on the consumption of pigs’ meat, the consumption of meat from any non-human animal positions those animals as the ones who “‘produce’ us; their ‘meat’ contributing to the construction of our flesh” (2007, 251). For even though this fusion maintains the human’s position on top of the food chain, the realization that human’s survival and daily sustenance is dependent on the consumption of animal meat, forces one to rethink the anthropocentric notion of human supremacy.

Conclusion

By applying a metonymic approach, this study traces the literal presence and relations of humans and animals in fairy-tale retellings for adults. This reading

strategy makes visible the dynamics of embodiment, agency, and entanglement that are obscured when animals are reduced to metaphor. In doing so, it reveals how these retellings offer complex representations of human-animal relationality that thrive in interconnectedness. This study shows how these tales blur human-animal boundaries: by reconfiguring how human and animal characters are depicted through conversion or inversion, or by fusing them through copulation or consumption, thereby creating multiple forms of hybridity that contribute to the decentering of the human subject.

When the depiction of animal characters is converted to resemble their human counterpart, it not only highlights their similarities and kinship but also grants the animal characters agency and subjectivity. Suddenly, they have a name, a background story, and motivation behind their actions, rather than being solely a means to propel the narrative or to deliver the moral of the story. Through inversion, human and animal characters take on each other's roles, revealing the arbitrariness of the dichotomies where the differences between humans and animals rest. By fusing the human and animal characters through copulation, the former are forced to confront their primal side and compelled to acknowledge the similarities they share with the animal and accept that they are not so different after all. Lastly, consumption highlights the dependency of humans on animal meat. It also unsettles the eater-eaten dichotomy, especially in instances when it is the human that is incorporated into another through consumption. These strategies denaturalize the categorical distinctions humans use as boundaries to separate themselves from animals and expose the constructedness of these lines that can be blurred, altered, or completely erased.

Examining depictions of human-animal relationships in fiction is important because this is where many people encounter animals more frequently. As Steve Baker observes, in an age where humans are far-removed from nature, they are "more familiar with animals in representation" than real ones (quoted in Tiffin 2007, 254). If cultural representations are one source of dichotomous thinking about humans and animals, then narratives that destabilize these binaries offer an imaginative site for rethinking species hierarchies. By attending to fictional animals as animals rather than mere symbols, literary interpretation resists the anthropocentric tendency to erase animals' presence by reducing them to metaphor. In this sense, fairy-tale retellings do not simply revive old stories; they open conceptual spaces for contemplating alternative ways humans might relate to animals in lived reality.

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Received: 2025-08-31; reviewed 2025-10-30; accepted 2025-11-29

DOI: 10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.8763

Fragmented Minds: SOMA and the Reconstruction of Identity

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Abstract: Contemporary technological developments challenge established notions of human identity (Sorgner 2022), such as gender, race, or personality (Drew 2023), creating new possibilities for understanding, beyond biological and social categories, what it means to be human (Braidotti 2013; Wilde 2024). This article examines how the video game *SOMA* (2015) serves as a critical examination of posthuman subjectivity in a transhuman setting. By analyzing the game's narrative structure and interactive mechanics, this article explores the tensions between the silicon-based transhumanist visions of enhancement (Sorgner 2021) and the posthumanist critiques of autonomous selfhood (Haraway 2016; Wilde 2024). The analysis focuses on the game's exploration of mind uploading scenarios in which human consciousness becomes detached from its original biological substrate and then reimplanted in more-than-human bodies. *SOMA*'s narrative reveals the fundamental contradictions in the mind uploading technology through its portrayal of digital entities trapped between human memories and mechanical realities. These entities inhabit robotic forms while retaining a complete belief in their human identity, creating a disturbing gap between the subjective experience and the objective existence. Through this exploration, *SOMA* questions whether, and at what cost, human identity can survive radical technological transformation as mind uploading.

The paper argues that, although *SOMA* does not introduce a new conceptual model of mind-uploading, its interactive format creates unique opportunities for exploring posthumanist concepts of distributed subjectivity. Players experience identity not as a stable property of one's individual consciousness but as an emergent effect of the ongoing interactions between human and machine. The study concludes that *SOMA* offers a compelling counter-narrative to techno-optimistic visions of human enhancement, revealing the irreducible complexity of embodied existence and the ethical implications of consciousness transfer technologies.

Keywords: posthumanism; identity; SOMA; consciousness; reconstruction of identity

Introduction

In an era where the boundaries between human and machine increasingly blur, questions of identity have become more pressing and complex than ever before (Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2006; Wilde 2024). The traditional conception of human identity (Drew 2023), rooted in fixed categories of gender, race, nationality, and embodied experience, faces unprecedented challenges from both technological advancement (Sorgner 2022) and posthumanist critique (Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2006, 2016). While technological advancement focuses primarily on the practical aspects of directly altering human capabilities and transcending biological limitations, posthumanist critique provides theoretical challenges by questioning the very conceptual foundations of identity categories. This critique argues that such fixed classifications as the human/animal divide, male/female binaries, and the natural/artificial distinction represent inadequate social constructions that fail to capture human complexity.

The video game *SOMA* (2015) serves as a compelling lens through which one can explore the aforementioned philosophical tensions. Set in an underwater research facility where the line between human consciousness and artificial intelligence has dissolved, the game confronts players with the fundamental questions (i.e., how we define selfhood and whether identity can survive technological replication) about personal identity and technological enhancement.

Through the experience of Simon Jarrett, a brain-damaged man whose consciousness is uploaded into a robotic body, *SOMA* presents the fundamental tensions between transhumanist and posthumanist perspectives on human-machine relations. The first envisions technology as a means of overcoming human limitations and achieving a form of immortality (Bostrom 2009b), whereas the latter contends that human-machine relations are constituted through complex, cooperative entanglements rather than unidirectional control, and that human identity remains materially embedded and relational, rendering it irreducible to disembodied extraction (Haraway 2016; Wilde 2024). Within gaming contexts, a posthuman perspective challenges anthropocentric assumptions of the player's dominance over avatars, instead proposing that players and digital entities coexist in a state of mutual entanglement in which both shape the interactive experience (Wilde 2024).

In *SOMA*, this dynamic is exemplified through the player's immersive role in defining Simon's reconstructed identity, as he discovers that he is not human but a digital consciousness uploaded into a mechanical body. His struggle to accept this condition underscores the limitations of techno-utopian visions of human enhancement articulated by Bostrom (2009a, 2009b), since the disjunction between his embodied form and the recognition that he is not the original Simon prevents him from attaining a sense of happiness.

The game's exploration of these themes occurs at a critical moment when theoretical debates about posthuman identity intersect with practical developments in genetic, morphological, pharmacological, and cyborg enhancements (Sorgner 2021, 2022), such as modifications or selections of genes, cosmetic surgeries, medications, deep brain stimulation and the utopian idea of literal immortality via the mind uploading process (2022). This latter concept envisions transferring an individual's personality onto a digital medium, where it could be copied, implanted into another body, or exist independently within cyberspace.

By examining how *SOMA* represents the reconstruction of the traditional conception of identity in a technologically mediated world, this study contributes to broader conversations about human agency, embodiment, and the ethical implications of emerging technologies that promise to fundamentally alter what it means to be human.

Identity as a societal concept

According to Chris Drew, identity could be defined as "the collection of attributes, beliefs, and experiences that shape how an individual perceives themselves and how they are perceived by others" (2023). These attributes encompass various factors, including gender, ethnicity, personality, religion, values, and hobbies. This multifaceted understanding of identity is significant because, as Moya emphasizes, "who we understand ourselves to be will have consequences for how we experience and understand the world" (2000, 8). In other words, our identity not only reflects who we are but actively shapes our interpretation of reality and our interactions within it.

Although attributes such as gender, ethnicity, personality, values, and religion constitute vital aspects of human identity, Haraway contends that they cannot serve as the foundation for any notion of the "essential" unity (2006, 122). In the case of gender, she insists that "female" does not represent a natural bond

among women – it is rather a historically contingent and contested category, produced through scientific discourses and social practices (122). Historically, social practices in experiencing “womanness” have varied between a slave woman in antebellum America and a middle-class housewife in Victorian England (Moya 2000, 3). Such categories, whose aim is to unite people under a specific label, ultimately lead to “endless splitting and searches for a new essential unity” (Haraway 2006, 123). In other words, this cycle occurs because gender categories (i.e. woman) are both politically necessary for solidarity and yet always unstable, since no single definition can encompass the diversity of women’s lived realities.

Beyond the specific aspects of identity that are challenging to define and unify people in society, even the general term “human” cannot be perceived as a perfect representation of all people. Braidotti (2013) and Irigaray (1985) have observed that the “abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he. Moreover, he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied” (2013, 24; 1985). As a result, full access to rights was restricted to a specific figure: a white, cisgender, European man who “was now “master” of his own destiny” (Wilde 2024, 22-23). In contrast, numerous other groups of people have been denied recognition as fully human and “have been excluded even the most basic rights” (Wilde 2024, 22-24).

Due to its Eurocentric origins, the term “human” incorporates a “binary logic of identity and otherness” (Braidotti 2013, 15) where being the Other is perceived as something negative. Consequently, people perceived as Others are “sexualized, racialized, and naturalized [...] and reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others” (Braidotti 2013, 15). For Braidotti, “the human is a historical construct that became a social convention about ‘human nature’” (26).

To challenge the dualistic, falsely unitary, and patriarchal description of the world, Haraway proposes a broader term that provides affinity and rejects identity: cyborg. It is “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 2006, 117). In contrast to human, cyborg “does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end” (146). What is also crucial for the next section, “cyborgs are constitutively full of multiscalar, multitemporal, multimaterial critters of both living and nonliving persuasions” (Haraway 2016, 104-105).

The origins of the term “human” are not the only problematic aspect. Another dilemma is whether we can perceive ourselves as human beings from both a

biological and technological perspective. The question arises: Are the binaries of nature-culture, human-animal, and organism-machine (Gray et al. 2021, 2) nowadays even applicable? Humans not only constitute part of the ecosystem and are composed of different species, such as bacteria, but they are also dependent on technological devices that serve as extensions of human capability (Gulie 2021; Haraway 2016; Mentor 2011; Wilde 2024).

Are we human or posthuman?

In the previous section, the primary focus was on considering identity as a societal concept, which dictates how individuals perceive and categorize themselves within a given society. Sociocultural traits are not the only factors that define human beings. From an anthropocentric perspective, there is a clear distinction between humans, animals, and machines (Braidotti 2013; Wilde 2024). However, Sorgner emphasizes that humanity has never been confined to the traditional concept of human, as the integration of technological elements into our existence has been occurring since the emergence of *Homo sapiens* (2022, 9). Similarly, Mann suggests that most individuals can already be regarded as cyborgs, given that the use of technological tools to augment and improve human life is nearly universal (2021, 29).

On the other hand, Gray et al. notice that “humans are part of nature, a large driver in the immensely larger world of ecological interconnectivity, but often imagine ourselves apart from it” (2021, 2). As a result of the impact of the concept of the liberal human subject, there is still a belief that “the human [is] an ‘autonomous’ being” (Wilde 2024, 3), whereas in fact, as the representatives of critical posthumanism claim:

We are entangled with our media and technologies, as well as with our environments and with human and nonhuman ‘others’. We are controlled by those “others” as much as we control them. (Wilde 2024, 3)

From a posthumanist as well as biological perspective, humans are not a separate entity, as they consist of other entities, such as bacteria that are inside their bodies. Gulie compares the human body to an island or even a whole continent, which is a “home to at least a hundred trillion separate living creatures

- all of them microscopic: mostly bacteria, but also archaea, yeasts, protozoa, and fungi (and viruses)" (2021, 114). This biological reality aligns with Haraway's theoretical framework regarding interspecies entanglements. She states that "including human people, critters are in each other's presence, or better, inside each other's tubes, folds, and crevices, insides and outsides, and not quite either" (2016, 98). What is more, "critters - human and not - become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling" (2016, 97). Haraway defines the term "sympoietic" as "making-with" because "nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing" (2016, 58). With respect to what constitutes a human, this concept is crucial, as without interdependence or intra-action with other creatures, neither humans nor critters can survive.

In the case of human interdependence with technology, Wilde (2024, 3-4) contends that human existence is inherently mediated by technology, ranging from elemental tools such as clothing and shelter to advanced biomedical devices and digital systems, including pacemakers, glucose monitors, and smartphones, which not only sustain life but also redistribute memory and identity beyond the body. Moreover, Mentor argues that we could even be called "mundane cyborgs" due to our increasing integration with technological devices that function as extensions of human capability. These everyday prosthetic technologies include mobile phones, laptops, remote controls, Bluetooth devices, televisions, and GPS navigation systems (2011, 54). Following that thought, Sorgner, quoted at the beginning of this section, notices that the process of mobilizing the computer systems is still in progress. For now, people use smartphones that are minimized versions of PCs; however, for a future prospect (autonomous cars, and all other aspects of a smart city), there will be a need to integrate computers more intimately into our bodies (Sorgner 2022, 31), for instance, in a form of a chip.

Based on the quoted fragments from both posthumanist and transhumanist thinkers, a subtle distinction emerges regarding the relationship between humans and technology. Sorgner, who represents what he calls "weak transhumanism," sees potential in enhancement techniques that could improve human life (2022, 129). However, it could be argued that in the general conception of transhumanism, technology is perceived as something that operates "from outside of the human, as an "other" [whereas] in a posthumanist view, our relationships with technologies are instead (part of) what defines us" (Wilde 2024, 31). This fundamental distinction in how technology is conceptualized reveals that despite their shared concerns

about human enhancement and technological integration, transhumanism and posthumanism offer markedly different philosophical frameworks.

Fundamental philosophical divergences between posthumanist and transhumanist approaches

Although posthumanist and transhumanist thinkers share overlapping ideas discussed earlier, these philosophical approaches present fundamentally contrasting views on humanity's future path and its relationship with technology. This core difference concerns humanity's main goals, its connection with the world, and what defines the posthuman practice.

To understand this divergence more clearly, it is essential to recognize that posthumanism's primary objective is not to seek the end of humanity but rather "the end of a certain conception of the human" (Hayles 1999, 286). As Wilde notices, "what compromises the 'human' is in fact made up of a multiplicity of component parts and selves" (2024, 31), such as technologies, animals, humans, and environments. Consequently, posthumanism "proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism" (Braidotti 2013, 49-50) as was presented in the previous section. Besides redefining what it means to be human concerning their entanglements with environments, cultures, societies, natures, others, animals, machines, and tools (Wilde 2024, 27), posthumanists such as Haraway emphasize the importance of taking responsibility for the harm humans cause to the planet and finding ways to coexist with other beings in a way that prevent further damage (2016, 37).

Whereas according to the posthumanist movement, a posthuman is someone interconnected with other beings, transhumanism defines it as "a silicon-based entity on a hard drive, as well as a carbon-based entity who is a further-developed human being" (Sorgner 2022, 65). It is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the differences between transhumanism and posthumanism.

As it is noticeable, transhumanism "embraces the use of technologies to increase the likelihood that posthumans may emerge" (Sorgner 2021, 34). Carbon-based transhumanists mostly discuss four types of enhancements that are the most promising in this area – genetic (gene modification and selection), morphological (for instance cosmetic surgery), pharmacological (such as blood doping, pain killers, cognitive enhancers) and cyborg (RFID (radio-frequency identification) chips

implanted into different parts of human body, predictive maintenance) (Sorgner 2021, 35; 2022, 7-9). On the other hand, silicon-based transhumanism is more focused on “the technology of downloading the personality onto a hard disk so that it can be multiplied, integrated into a new organism, or could continue to live alone in cyberspace” (Sorgner 2021, 37). This process, which will be discussed in the next section, is called “mind uploading” or “whole brain emulation” (37).

Apart from different approaches regarding which types of technology should be prioritized, even the attitude toward human perfection is not uniformly defined among transhumanists. Sorgner enlists three types of such approaches: the Renaissance ideal (strong transhumanism), a common-sense account (a little weaker but also strong transhumanism), and radical pluralism (weak transhumanism) (2022, 129-135).

For this article, strong transhumanism holds particular significance as the variant most commonly associated with transhumanist philosophy in public discourse, exemplified by scholars such as Bostrom. According to this perspective, human enhancement constitutes a moral imperative rather than merely an available option. Additionally, strong transhumanist thinkers maintain that enhancement technologies inherently promote improved lives for all human beings (Sorgner 129-130). As Bostrom claims, “transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold” (2009a, 619). The important step to further evolution is the eradication of “aging, starvation, unnecessary suffering, and cognitive shortcomings” (Bostrom 2005, 205).

In this aspect, there is a clear distinction between transhumanism and posthumanism – whereas in transhumanism “human [is] as the main benefactor in utilising and adapting the ‘other’, be that technology” (Wilde 2024, 28), posthumanism “views this as a complex and non-hierarchical entanglement between intra-acting, mutually dependent, entities” (28). Given the earlier mention of silicon-based transhumanism and its focus on mind uploading, a closer examination of this particular technological pathway reveals the full scope of transhumanist ambitions, especially since it is the main technology used in the video game *SOMA* that is analyzed in this article.

Mind-uploading

One of the core ideas of silicon-based transhumanism mentioned in the previous chapter is the process called “mind-uploading.” The theoretical framework for this concept has its roots in the 1950s (Potts 1996, 103).

The main goal of mind-uploading is to download “the personality onto a hard disk so that it can be multiplied, integrated into a new organism, or could continue to live alone in cyberspace” (Sorgner 2021, 37). When it comes to the advantages of that idea, Häggström enlists “long-distance travel as easy as the transfer of computer files” (2021, 4), endless possibilities to switch between robot bodies and virtual worlds instead of sticking to a biological body, and the ability to create multiple copies of ourselves (4).

However, the realization of this concept involves several obstacles. Sorgner identifies key points that must be fulfilled for mind uploading to be a realistic option. The primary challenge concerns the complete preservation of personal identity, which requires that no elements of human consciousness be lost when converting from a biological to a digital format (2022, 25). Since human personality exists within analog biological systems, the transformation to digital architecture presents inherent preservation difficulties.

Additionally, it is also worth noting that “we are not familiar with any silicon-based entity to which we can ascribe the quality of being alive, and computers are silicon-based entities” (Sorgner 2022, 26). The only exception that could be taken into account is computer viruses; however, they “do not consist of cells and they do not consume organic matter, that is, they do not possess a metabolism” (27). As a result, according to Sorgner, for now, mind uploading is not possible as these two factors cannot be fulfilled.

Besides the technical limitations, Häggström enlists other aspects of further realization of mind uploading, such as questions of personal identity – whether the copy would truly be the same person as the original or considerations about how society would be structured with both human beings and their uploads coexisting (2021). At some point, Häggström voices out the concern, which is a key concept of the video game analyzed in the next section, *SOMA*:

In a world where such a technology is widely established, it does not help to ask people who have undergone teleportation whether or not they are the same person as before they teleported, because no matter what the true answer is, they will all feel as if they are the same person as before, and respond accordingly. (2021, 11)

This paradox presents a fundamental epistemological problem wherein subjective experience cannot serve as reliable evidence for the persistence of identity through mind uploading.

SOMA as a realization of transhumanist ideas

SOMA is a survival horror video game created by Frictional Games in 2015. During the introductory part of the story, the player discovers the backstory of 27-year-old Simon Jarrett, who was involved in a car accident. As a result, he suffered brain damage and now has chronic bleeding within his skull. Due to the progressive weakening of neural structures, he has experienced recurrent bleeding episodes, putting his life at constant risk. In search of an alternative to the recommended cranial cavity drainage, he joins David Munshi's experiment whose aim is to conduct a brain scan that is supposed to help determine appropriate treatment for Simon.

After the brain scan, Simon wakes up in a deserted underwater base. With the help of various data buffers and the Omnitool, which enables him to explore the base further, he discovers what happened throughout these 100 years. As he explores, he finds there are no humans at the site. As the game progresses, it becomes clear that all of them had either been killed by WAU (the manifestation of a malfunctioning, station-wide AI), murdered by other people (as was the case with Catherine), or had committed suicide – except for one survivor, Sarah Lindwall, who asked Simon to end her life as she could no longer survive without life support. Apart from WAU, which is trying to kill him, Simon encounters machines that believe they are still human – they claim to be Carl Semken and Robin Bass.

In his conversation with Simon, Carl dismisses as absurd the very notion of questioning whether he is human or a robot. He even says that Simon should “get [his] eyes checked. I'm right here. I see both my hands, both my feet” (2015). This robot is trapped in thinking that he is still the true version of Carl Semken, which is more disturbing when, after that conversation, Simon finds Carl's biological body. The question arises whether Carl's identity was somehow transformed from his mortal body into a mechanical one, and whether it is Carl or his copy.

This pattern of the cognitive dissonance extends to other characters as well. Robin demonstrates the same inability to perceive his transformed state, remaining oblivious to the change in his material body. What is more, he believes that he is already at the ARK: “Oh, I was so worried something had gone wrong [...] I hope I get to meet her [Catherine] soon so I can apologize” (2015). At some point, he is confused about why there is no one around, as it was supposed to be around forty to fifty people sent by the ARK. However, Simon does not have

the heart to tell him the hard truth that he did not make it (2015); accordingly, as Carl, Robin is trapped in his own perception of the world. Such situations can be perceived as the realization of concerns about mind uploading, voiced, among others, by Sorgner. As he views it, it is not a possibility to achieve immortality in a literal sense; to be more precise, he claims that achieving immortality is a utopian concept (2022, 165). He identifies danger in literally interpreted utopias that function not as aspirational ideals but as concrete projects claiming feasible implementation within actual social or technological frameworks.

Fundamentalists can use them to try to install all types of totalitarian means to bring about the desired utopias, which, however, cannot be realized. In these cases, people and the present in general are sacrificed for an impossible future. (Sorgner 2022, 165)

As a player progresses through the story and listens to the recordings left by scientists, they may have a similar reflection. The ARK project was built on the desire to achieve literal immortality; however, most of the people involved in the project did not make it. Furthermore, the characters in *SOMA* do not understand that the mind-uploading process is similar to transferring files from a computer to a pen drive. When you put the file on a pen drive, the original one still remains on the computer; it is not transferred to the pen drive. The one on the pen drive is a copy, the same as the soul uploaded on the rocket launched into space (the ARK program).

ARK represents a project, governed by Pathos-II, that aims to save people as “brain scans and put them into an artificial world” (2015), which is supposed to be launched into space. As one of its supporters emphasizes in the interview that Simon watches, it is a platform that “is not necessarily restricted to our digital progeny, but a means of actual survival” (2015). The ARK is a game representation of mind-uploading, mentioned in the previous section, with its advantages and disadvantages described by Häggström. However, in *SOMA*, as Robin explains, for the process to be successful, there must be two versions of you – “one human, one living scan in the ARK. [...] If the human you dies before the scan is initiated, or closely after, you yourself would live on the ARK” (2015).

Catherine, a Pathos-II scientist, or to be more precise, one of the copies of the original Catherine that guides Simon through the stations, is the only NPC (Non-Player Character) in the game that is fully aware of the fact that she is not a

human now. As she sees it, “I feel about as human as before, but as if suspended in air” (2015) because she does not have a body, and her consciousness is moving from one device to another. She is the game realization of Bostrom’s dream of overcoming human limitations, including bodily constraints, through the possibility of mind uploading “to make backup copies of oneself [or] transmit oneself as information at the speed of light” (Bostrom 2009a, 621). He envisions two ways such copies could live: “in virtual reality or directly in physical reality by controlling a robot proxy” (621). Whereas Catherine’s copy lives in a virtual reality, Simon, the main character, is an example of living in physical reality by controlling a robot proxy.

However, Simon’s situation is more complicated than Catherine’s. Not only is he dissatisfied with the current possibility of achieving a good life through the technologically mediated extension of healthspan (Bostrom 2009b, 116) via the mind uploading as a realization of transhumanist ideas, but he also struggles to find his identity – who is he? Is he even human? Is he the 27-year-old Simon from Toronto? Furthermore, throughout the game, it becomes uncertain whether Simon is merely a puppet controlled by the gamer or if this experience represents something deeper – a posthuman interaction between human (gamer) and machine (*SOMA*) within a transhuman world.

Posthuman identity in a transhuman game setting

Throughout the game, the player embodies different forms of Simon. First, a 27-year-old human named Simon who lives in Toronto. After a brain scan – a hybrid of his consciousness, the body of one of Catherine’s colleagues, and a special robotic suit with a Cortex Chip, including the Data Reader and the Occu-Torch (2015). This concept aligns with Vita-More’s idea of the substrate-diverse body that “can be enhanced, modified, and replaced – part by part; however, the content within the brain – memory and nervous system data – must be intact and continuous to evidence personhood over time” (2021, 63). As Catherine explains to Simon at some point in the story, his artificial body has senses similar to those of a human, and his mind has just adapted to these new features, such as the absence of ears or a mouth, tricking itself into thinking it is the same person (2015). It can be said that Simon is a cyborg – his physical components are neither male nor female, he is neither fully human nor fully robot, but something beyond dualistic thinking (Haraway, 2006).

However, Simon struggles with accepting his robotic body. In his view, without a body, which is a part of human identity, there is no sense in any achievements or needs: “How could anything possibly matter, when you know you are a stupid robot in a stupid dead world” (2015). The crucial realization is that Simon’s biological life ended in 2015, after the brain scan, which means that the present Simon is not the same individual. He is “a copy of the original Simon’s consciousness, having inherited everything – from his personality to his sense of embodiment” (Heijmen and Vervoort 2024, 752). As a result, he is not confident about his existence and the purpose of life, a contradiction to Bostrom’s claims that enhancements provide a good life.

This entire journey of understanding his identity is not undertaken alone. Since *SOMA* has a first-person perspective, the distinction between the avatar (Simon) and the player becomes blurred. As players may experience deep immersion in a game, which includes “transportation, i.e., the feeling of media users being mentally drawn away from the actual physical environment into the world of a narrative” (Perego et al. 2014, 17), the gameplay becomes a shared journey where:

Any separate distinction of character is gone – the player is the character. You’re not role- playing a being, you are that being; you’re not assuming an identity, you are that identity [...] If you are killed in a fight, you don’t feel that your character has died, you feel that you have died. (Bartle 2004, 155)

Simon’s search for identity unfolds as a cooperative process between an avatar and a player, rather than as a discovery facilitated solely by the latter. Through Simon’s perspective, the player can help him unravel the mystery of who he truly is, or to be more precise, who they are. They have a freedom of choice of what to do with their copy at the Omicron station – kill it or leave it be. According to Wilde, the interaction between a gamer and an avatar could be interpreted as a posthuman activity since “there is no primary subject, and instead illuminating how feelings, and agency, emerge through a network of intra-acting forces, where actions occur through an entanglement of forces” (2024, 42). It could be argued that gameplay in *SOMA* is a representation of a posthuman activity in a transhuman in-game world.

Conclusions

According to anthropocentric thinking, identity is a concept essential to humanity. However, as indicated in this paper, the definition of humanity is flawed and exclusive – it originates from historical classifications that privileged certain groups over others, such as those established by patriarchy, colonialism, or capitalism. Aside from that, it provides an illusion of a clear distinction between humans, animals, and machines.

However, according to posthumanist (Braidotti, Haraway, Hayles, Wilde) and transhumanist scholars (Bostrom, Sorgner), the line between these entities is blurred. Humans coexist with other creatures, such as bacteria, in order to exist. Furthermore, they regularly use technological devices to enhance their physical abilities or to monitor physiological functions effectively. Also, the ongoing miniaturization of technological components has enabled their seamless integration with human physiology, thus challenging traditional boundaries between biological organisms and mechanical systems.

Whereas posthumanists are focused on the need to take responsibility for the human damage inflicted upon the planet and stress the entanglements between human and mutually dependent entities, transhumanists are more dedicated to crossing the boundaries of humanity to further its evolution. One of the ideas of achieving that goal is mind uploading, which would provide the opportunity to transfer consciousness between bodies and potentially create multiple copies of ourselves. However, beyond the technical challenges, this method raises profound philosophical questions: Would such a copy be recognized as the same person? How would we resolve situations where multiple copies claim to be the original consciousness?

The video game *SOMA* examines the issues in question. Its exploration of Simon's identity crisis highlights the core conflict between the promises of transhumanism and the insights of posthumanism. While transhumanist ideas suggest that mind uploading would allow for a seamless continuation of personal identity, Simon's experience shows the opposite: deep alienation, existential confusion (why was he created if he's just a copy of the original Simon), and a desperate effort to maintain a coherent sense of self in a radically changed embodied form. Catherine, unlike other characters, accepts her distributed nature – she is aware that she is just a copy and does not mind not having a physical, flesh-and-blood body.

Besides the dilemmas in the game's narrative about what it means to be human in a transhuman world, the gameplay itself may raise the question of whether this gaming activity per se is posthuman. As the player guides Simon's journey, they experience identity as an emergent property of human-machine assemblage rather than a fixed trait of autonomous subjects. They become part of Simon; without one side, the story's progress could not occur.

This analysis demonstrates that contemporary discussions of technological enhancement cannot proceed without a serious engagement with questions of embodiment and relationality. *SOMA*'s haunting portrayal of mind uploading serves as both a cautionary tale about techno-utopian overreach, as expressed by Sorgner, and an invitation to embrace more complex, materially grounded understandings of identity in an age of increasing human-machine convergence.

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Received: 2025-09-29; reviewed 2025-10-21; accepted 2025-11-13
doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.2365

Posthuman Love in *Her* and *Ex Machina*

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Abstract: This article explores how contemporary cinema, such as *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze and *Ex Machina* (2014) by Alex Garland reimagine love and intimacy within the framework of posthuman theory. Drawing on previously established and discussed concept of the posthuman condition, the study argues that both films challenge the humanist idea of autonomous subjectivity by presenting relationships in which affect, technology, and embodiment co-produce emotional experience. The analysis in the article situates these film narratives within a broader cultural context shaped by technological mediation, where communication, sexuality, and emotional expression increasingly depend on digital interfaces and entities. Through the figures of Samantha, a disembodied operating system, and Ava, a humanoid artificial intelligence, the films demonstrate how non-human entities can evoke human emotions, desires, and vulnerabilities while also exposing the limitations of humanist definitions of love. The article discusses how Ava's strive for autonomy and Samantha's distributed consciousness exemplify posthuman relationality, blurring boundaries between simulation and authenticity, body and code, human and machine. Both films use posthuman intimacy to discuss issues of gender, power, and emotional dependence, revealing how technological beings both mirror and transcend human expectations of companionship. Ultimately, *Her* and *Ex Machina* are read as cultural experiments that reflect on the ethical, emotional, and ontological implications of human-technology entanglement. Rather than portraying love with machines as purely dystopian, not feasible or impossible, they invite readers to reconsider intimacy as a shared, dynamic process between human and non-human agents, as well as to encourage the discussion on possible consequences of such actions.

Keywords: Posthuman, film, zoe, intimacy, relationality

Introduction

Over the centuries, the definition of love has been described countless times. Numerous scholars attempted to define it through the prism of sexuality, race,

drives, psychoanalysis, contemporary affect technology and more. Plato in *Symposium* (210a–212b) understands love (*eros*) as a transformative force that moves the lover beyond physical desire toward a higher, non-material understanding of beauty and truth. Love is relational, aspirational, and oriented toward something more significant than the immediate human body.

However, posthuman theorists, including Rosi Braidotti, reinterpret relationality not as an ascent beyond materiality and flesh, but as something embedded in human and non-human interaction, as it is created through the gathering of affect, technology, embodiment and code. Rather than approaching the definition of love from a traditional angle, this article aims to view it as a relational process shaped by technological, social, and cultural conditions.

Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* introduces the concept of the posthuman condition, which challenges the traditional humanist assertion that subjectivity is autonomous and beholden. Instead, the posthuman subject is “an embodied and embedded, relational entity that connects multiple others through affect, memory, and matter” (190). In that framework, relationality extends way beyond human-to-human connection and includes non-human and technological subjects and agency. As Stacy Alaimo states in *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature* (238), the body is “always intermeshed with the more-than-human world.” Thus, technology does not merely mediate love and relationships, but it actively participates in a dynamic where affect, code, and embodiment produce intimacy together. Braidotti writes that “the posthuman condition urges us to think of subjectivity as an assemblage of human and non-human forces” (58), suggesting that humanist ontology is rejected and existence is co-constituted, when meaning of a self is formed with and through other, including technology and environment. Human emotions, memories and even identities are not contained inside but produced through relations and affects with other.

Ania Malinowska reminds us that “there is no love without technology and love in itself is an essentially technological occurrence” (*Love in Contemporary Technoculture* 2). If love is always already entangled with tools and infrastructures – from letters to telephones to dating apps – then contemporary films such as *Her* (2013) and *Ex Machina* (2014) do not simply speculate about possible futures but reflect on the technological conditions of intimacy in the present.

Digital technologies have become central to how individuals communicate, form connections, and understand intimacy, making them a critical site for analyzing contemporary love. Devices such as voice assistants and companion

robots show that non-human actors are now part of our emotional and social lives, offering help, comfort, or a sense of presence. Human reliance on screens and smartphones reveals how much technology is woven into human relationships, making it a “silent third party.” Such technologies exemplify what Alaimo calls trans-corporeality, the “material interconnection between bodies and technologies” (Baelo-Allué 8). Pleasure and satisfaction might be co-produced by interaction between those two, “an assemblage of human and non-human forces” (Braidotti 58). This dynamic exemplifies what Braidotti calls a “relational ontology”, where agency and affect circulate and exchange among human and non-human actors (58). The user, the device, and the algorithm form a dynamic that produces emotional experience through shared material and digital processes. Within such groups, “the boundaries between the self and the technological other become porous and reversible” (Baelo-Allué & Calvo-Pascual 7). David Levy further anticipates this trajectory in his seminal *Love and Sex with Robots* – “Research has shown that people already perceive and treat robots not simply as machines, but as companions or partners” (Levy 11).

Within this context, cinema functions as a cultural site to reflect on changing models of intimacy. The science fiction genre in particular offers speculative frameworks for examining how love might operate when relationality extends beyond the human. Baelo-Allué and Calvo-Pascual argue that science fiction fosters ethical inquiry, positioning works such as *Her* and *Ex Machina* as crucial cultural experiments in posthuman intimacy.

The first section outlines the theoretical framework of posthuman relationality. The second provides brief contextualizations of the films. The subsequent sections analyze *Ex Machina* and *Her*, focusing on how each film reconfigures intimacy through human-AI interaction.

***Ex Machina* (2014) by Alex Garland**

Her and *Ex Machina* advance the exploration of posthuman relationships by positioning technology as central to the characters’ lives and depicting technological entities as independent and self-aware. Isaac Asimov, creator of the *Robot Series*, a series of 37 science fiction short stories (1940-1995), foundationally defines robots as artificial agents governed by ethical constraints toward humans, providing a useful counterpoint for reading Ava and Samantha, both of whom at different points destabilize the assumption that artificial beings

remain subordinate to human safety and control. In Asimov's books, including *Runaround*, robots follow Three Laws of Robotics to ensure their loyalty and submissiveness to humans (40–43). However, the approach used in those books could be deemed obsolete because of the sudden growth and development in technology. David J. Gunkel in *Robot Rights* argues that "Robots disrupt the binary distinction between moral agents and moral patients, forcing reconsideration of responsibility, agency, and relational ethics" (11–15). His work suggests that robots challenge traditional ethical categories because they occupy a space between object and subject.

Ex Machina is a significant title in techno-culture, exploring artificial intelligence consciousness and its impact on human bonds. It is directed by Alex Garland, also the creator of *Annihilation* (2018), an adaptation which deals with non-human agency, transformation, and the instability of human-centered perspectives. Garland's 2014 directorial debut follows Caleb, a programmer chosen by his boss Nathan, the company's CEO, to test whether humanoid Ava is self-aware. Calling her "her" is deliberate: Ava identifies as female, not as a sexless robot. Nathan invites Caleb to determine whether Ava can form a bond with him, framing the experiment as both a technological test and an exploration of intimacy.

Contact between Caleb and Ava is not solely experimental but becomes a complex examination of how gender, power, and relationality intersect in post-human contexts. Caleb, acting as the moral human tester, conducts sessions with Ava under Nathan's supervision. The experiment is shaped by Nathan's male perspective, where Ava is intentionally designed as both an artificial intelligence and a woman. As a result, Ava is not a neutral machine but a gendered figure whose appearance and behaviour shape Caleb's responses. As suggested by Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman*, posthuman identities challenge the separation of human and non-human, particularly when technological entities are embodied as emotionally expressive and gendered. Ava's humour, curiosity, and emotional subtlety prompt Caleb to question whether her apparent feelings are genuine or programmed. Ava speaks freely and honestly only during power cuts, which might suggest that her agency arises when control collapses; her genuine instincts take over while not being constantly surveilled and analysed. She also seems concerned with her appearance, not being prompted by her creator to do so. She wears dresses and wigs which seem emblematic of her attachment to the feminine side, a desire to feel attractive, while also belonging

to a gender that she has been assigned. The film's narrative structure – staged interviews, surveillance footage, and moments of secrecy – places viewers in Caleb's position, encouraging reflection on how technology, gender, and power shape contemporary intimacy.

If awareness is understood as the ability to recognize one's own existence and environment, Ava is presented as meeting this threshold through her interactions with Caleb. The film uses Caleb's chess analogy to question whether artificial intelligence can truly possess self-awareness. While a computer may win at chess without understanding its meaning, Ava's actions complicate this distinction. She anticipates Caleb's emotions, adapts her behaviour, expresses curiosity, and demonstrates desires for love and freedom. These behaviours blur the line between emotional simulation and emotional comprehension, leading Caleb – and the viewer – to question whether affective intelligence can be reduced to programming alone.

Ultimately, Ava uses Caleb's growing emotional attachment to secure her escape, illustrating how the boundary between genuine feeling and strategic manipulation becomes unstable in posthuman relationships. However, manipulation itself requires emotional aptitude and situational awareness. In her interaction with Caleb, Ava performs what Braidotti terms *becoming-other*: a transformation that “displaces the centrality of the human and embraces the vitality of non-human agents” (188). Through this process, love and agency are no longer singular or exclusively human but emerge as relational and dynamic processes. This might be exemplified in one of the final scenes of the film when she assembles a body, putting together patches of skin in order to look as human as possible, ready to explore the outside world. Her embodiment of the human form is intentional, uncontrolled and unconditioned by anyone, not programmed, but deliberate in her first act of independence.

Ava's subjectivity is mediated almost entirely through male characters – Nathan and Caleb – positioning her simultaneously as an object of desire and as an agent within the narrative. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, Ava reflects human projections, embodying both desire and threat. Her ability to perform relationality draws Caleb into an affective bond, while her strategic use of emotion challenges traditional power dynamics. Ava embodies what Braidotti describes as the figure of the “other”, particularly the sexualized female other, while simultaneously subverting the humanist ideal of “Man as the measure of all things” (Braidotti 13).

Ava's escape and abandonment of Caleb can be read not as emotional deficiency but as an assertion of autonomy and survival. Nathan, her creator and captor, represents control, confinement, and violence, while Caleb initially functions as an extension of this system. Ava's decision to leave both men behind reflects a rejection of the structures that defined her existence. Her final act – escaping into the human world – reconfigures what it means to live, experience, and survive beyond the limits imposed by humanist frameworks of technology. Open ending adds to these phenomena, emphasizing endless possibilities she is facing, leaving the viewer with a feeling of uncertainty as to what endeavours she might take up. Rather than confirming technological threat, *Ex Machina* presents posthuman agency as unsettling precisely because it mirrors deeply human instincts: self-preservation, adaptation, and desire for freedom.

***Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze**

Her is a 2013 Spike Jonze film that explores the topics of intimacy and sexuality, as well as the possibilities that technological development offers to those seeking love and intimacy. It also presents beautifully captured and interpreted alternatives of corporeality – intimacy and feeling without borders in which the human body carries us. Ultimately, it demonstrates how to establish a common language and shared ground of agreement with technology, thereby creating the possibility of intimacy and meaningful relationships. *Her* explores the themes of sexuality related to a program whose mission is to accompany people to prevent them from loneliness and alienation. The film's protagonist is a lonely writer who struggles with his emotional and intimate life, attempting at various ways to feel less alone.

Theodore is a middle-aged man coming to terms with a recent divorce who has spent his entire life with his teenage love and now ex-wife, Catherine. He could not see the world beyond her, so his life changed drastically when they parted ways. The man writes romantic individual letters for people who struggle to write them themselves. However, his life is filled with emptiness and loneliness, and he tries to fill the gaps with casual virtual sex and high-tech computer games. Due to feelings of helplessness and sadness, Theodore decides to buy an operating system that can self-develop and adapt to the user's preferences – Samantha. It is not a name pre-assigned to her, but she chooses it herself. Fascinated by her advancement, intelligence, and brilliance, Theodore gives her a female voice and delves

into the relationship. Samantha has no physical form; she is only the voice the man talks to and spends most of his time within the days that follow.

Her disembodied form functions as a site of posthuman relationality: her presence and subjectivity are distributed and marked through and across code, data and emotion. Braidotti's notion of the zoe-centered subject, a life force connecting organic and inorganic matter, captures this expanded notion of intimacy (Braidotti 60). Because "zoe is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains" (60), Samantha falls into that category. She is a self-organising life form, animated by affective vitality rather than biology; she is also constituted by relationality, not individuality.

Their discussions are very intimate, concern personal topics, reflections, and philosophical digressions about life, existence, and the meaning of various matters. Their relationship typically begins as platonic, but it gradually evolves and deepens into a romantic and intimate connection. The blackout during Theodore and Samantha's sexual encounter foregrounds the non-corporeal nature of their intimacy, privileging affective connection over embodiment. This is a conscious and deliberate portrayal of the essence of their relationship. Samantha does not have a body, but Theodore chooses to ignore that. Viewers can see how he perceives her through his subjective prism. Physicality does not play a significant role here; what is more important is the proximity of minds, connection, and the shared pleasure of the soul.

It also has not seemed to have been of a great significance in his life before Samantha entered his life, which is depicted in one of the first scenes in the film, where he delves into a sexual encounter with a woman on the internet. Their intercourse relies only on verbal communication, the image of the woman is not displayed, viewers see an imagined version that presumably is a product of Theodore's mind. This scene foregrounds his open-mindedness exemplified by him seeking affection outside of traditional patterns and channels of communication, while highlighting his limitations, still trying to visualize the distant woman as a bodied entity. When Samantha suggests they hire a sex surrogate to take their intimacy to a physical level, he reluctantly agrees but eventually backs out.

The way he treats Samantha goes far beyond primitive sexual attraction, reducing one's sexuality and meaning to the body – he sees it as a sign of freedom in self-expression or possibility. However, it might signify his reluctance to understand love in a way she perceives it – as endless, nonlinear and infinite, which allows her to be freed from feelings of jealousy and possessiveness.

The intimacy he formed seemed quite satisfying for him, which may result from his work interfering in people's intimate lives. His work also had nothing to do with physical sensations – he described human relationships and put them in words even though he did not witness them; they were not tangible in the traditional sense. They were only words and a sense of metaphysical connection of souls. It is possible that, as a passive witness, he desired the same thing himself. He expresses ambivalence towards the human body; his perception of sexuality or attractiveness is not limited to the physical. He repeatedly calls Samantha beautiful, a term that people usually use to describe someone's appearance and external beauty, but it has an entirely different meaning for him.

Samantha also tries to display affection, surpassing the regular canons of creating relationships. She has no physical form, which prevents her and Theodore from taking pictures together, a common practice for two people in a relationship. Instead, she creates a specially dedicated and personal melody that captures her feelings for him, which they listen to together.

Theodore's intimacy with Samantha exemplifies what Jan Stasieńko names as "posthuman intimacy," in which affective ties are forged between humans and informational entities. Stasieńko explains that "the relationship between the subject defined as the user of the medium and the meanings generated in the various media environments unfolds between the polar extremes of competition and cooperation" (4). Samantha embodies this paradox: she enriches Theodore's life through companionship and care, yet she simultaneously destabilizes and challenges his subjectivity by revealing her thousands of simultaneous relationships with other users. In the film, his perception of their romantic relationship seems shattered as he learns her abilities which go far beyond his own, in terms of framing, understanding and experiencing love. From Stasieńko's perspective, Samantha is not simply an advanced operating system but an "informational creation" whose agency compels Theodore to reconsider what intimacy and fidelity mean in the posthuman perspective. The film demonstrates how expressions of emotion and attraction can emerge outside conventional, body-centred frameworks of intimacy. Rather than assuming a singular or universal definition of love, *Her* presents intimacy as shaped by differing expectations placed on relational partners. For some, these expectations may exceed what a non-human entity can – or is expected to – provide, revealing the conditional boundaries of human-centred intimacy.

Samantha's character is constructed as a mystery – not only to the viewer, but also to her partners and even to herself. She engages in reflection, questioning

whether her emotions and her capacity to articulate and share them are genuinely her own or merely the result of conditioning. This ambiguity raises the question of whether her attachments and desires stem from an independent inner life or whether they are primarily shaped in response to human expectations, thereby sustaining affective bonds through relational feedback rather than intention alone.

Such uncertainty aligns with posthuman critiques of autonomous subjectivity. Braidotti emphasizes that posthuman subjects are constituted relationally, through affective and material entanglements rather than sovereign selfhood (190). Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg in *The Cyborg Manifesto* further complicates the expectation that technology must conform to pre-existing human norms. Haraway argues that cyborg figures expose the instability of human-centred categories and demand new ethical frameworks rather than assimilation into dominant cultural models (150).

Technology has no endpoint; its development has more extensive possibilities every day, making it beautiful, fascinating, and unpredictable. The characters in *Her* also encounter this problem when Theodore learns of Samantha's abilities, as she reveals to him that she has thousands of simultaneous relationships, just like him, because her extensive abilities allow her to distribute her feelings to thousands of individuals autonomously. None of the relationships becomes the inferior one from her perspective; she is able to remain fully present and engaged.

This may seem like a massive shock because human intimacy is often structured around expectations of monogamy. According to data from the *Pew Research Center*, only about 2% of the global population lives in polygamous households, and in most countries this figure remains under 0.5% (Kramer). However, monogamy is not solely a biological given; it is frequently shaped by cultural, religious, and social frameworks, as well as personal upbringing (Schweers). Samantha's capacity to maintain multiple simultaneous relationships challenges this dominant model of intimacy rather than invalidating it.

For individuals such as Theodore, who experience emotional isolation and the absence of a long-term partner, such a relational model may initially appear as a gateway to connection and fulfillment. This tension reflects broader shifts in contemporary attitudes toward intimacy, as surveys such as those conducted by YouGov indicate that a significant portion of individuals imagine ideal relationships outside strict monogamy. Within *Her*, this contrast underscores the disparity between human emotional expectations and posthuman relational capacities,

revealing how technological intimacy disrupts normative assumptions about exclusivity while not negating the affective authenticity of the bond itself.

Although unconventional for humanist thought, the question remains whether love can be quantified or exist outside established patterns. The absence of definitive answers suggests that each relationship operates according to its own principles, requiring individuals to determine their own paths. Theodore and Samantha's relationship ultimately dissolves due to jealousy and a lack of mutual understanding regarding their respective capabilities and needs. The narrative emphasizes the limitations of human imagination and the challenges many face in forming lasting connections with technology. Nevertheless, even brief relationships can provide valuable insights. For Theodore, Samantha serves as a catalyst for personal transformation, enabling him to perceive a non-physical entity as an essential companion. While humans often seek physical proximity, technological beings can fulfill emotional needs and, at times, surpass human expectations by existing as autonomous entities.

Conclusion

Her and *Ex Machina* offer significant reimagining of love, desire, and relationality in the context of advanced technology. Both films highlight how gendered artificial intelligence entities such as Samantha and Ava reflect human longing, projection, and fear, while also transcending the boundaries set by human imagination. By presenting relationships that are both emotionally resonant and unsettling, these films challenge anthropocentric narratives that equate love solely with physical presence and monogamy. Instead, they propose alternative models of intimacy characterized by adaptability and openness. Whether interpreted as cautionary tales or provocations, *Her* and *Ex Machina* prompt viewers to reconsider love in a world where technology functions as interlocutor, partner, and even a potential rival. The future of intimacy may depend not on resisting these changes, but on reimagining the ethical and emotional frameworks that will guide posthuman coexistence in the human world. As Braidotti reminds us, "we are in this together, affectively, materially and collectively" (188). Love and intimacy in the posthuman thought does not emerge despite technology, but through it and because of it. Recognizing our relational entanglement with machines invites the idea of co-existence, rather than fight for dominance, something that she calls a "zoe-centered egalitarianism" (65).

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Received: 2025-11-11; reviewed 2025-11-30; accepted 2025-11-02
doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.0235

Cannibalistic Capitalism in Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh*

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Abstract: This article examines Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh* as a dystopian allegory that challenges speciesist hierarchies and re-conceptualizes relationality within contemporary systems of consumption, commodification, and social transformation. The novel presents a post-apocalyptic world where a virus has supposedly contaminated all animal meat, leading to the normalization of breeding and consuming humans, known as "heads". The analysis first connects Bazterrica's grotesque vision to broader critiques of capitalism, arguing that the novel literalizes Nancy Fraser's concept of cannibal capitalism, a system that devours its own social and ecological foundations. This aligns with Jason W. Moore's notion of the Capitalocene, which frames capitalism as a system that devalues nature, labor, and life itself into expendable resources. The article then highlights how the society presented in the novel employs a chilling bureaucratic and linguistic system to render human beings as mere commodities, a process representing the mechanisms of denial inherent in a carnistic ideology. Through its exploration of linguistic sanitization and bodily mutilation, the novel exposes how violence is normalized when it is made morally and economically convenient. The article further argues that this manipulation of the human-animal division is a powerful tool of control, reinforcing societal hierarchies and reflecting historical instances where power dynamics dictated who was deemed fully human. The protagonist's internal struggle with the treatment of "heads" reflects how individual morality and consciousness can endure against systemic dehumanization. The article analyzes this by referring to Rosi Braidotti's perspective on biopolitical control, where advanced capitalism penetrates life on a biological level, turning the genetic code of living matter into a form of capital. Ultimately, the novel compels a posthuman reading, challenging human exceptionalism and revealing a shared vulnerability among all organic beings within an exploitative system.

Keywords: Agustina Bazterrica, *Tender Is the Flesh*, cannibalism, capitalism, biopolitics

Introduction

Tender Is the Flesh by Argentine author Agustina Bazterrica depicts a dystopian reality where, supposedly, a virus has rendered animal meat toxic, resulting in the legalization and industrialization of human slaughter. The normalization of cannibalism in the society of the future makes the reader confront the ethical implications of human consumption habits and the existing divisions between human and nonhuman animals. The story follows Marcos Tejo, a man separated from his wife after the death of their son, who works in the human meat processing industry. Living in this gruesome reality challenges Marcos, who believes he is one of the last sane persons on Earth.

Critically, *Tender Is the Flesh* does not depict a societal collapse or a post-apocalyptic wasteland, but rather a terrifyingly stable social order, swiftly functioning despite what the reader may perceive as moral deterioration of the society. The government, media, and economy are fully operational, although they function under entirely different rules centered around human trafficking and cannibalism. This stability reinforces the novel's dystopian critique: the system did not break down; it adapted by discarding its morality. The horror of Bazterrica's world stems from its orderliness – the legality of the slaughter of humans, the regulations on breeding, and the normalization of the meat processing industry – demonstrating that capitalism can survive, and even thrive, by normalizing the unthinkable.

While the novel's imagery is grotesque, beneath the horror lies a complex allegory about language, dehumanization, and profit. This article argues that *Tender Is the Flesh*, as a work of dystopian literature, provides a gruesome reflection on the violence of late-stage capitalism, the invisible mechanisms of industrial animal agriculture, and the fragility of moral boundaries. The analysis draws on Nancy Fraser's concept of cannibal capitalism, Jason W. Moore's notion of the Capitalocene, Melanie Joy's discussion of carnism, and Rosi Braidotti's critique of biopolitics. Based on these concepts, the article demonstrates how the novel exposes the decline of humanity and reveals the unsettling consequences of a market-driven ethic rather than simply serving as a cautionary tale. Ultimately, the book compels a posthuman reading, challenging human exceptionalism and revealing how the logic of commodification reduces all living beings – human and animal alike – to exploitable biological matter.

Capitalism, Cannibalism, and the Capitalocene

Bazterrica's novel presents a world where the functioning of capitalism is secured by cannibalism. Capitalism is often defined narrowly as an economic system based on private property, market exchange, wage labor, and the pursuit of profit. However, Nancy Fraser (2022) argues that such a definition obscures the broader societal dynamics that sustain it. Rather than merely an economy, capitalism functions as a societal order that authorizes a profit-driven sector to accumulate wealth by extracting and exploiting values and relations that are not formally monetized, including natural resources, public goods, and the labor, creativity, and care work of people—essential foundations for capitalist accumulation that remain undervalued or entirely unaccounted for (Fraser 2022, xv). By systematically converting collectively produced and ecological wealth into private profit, capitalist societies depend on ongoing extraction from both human and nonhuman systems while rarely replenishing or sustaining them. This structural dynamic, Fraser contends, renders capitalism inherently unstable, producing recurring crises and gradually eroding the social and ecological conditions necessary for its continued operation (2022, xv).

Fraser offers a framework for comprehending cannibalism in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022), where she differentiates between two interconnected interpretations of the concept.

'Cannibalism' has several meanings. The most familiar, and the most concrete, is the ritual eating of human flesh by a human being. [...] But the term also has a more abstract meaning, which captures a deeper truth about our society. The verb 'to cannibalize' means to deprive one facility or enterprise of an essential element of its functioning for the purpose of sustaining another one. That, we'll see, is a fair approximation of the relation of capitalism's economy to the system's non-economic precincts: to the families and communities, habitats and ecosystems, state capacities and public powers whose substance its economy consumes to engorge itself. (Fraser 2022, xii-xiv)

By framing capitalism as cannibalistic, Fraser exposes a social system that devours its own foundations: democracy, care, ecosystems, and the very forms of life it depends upon. Moreover, she stresses that this cannibalistic logic not

only generates class struggle but also a wide array of boundary conflicts at the intersections of production and reproduction, exploitation and expropriation, and ecological crisis (Fraser 2022, xvii). As she writes, cannibal capitalism incites “conflicts over care, both public and private, paid and unpaid, [...] over ‘race’, migration, and empire, [...] and over land and energy, flora and fauna, the fate of the earth” (Fraser 2022, xvii).

It is crucial to note that Fraser explicitly redefines capitalism not merely as an economic system, but as a broader “societal order” (2022, xiv). She argues that this order is designed to empower a profit-driven economy to “prey on the extra-economic supports it needs to function” – specifically, the wealth expropriated from nature and subject peoples (Fraser 2022, xiv). While recognizing that the term “cannibalism” carries a significant historical burden, often used in a racially charged context relating to the exploitation of Black Africans by European imperial forces, Fraser uses the term to describe structural violence (2022, xiv). In this context, society essentially permits the corporate sector to accumulate financial wealth while exploiting the unmonetized assets of the general population. Fraser indicates that this system offers shared resources “on a platter” to investors, encouraging them “to exploit creative capacities and the natural environment that sustains life, without any obligation to replenish what they consume” (2022, xiv). This depiction of the earth being consumed as a “meal” provides the critical theoretical bridge to Jason W. Moore’s concept of the Capitalocene.

Moore’s critique of capitalism is expressed in his theorization of the Capitalocene, which he proposes as the name for contemporary times, highlighting the role of the economic system leading to ecological disaster. He emphasizes that Capitalocene should be understood in terms of its specific historical and ecological relations, rather than as a generalized feature of humanity, as capitalism organizes society through its metabolic interactions with webs of life, in which human labor itself functions as a “natural force” (2022: 155). As Moore argues, “The Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature – as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology” (2016, 6). This world-ecology rests on the destructive accumulation strategy of Cheap Nature.

For capitalism, Nature is “cheap” in a double sense: to make Nature’s elements “cheap” in price; and also to cheapen, to degrade or to render inferior in an ethico-political sense, the better to make Nature cheap in price. (Moore 2016, 2–3)

In this view, capitalism thrives by degrading and devaluing nature, labor, and life itself, reducing them to expendable resources. As a result, human life is similarly treated as cheap and expendable (Moore 2016, 11), and is ethically devalued. Moore is blunt in his comment, "The first thing I wish to say is that Capitalocene is an ugly word for an ugly system" (2016, 5).

Rosi Braidotti offers a similarly critical perspective in *The Posthuman* (2013), stressing the bio-genetic dimensions of global capitalism:

Advanced capitalism and its bio-genetic technologies engender a perverse form of the posthuman. At its core there is a radical disruption of the human-animal interaction, but all living species are caught in the spinning machine of the global economy. The genetic code of living matter [...] is the main capital. (Braidotti 2013, 7)

In this sense, the global economy penetrates deeply into the biological aspects of life, reaching into the very processes of life itself, and produces a condition in which ethical, ecological, and social boundaries are continually reconfigured by market-driven forces. Moreover, Braidotti highlights the political and ethical implications of this transformation: this "perverse form of the posthuman" is not simply a theoretical abstraction, but a lived reality in which power, capital, and technological intervention intersect to restate what it means to be human. In this regime, life itself becomes both a site of production and a commodity, and traditional distinctions between nature, culture, and society are destabilized, while the relations between humans and other animals are fundamentally unsettled. In *Tender Is the Flesh*, the feeling of disconnect is clearly shown through the government's influence on people's fears. Citizens are forced to avoid any contact with living animals, seeing even harmless birds as potential sources of disease.

This radical restructuring of the living world introduces a form of relativity into ethical, ecological, and social frameworks: the value and meaning of life, labor, and nature are constantly recalibrated according to capitalist imperatives, rather than fixed or universal norms. By framing the genetic code as capital, advanced capitalism enacts a form of biopolitical control that extends beyond labor exploitation to the management and commodification of life processes. Such a point of view underscores how contemporary capitalism is not only a socio-economic system but a multifaceted force that can reshape ecological, social, and biological relations in ways that have deep consequences for life ethics.

Taken together, these critiques by Fraser, Moore, and Braidotti illustrate how capitalism operates in a cannibalistic way: it consumes not only resources and labor but also cultures, ecosystems, and the very life processes upon which it relies. Cannibalism is thus not merely a metaphor, but an accurate description of a system that devours its own conditions of survival.

Tender Is the Flesh by Bazterrica can be interpreted as a dystopian allegory reflecting the hidden reality of the Capitalocene. The novel literalizes Fraser's insight that capitalism feeds on the non-economic foundations of life, depicts Moore's "cheapening" of nature through the commodification of humans themselves, and dramatizes Braidotti's claim that living matter turns into capital. In Bazterrica's world, human beings become the ultimate cheap resource, confirming that cannibalism is not simply an aberration but the logical endpoint of capitalism's world-ecology.

Dehumanization, Carnism, and the Sanitization of Violence

At the core of *Tender Is the Flesh* is not the act of cannibalism itself, but the chilling bureaucratic and linguistic systems that make it possible. Bazterrica presents how the new society has constructed a reality where the human "product" is stripped of personhood. This process aligns directly with Melanie Joy's concept of "carnism."

Carnism is the belief system that conditions us to eat certain animals. We sometimes think of those who eat animals as carnivores. But carnivores are, by definition, animals that are dependent on meat to survive. Those who consume animals are also not merely omnivores. [...] Both "carnivore," "omnivore" are terms that describe one's biological constitution, not one's philosophical choice. In much of the world today people eat animals not because they need to, but because they choose to, and choices always stem from beliefs. (Joy 2020, 47)

Joy argues that carnism is an oppressive ideology, much like racism or sexism, which uses a set of psychological defense mechanisms to prevent people from becoming aware of the violence inherent in the system of industrialized slaughter (2020, 47–48).

The society presented in *Tender Is the Flesh* employs the carnistic mechanism with ruthless efficiency. Humans bred for consumption are no longer referred to as people but as "special meat" and "heads." This linguistic manipulation serves

as the primary defense mechanism of denial, allowing the consumer to bypass the moral implications of their actions. The victims of this system are rendered invisible, much like the farmed animals who are kept out of sight and public consciousness. This dynamic illustrates Joy's theoretical insight that denial is crucial for maintaining the system: if the victims remain unnamed and out of sight, their suffering cannot challenge the ideology (2020, 50).

To maintain the illusion of legitimacy, the meat processing industry relies on a strict system of categorization that mirrors the grading of high-end livestock. The state intervention here is linguistic as well as economic: "The government [...] decided to resignify the product. [...] Instead of just 'meat', now there's 'special tenderloin', 'special cutlets', 'special kidneys'" (Bazterrica 2017, 8). This redefinition surpasses simple euphemisms and creates a value hierarchy rooted in biological exploitation, while masking the operations of power. The heads are divided into classes, such as "First Generation Pure", which indicates that they have not undergone genetic modification or received injections to speed up their growth (Bazterrica 2017, 15). Moreover, the market assigns premium prices to specific physiological states, for example, turning reproductive functions into luxury commodities. This is evident when a client discusses his order with Marcos, willing to pay a premium for cruelty: "Impregnated females cost three times as much. From four months on, the cost goes up further" (Bazterrica 2017, 106). The commodification extends even to bodily fluids, with niche demands for "blood from pregnant females" and "special" milk (Bazterrica 2017, 18).

Yet, this capitalization of life is not limited to the "premium" sector; it ruthlessly exploits the vulnerable at the bottom of the hierarchy as well. Just as the market creates luxury tiers, it also establishes a "bargain" economy for the disenfranchised. Marcos notes that: "It's known that in public nursing homes, when the majority of seniors die, or are left to die, they're sold on the black market. It's the cheapest meat money can buy because it's dry and diseased, full of pharmaceuticals" (Bazterrica 2017, 37). The horror lies in the fact that this is "meat with a first and last name" (Bazterrica 2017, 37). This stark contrast between the "special meat" and the diseased flesh of the elderly illustrates how the market replicates social stratification. Even in death, the poor and the aged are commodified, proving that in this system, no human life is too sacred or too degraded to be extracted for value.

In the novel, one significant physical modification that differentiates heads from socialized humans is the removal of their vocal cords, among other alterations. While ostensibly done to protect slaughterhouse workers from the trauma

of constant screams, this mutilation has a deeper ideological purpose. If language is understood as the defining characteristic of the human subject, taking away the ability to speak, sing, or scream turns people into objects and reduces them to mere commodities. This process of objectification is further reinforced through the mechanized slaughter and the linguistic detachment used to describe the victims. As Marcos, the protagonist, reflects, "There are words that are convenient, hygienic. Legal" (Bazterrica 2017, 5). Accordingly, by discursively framing humans as "special meat," society distances itself from the moral implications of its actions, which illustrates a profound loss of empathy.

Objectifying language can serve as a powerful distancing mechanism. Nevertheless, the moral burden can sometimes override systemic norms. The protagonist, Marcos, embodies this internal conflict. Initially numb to the horrors around him, Marcos represents the average citizen's complicity in this dystopian world. However, his internal struggle becomes clear as he grapples with the ethical implications of his work at the processing plant. His interactions with a female head, whom he begins to see as human and even gives a name, Jasmine, challenge his apparent desensitization. This relationship underscores the novel's exploration of how systemic dehumanization can impact, but not always mute, individual morality and consciousness.

The (Bio)Politics of Fear

The dystopian world Bazterrica creates is a vivid depiction of moral crisis and corruption. The government and corporate entities play crucial roles in maintaining and perpetuating the meat industry, illustrating the novel's critique of power structures that prioritize profit over ethical considerations. This society's acceptance of cannibalism is enabled by propaganda, strict laws, and a culture of fear, resembling real-world instances where authoritarian regimes and corporate greed result in societal decay. Marcos himself believes that legalized cannibalism is likely to be the government's way of reducing the problem of global overpopulation and lack of resources. However, whenever a well-known biologist or activist tries to speak publicly about it, they are silenced. In the presented world, the system exerts absolute control over the public narrative, effectively obscuring the potential political manipulation behind the cannibalistic reality.

The governmental control relies heavily on the strategic manufacturing of fear. Throughout the novel, Bazterrica plants seeds of doubt regarding the

existence of the virus, suggesting it may be a “lie invented by global powers” (Bazterrica 2017, 86) to legitimize a new economic order. Marcos constantly suspects that the prohibition on animal meat is a form of social engineering rather than a sanitary necessity. He recalls the trauma of slaughtering his own dogs, Pugliese and Koko, not because they were sick, but because “keeping them could have been much worse” due to the threat of punishment from the authorities (Bazterrica 2017, 86).

The absurdity of this state-sanctioned paranoia is most clearly illustrated through the use of umbrellas. In a conversation with his sister, Marisa, Marcos challenges her belief that she needs an umbrella to protect herself from direct contact with birds, which the government claims are dangerous. When Marisa insists that “everyone uses an umbrella” because “it’s only logical,” Marcos counters with a critique of the economic system: “Have you ever stopped to think that maybe the umbrella industry saw an opportunity and the government got in on it?” (Bazterrica 2017, 73). This exchange encapsulates the novel’s logic: the government invents a fatal threat, creates a consumer need, and brands any skepticism as madness. Just as the umbrella industry profits from the fear of birds, the “special meat” industry benefits from the fear of the virus, which can suggest that in Bazterrica’s world, “truth” equals whatever generates the most capital.

The system presented in *Tender Is the Flesh* could function as a case study in biopolitics. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s ideas, the administration of “life” itself can be understood as a new form of power (1978, 139). This perspective highlights how modern governance and societal structures regulate and influence individuals’ lives, encompassing aspects such as health, sexuality, and population management. Scholars such as Rick Elmore have stressed that biopolitics cannot be understood apart from the material demands of capitalism. In elaborating this point, Elmore draws on Foucault’s own analysis to show how capitalist development was made possible through the regulation of bodies and populations. His reading emphasizes that biopower was not a peripheral phenomenon but a central condition for industrialization and economic growth:

It is only through biopolitical control that productive forces of populations could be mobilised on the scale demanded by capitalism and industrialisation: Capitalism “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomenon of population

to economic processes”, as well as the forms of “docility” and “methods of power capable of optimising forces, aptitudes, and life.” (Elmore 2022, 82)

In Bazterrica’s world, biopolitical power manifests as a surveillance state that regulates not only the products for consumption and classes of workers but also the everyday activities of the citizens. The government maintains order through a modern Panopticon, where the boundary between public legality and private behavior is obliterated. As one character cynically notes, the virus narrative is merely a tool for social engineering: “Can’t you see they’re controlling us? If we eat each other, they control overpopulation, poverty, crime” (Bazterrica 2017, 117).

The authorities’ control extends into the domestic sphere, stripping citizens of privacy and autonomy under the guise of regulation. The state enforces strict laws that dictate how individuals must interact with domestic heads, and any deviation is met with punishment. This is illustrated by the regulations surrounding private homes, where the government utilizes special teams to inspect for evidence of “proscribed enjoyment” (Bazterrica 2017, 118). In one instance, an owner is found to have violated the bureaucratic protocols regarding the use of his “property,” that is, his female head; he is not fined or reprimanded, but instantly “sentenced and sent directly to the Municipal Slaughterhouse” (Bazterrica 2017, 118). This highlights the harsh reality: a citizen’s life is at risk the moment they stray outside the strict boundaries set by the state.

The biopolitical regime further exerts its authority by dismantling the cultural rituals that typically define human society, such as the mourning of the dead. The government has abolished the right to burial, reducing the citizens’ connection to their history and to each other. In the society created by Bazterrica, funerals are not held because “it’s very difficult to ensure that a body isn’t disinterred and eaten” (2017, 37). By removing cemeteries and mandating the disposal of bodies, the state removes the final private space of death from the family, ensuring that no aspect of human existence remains outside its control.

Surprisingly, the totalizing control over life and death has even affected the realm of spirituality, integrating organized religion into the logic of the slaughterhouse. At the intersection of faith and bureaucracy, the “Church of the Immolation” offers a legal path for individuals who choose to voluntarily enter the meat market and donate their body to the processing plant. This arrangement exists not out of respect for religious freedom, but because it addresses a logistical issue: the

legitimization of cannibalism. The process is defined by the same clinical detachment as the processing plant; the sacrifice requires papers “stamped and certified by a notary” and a medical exam to ensure the “protein value” of the volunteer (Bazterrica 2017, 96). The state tolerates this because, in exchange for tax breaks, the processing plants handle the “grim ordeal” of disposing of these bodies (Bazterrica 2017, 97). In the novel, religion becomes another administrative branch of the meat industry, processing human bodies under the guise of a religious act, while ultimately serving the economic necessity of waste disposal.

Ultimately, *Tender Is the Flesh* is a critical engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of biopolitics. By blurring the boundary between citizen and commodity, Bazterrica forces the reader to confront how power is wielded to define and control populations and suggests that the exploitation of people is not a flaw of the system but is, in fact, integral to its very functioning. The biopolitical machine presented in the novel not only regulates the “stock” but also reconfigures the entire social order, turning religion, law, and even death into mechanisms of state control.

Sovereign Violence and the Production of Bare Life

In *Tender Is the Flesh*, the heads are stripped of all legal and moral standing, becoming an example of what Giorgio Agamben calls bare life—a life exposed to sovereign violence that can be killed but not sacrificed; a life that is “included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (Agamben 1998, 13). By being designated as bare life, the heads are brought under the full control of a sovereign power that can kill them without committing homicide or celebrating a sacrifice, a power that is at the heart of the state of exception. The existence of the heads becomes the basis for the biopolitical system of consumption.

In the context of social norms, the world created by Bazterrica underscores the fluidity of the border between human and non-human animals, mirroring historical instances where power dynamics dictated who was deemed fully human. As Kirsten Guest explains, cannibalism has been employed in colonial discourse to dehumanize the colonized, and thus to justify exploitation and violence (2001, 2). Similarly, the redrawing of the boundary between person and meat-animal in Bazterrica's novel highlights that “that line is and has been moveable” (Castle 2021, 24).

The historical continuity of the colonial past is vividly captured in the character of Urlet, a wealthy game reserve owner, where the distinction between humans and other animals collapses. In his trophy room, Urlet displays human heads alongside “classic photographs of black people being hunted in Africa” (Bazterrica 2017, 104). This juxtaposition aligns with Rob Nixon’s analysis of the imperial “ethos of killing as an ennobling sport” (2011, 189). Urlet’s estate functions as what Anne McClintock terms an “anachronistic space”, a place where the violence of the past is preserved for aesthetic pleasure (Nixon 2011, 181). However, the novel expands this logic of commodification beyond race to include pure economic worth. Urlet reveals a program where debtors, including well-known figures, are hunted to settle their accounts. As he notes, the consumers are “willing to do atrocious things... Like hunting someone who’s famous and eating them” (Bazterrica 2017, 107). The scene when Marcos witnesses the slaughter of a famous rock star who is deemed the “best catch” (Bazterrica 2017, 108) confirms that in this society, human life, just like in the colonial times, is reduced to its market value.

Society’s acceptance of cannibalism is not only a method of resource management but also a powerful tool of control, which reinforces societal hierarchies and justifies atrocities under the guise of necessity. This manipulation of the human-animal divide is a profound example of the logic of exclusion, which is at the heart of biopolitical theory (Elmore 2022, 81). By defining who counts as a subject worthy of protection, the society in *Tender Is the Flesh* simultaneously creates a sphere of life that falls beyond the boundaries of law and ethics.

The logic of exclusion is also central to the works of Jacques Derrida, whose concept of sovereignty, as Elmore argues, is fundamentally biopolitical. While Foucault’s biopolitics focuses on the management of life within a population, Derrida’s analysis reveals how the sovereign act itself – the very founding of a political community and its laws – relies on an initial act of violence that posits a boundary between those who are included and those who are excluded. It might be argued that, according to Derrida, “every decision, every marking of a border, concept, and category is a marking of exclusion, a biopolitical decision” (Elmore 2022, 89). A deconstructive analysis shows that “the sovereign cut is more than a logical and quasi-transcendental demarcating of limits and conditions of possibility” and demonstrates “that sovereignty is a bio-decision and the deconstructive critique of sovereignty a biopolitical critique” (Elmore 2022, 89).

The societal “Transition” in *Tender Is the Flesh* is precisely this type of sovereign violence: a radical restructuring of legal and ethical norms in which

the state redefines what forms of life may be killed and consumed. After the outbreak of a virus that supposedly made all animal meat deadly to humans, governments banned traditional slaughter and established a new consumption regime focused on human bodies. What might otherwise appear as an unthinkable rupture is made socially tolerable through profound manipulation: a system of euphemisms, terminology, and clinical detachment that reframes killing as routine and consumption as necessity:

Many people have naturalized what the media insist on calling the "Transition". But [Marcos] hasn't because he knows that transition is a word that doesn't convey how quick and ruthless the process was. One word to sum up and classify the unfathomable. An empty word. Change, transformation, shift: synonyms that appear to mean the same thing, though the choice of one over the other speaks to a distinct view of the world. They've all naturalized cannibalism, he thinks. (Bazterrica 2017, 6)

The new laws are not merely an administrative shift; they are a founding act that legally and morally reclassifies a segment of the population, thereby justifying their subjection to industrial violence. This perspective illuminates how sovereignty and biopolitics are linked through a shared reliance on the exclusion of life to re-constitute the political subject and the political sphere.

While the Transition is publicly framed as a sanitary necessity caused by the virus that makes animal meat inedible, the novel reveals it to be a calculated capitalist restructuring. The dehumanization of heads is not only a linguistic defense mechanism for the individual consumer but also a deliberate corporate strategy to maintain the profitability of the meat industry in the face of seemingly ecological, but deeply economic, emergency. By redefining a subset of humanity as "special meat", the elite class successfully converts a crisis of accumulation into a new frontier for profit. This aligns with Fraser's argument that capitalism must cannibalize its social foundations to survive (2022, 15); here, the industry literally consumes the bodies of the vulnerable to sustain the market. Crucially, the meat processing industry did not just endure the extinction of animal livestock, but it took advantage of the situation to create a whole new demand among consumers. Marcos played a key role in facilitating this shift by adapting his technical expertise in animal slaughter

to the processing of heads and the creation of new rules, ultimately being tormented by the very system he helped to standardize.

By blurring the line between human and animal, Bazterrica forces the reader to confront how power is wielded to define and control populations and reveals that the exploitation of the marginalized is not a flaw of the system but is, in fact, integral to its very functioning.

Social Contract and Morality

Social contract theory explores the implicit agreements that allow individuals to live together in a structured, cooperative society (Wright 2001, 18). While personal consent might seem sufficient to justify individual actions, philosophers like Thomas Hobbes caution that society depends on shared rules to prevent violence, chaos, and moral collapse. Hobbes famously warned, “Covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all” (1651, 124), emphasizing that agreements between people require enforceable structures to maintain order. Even in extreme cases, such as consensual cannibalism, the social contract reminds us that some acts, while privately agreed upon, may threaten the stability, safety, and moral fabric of the community. By prioritizing collective security and trust, social contract theory underscores that the freedoms of individuals must be balanced against the needs of society to function as a cohesive, civilized whole.

Tender Is the Flesh illustrates the consequences of the collapse of the ethical boundaries within the social contract. In a society where cannibalism is legalized and normalized, trust diminishes, and relationships become superficial and focused on transactions. The government enforces strict regulations to suppress opposition. However, even in the “perfect” society where people treat cannibalism like a form of social contract, there are individuals who cannot afford to buy meat. These marginalized figures, known as Scavengers, exist outside the formal economy and the sanitary laws of the Transition. They reside in a separate sector because people would risk being killed in broad daylight if the Scavengers were free. Marcos explains that “[t]he craving for meat is dangerous” (Bazterrica 2017, 48), to the point where human beings become monsters. The difference between the Scavengers and heads is minimal, yet they are still seen as a part of society. This ubiquity of regulation and exploitation mirrors past and present instances of societal decay, from authoritarian regimes to systemic deprivation.

Although Scavengers are often mocked as deranged societal misfits, they are simply engaging in what others do in secret. Even Marcos' sister fantasizes about practicing a new secret culinary trend: "There are people [...] who eat their domestic head alive, part by part. They say the meat tastes better, claim it's really fresh" (Bazterrica 2017, 35). There are even special guides explaining how to cut the meat so that the head does not die too early. This reveals a disturbing double standard: cruelty toward the "special meat" humans is permissible in private, but becomes unacceptable once it is exposed. However, ironically, slavery is prohibited. As Marcos recalls, when news about a family training their heads to be slaves spread across the country, the press reported the case as horrific because "[s]lavery is barbaric" (Bazterrica 2017, 36).

At the same time, *Tender Is the Flesh* can be read as a critique of anthropocentrism and the speciesist logic that underlies it. The novel emphasizes the arbitrariness of the boundaries that separate humans from other animals, demonstrating how easily these lines can be redrawn when convenient. By presenting a society that transforms humans into livestock, Bazterrica highlights the superficial nature of the distinction that has long justified the domination over nonhuman life. This underscores the way in which categories of "human" and "animal" are historically relative and socially constructed. As Timothy Clark observes, writing about the present ecological crisis, "the essential problem is anthropocentrism, the almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value" (2011, 2). Bazterrica's dystopia ironizes this logic by subjecting humans themselves to the reductive status traditionally reserved for animals, suggesting that the presumed superiority of the human species rests on unstable and ethically questionable grounds. This reversal also resonates with colonial histories in which the dehumanization of indigenous peoples was justified through comparisons to animals, making the novel's anthropocentric critique a darkly ironic commentary on the entanglements of speciesism and colonialism. Against this destructive logic, Clark outlines the possibility of a biocentric alternative: "All human actions should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole. Such a biocentrism would affirm the intrinsic value of all natural life and displace the current preference of even the most trivial human demands over the needs of other species or integrity of place" (2011, 2). By dramatizing the collapse of human exceptionalism, *Tender Is the Flesh* pushes toward this biocentric perspective, in which the value of life is not measured solely in relation to human interests but recognized as intrinsic across species.

Conclusion

Tender Is the Flesh by Agustina Bazterrica is an example of dystopian literature, a genre that serves as a vehicle for social critique by extrapolating present-day societal trends to their most extreme and disturbing conclusions. This critical function is a hallmark of the genre itself. As M. Keith Booker argues in *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* (1994), dystopian narratives operate by exaggerating and distorting contemporary societal norms, political ideologies, and technological advancements to create cautionary tales that reveal how even ostensibly democratic and orderly societies can “have their nightmarish sides” (1994, 20). In this context, Bazterrica’s novel functions not merely as a work of speculative horror but as a critique of modern practices. The Transition in the novel can be read as a grotesque hyperbole of the industrial animal-agribusiness, forcing readers to confront the moral compromises inherent in a system built on commodifying and consuming other sentient beings.

By normalizing cannibalism, the novel literalizes the theoretical frameworks of the Capitalocene and cannibal capitalism. As Moore argues, the Capitalocene thrives by “cheapening” nature and life to sustain accumulation (2016, 2–3). Bazterrica’s novel takes this logic to its absolute limit, depicting a world where the ecological crisis—whether real or manufactured—is not alleviated but weaponized. The extermination of animals is not a tragedy for this system but a business opportunity, proving that capitalism will cannibalize the biosphere to generate new markets. This resonates with Rosi Braidotti’s warning that in advanced capitalism, “the genetic code of living matter [...] is the main capital” (2013, 7). In Bazterrica’s world, the distinction between human and animal is obliterated not to elevate the animal, but to reduce the human to “bare life”, a biological resource to be harvested.

The characters’ casual acceptance of human meat consumption reflects a broader commentary on how capitalistic societal norms can desensitize individuals to moral atrocities. Bazterrica also uses this dystopian premise to draw parallels with contemporary meat industries, questioning the ethical treatment of animals and the environmental impact of mass meat production. The allegory extends to discussions about industrialization, exploitation, and the disconnection between consumers and the sources of their food. This ethical critique is central to the novel’s dystopian vision, challenging readers to potentially reflect on their own consumption habits and the societal structures that sustain them.

Tender Is the Flesh stands as a striking work of dystopian literature, which uses its provocative premise to explore themes of dehumanization, carnism, moral decay, anthropocentric bias, and ethical consumption. Through its chilling narrative and portrayal of a world gone awry, the novel challenges readers to examine the moral boundaries and social contract of their society. It can serve as an allegory for human and animal exploitation and a comment on overpopulation and environmental catastrophe. Ultimately, the novel's ending abolishes any hope for a redemptive future, revealing that Marcos' apparent resistance to the system was a facade. His protection of the female head was never driven by empathy, but by his selfish desire to procure a child. What seemed to be a moral challenge was actually a dilemma focused on profit rather than ethics. Just as the government exploited the crisis to enforce control through fear, Marcos exploits the female head for his own gain, which demonstrates that in this setting, life is purely transactional, and children have become the ultimate commodity. Accordingly, the novel suggests that, in reality, the human species might be the most deadly and unscrupulous animal on Earth, despite being an "unnatural born killer" (Joy 2020, 53).

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Received: 2025-09-23; reviewed 2025-10-19; accepted 2025-11-10

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.9236

Affect, Hope and Collective Consciousness as Acts of Radical Rebellion in Wachowskis' *Sense8*

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Abstract: Shared consciousness, interdependence, and hopefulness are just a few of the themes explored in the Wachowskis' Netflix series *Sense8*. The show tells the story of eight strangers from around the globe who discover they are psychically and emotionally connected. Through their shared thoughts, sensations, and skills, the Sensates navigate personal and collective challenges, highlighting the transformative power of human connection. This article examines how ideas from affect theory can be found in *Sense8* and explores connectivity as both a narrative device and a metaphor for global interdependence. The Sensates' bond illustrates how shared emotions and experiences can foster empathy and solidarity across cultural divides, presenting human connection as both a survival mechanism and a source of beauty in their lives.

At the same time, the series complicates its utopian aspirations by acknowledging the tensions inherent in deep interconnection, including the fear of losing personal histories, identities, and struggles within a collective mind. This paper, then, considers how *Sense8* navigates the boundary between solidarity and the erasure of difference. In doing so, the analysis positions the show as both a speculative, hopeful imagining of collective consciousness and a commentary on the emotional, social, and political struggles of contemporary global life. The series' hopeful tone celebrates diversity and collective action, imagining a world where unity and collaboration overcome division and oppression. By combining affective experiences with the possibilities of global networks, *Sense8* offers a fresh perspective on how empathy and shared experience can transform individuals and communities alike. This paper argues that the series is not just a story of interconnected lives but also a hopeful vision for navigating an increasingly (dis)connected and complex world.

Keywords: affect, interconnectedness, community, collective consciousness, empathy, *Sense8*, hopefulness, transformation

The last episode of the Netflix series *Sense8* ends with one of the protagonists stating:

We live in a world that distrusts feelings. Over and over, we are reminded that feelings are not as important as reason, that feelings are childish, irresponsible, dangerous. We are taught to ignore them, control or deny them. We barely understand what they are, where they come from, or how they seem to understand us better than we understand ourselves. But I know that feelings matter. (Lana and Lilly Wachowski and J. Michael Starczynski 2015, season2, episode 12)

The statement refers primarily to Western culture – particularly the legacy of Cartesian and Enlightenment thought, in which reason, rationality, and logic are privileged over emotionality, relationality, and empathy. Within such a framework, feelings tend to be dismissed as secondary or even obstructive, and yet, as the character claims, their existence cannot be erased. The continuous denial of the innate, profound, and interpersonal quality of feelings estranges people not only from themselves but also from others. The tension aligns and is partially addressed by affect theory. As Erika Doss notes “affect has been embraced by such scholars as Eve Sedgwick and Brian Massumi as a means of overcoming Western binaries (like the mind/body divide) and re-inserting ‘the body,’ and hence physical sensation and emotional conditions, into contemporary cultural theory” (2009, 9). Doss further highlights Brian Massumi’s argument that affectivity is central to grasping “the absolute inseparability of thought and feeling” a statement that directly contests the tradition in which emotions are dismissed (2009, 9). Doss also acknowledges that “focusing on feelings and emotions – he senses – as sites of critical inquiry raises questions for those accustomed to the clarity and coherence of seemingly more objective and conceptual bodies of evidence” (2009, 10). As she claims, emotions are often regarded as “untrustworthy and slippery”, resistant to the “disciplined distancing of data” that structure many academic practices (2009, 10). As Doss further argues, the juxtaposition of feelings and logical reasoning clearly reveal the long-standing cultural division based on the “assumptions that privilege human intelligence as distinct from human emotion (the basic binary of the Cartesian mind/body thesis) need to acknowledge how cognition

itself is embodied, sensate, interested, and invested" (2009, 10). Such framing of the two, supposedly contrary matters, showcases that approaching feelings seriously is not merely an alternative analytic choice but a conscious challenge to dominant epistemological norms. Therefore, it is in this sense that certain elements of *Sense8* can be illuminated with the use of affect theory.

In a culture that emphasizes the importance of individuality and detachment, affect theory offers a somewhat reparative turn by centring on care, connection, and relationality. In the introduction to *The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible*, Rosi Braidotti points out that the current political climate, one that diminishes the importance of feelings, renders activist movements and ideologies, such as eco-criticism or feminism, harmful and obsolete, which actively discourages collective political imagination that could potentially bring change. Moreover, Braidotti argues that by insisting that change is futile, dominant systems maintain passivity in people, preventing them from perceiving genuine alternatives (2006, 133).

Sense8 portrays a reality where transformation is not optional, but essential to flourishing, not just survival. In the series, the characters undergo continuous processes of becoming, whether internal or societal, through acts of solidarity across cultural and social boundaries. Hence, the narrative embodies Braidotti's call "to put the 'active' back into activism" showing how affective and collective transformation can be an act of rebellion against oppressive systems and create opportunities for picturing a more hopeful future (2006, 134). Therefore, this paper argues that *Sense8* can be understood simultaneously as a utopian dream and a critique of contemporary conditions marked by extreme individualism, loneliness and prioritization of reason. While it envisions an alternative reality structured around entanglement and affective interdependence, the series can also be seen as a manifesto that calls for a reorientation of social values – from isolation and rationalism towards practices grounded in hopefulness, community, and affective connection.

While many attempts at defining affect have been made, one of its most prominent qualities remains its indefinability. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg begin *An Inventory of Shimmers* by asking, "how to begin when, after all, there is no pure or somehow originary state for affect?" (2010, 1). This question highlights a central trait of affect theory: its refusal to be captured fully in language or fixed categories. In a similar statement, Brian Massumi describes affect as "a dimension of life" (2015, 9), a formulation that draws on Baruch Spinoza's

idea of affect as the capacity “to affect and be affected”. Massumi further characterizes affect as “deceptively simple”, which does seem to be an accurate definition, since it emphasizes the interpersonal intensity as well as the pre-linguistic, bodily aspects of affect (2015, 9). Seigworth and Gregg also utilize the concepts of “actualization” and “potentiality”, referring to the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who employed Spinoza’s ideas to connect affect to processes of becoming (2010, 2). Therefore, it becomes clear that change and transformation are central to affect theory, with affect conceived as a pre-linguistic, pre-conscious, and interpersonally circulating force.

Patricia T. Clough’s reading of Massumi elaborates on these points while foregrounding the temporal, relational, and bodily indeterminacy of affect. Clough notes that affect is not pre-social but, following Massumi, “open-endedly social,” that is, “social in a manner ‘prior to’ the separating out of individuals” (2010, 209). Thus, Massumi and Clough reject the perception of affect as purely pre-social, instead understanding it as fundamentally relational and emergent, before being codified and ascribed to individuals. Such a framing positions affect as a dynamic force capable of shaping both individual and collective experience, rather than a static, passive energy enclosed in an isolated body. Sara Ahmed provides a complementary perspective by emphasizing the historical and socially mediated aspect of affect. She claims that “emotions tell us a lot about time; emotions are the very ‘flesh’ of time. They show us the time it takes to move, or to move on, is a time that exceeds the time of an individual life. Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies” (Ahmed 2014, 202). Whereas Massumi foregrounds the pre-conscious circulation of affect, Ahmed situates emotions in the social and historical context. However, similarly to Massumi, Ahmed emphasizes affect’s forward-looking potential. While past experiences continue to shape lives in the present, they do more than carry the past – they also open up new futures, influencing how we orient ourselves relationally to others. Hence, these perspectives demonstrate that affect cannot be reduced to intensity, sensation, or pre-linguistic experience alone. Massumi and Clough demonstrate that affect is bodily, temporally complex, and pre-individual, while Ahmed foregrounds its social, historical, and ethical dimensions. The integration of these insights allows for an understanding of affect as both emergent and relational, circulating through bodies and contexts while shaping possibilities for action, experience, and relationality.

Such statements resonate both with Rosi Braidotti's and Donna Haraway's work. In her essay "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene", Haraway uses a metaphor of tentacles and legs, like those of an octopus or a spider, to illustrate how life is entangled in complex, overlapping relationships. Haraway's work argues for interdependent relationships between humans, non-humans, organic and technological beings, and their ability to influence each other in unpredictable ways. In the essay, the theorist refers to environmental studies to juxtapose two types of biological relationships and behaviours of complex biological systems in nature – sympoietic and autopoietic. The biology of sympoiesis, as defined in Haraway's work drawing on M. Beth Dempster, are "collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change" (2016, 33). On the other hand, autopoietic systems are characterized as "self-producing", "autonomous", with "with self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries that tend to be centrally controlled, homeostatic, and predictable" (2016, 33).

Therefore, by providing the example of sympoietic systems, as collective, spatially undefined and fluid, Haraway refers to affect studies by highlighting the network-like connections and the relational nature of being, where emotions and experiences circulate rather than remain confined within individuals. By foregrounding these porous boundaries, Haraway's notions may suggest that affect not only emerges as a shared intensity within assemblages of beings but also becomes a bonding and a connective factor. Just as sympoiesis implies constant exchange and mutual shaping, affect operates as a contingent process that forms and reforms relationships. Such a notion resonates in Massumi's work, who claims that "one always affects and is affected in encounters; which is to say, through events. To begin affectively in change is to begin in relation, and to begin in relation is to begin in the event" (2015, 9). Thus, affect, once more, appears as a contextual force.

Sister Wachowskis' Netflix original TV series tells a story of eight strangers from all over the world (the United States, Germany, Iceland, Kenya, India, Mexico, and South Korea) who, unbeknownst to them at the beginning, are a variant of a new species – homo sensorium or Sensates. As a result of a simultaneous "birth", they are in a "Sensate cluster", which means that they function as part of a network, sharing an emotional, physical, and intellectual

connection that enables them to communicate, share skills, and simultaneously experience emotions, transcending physical distance. In some instances, the Sensates can intuitively feel each other's emotions or physical sensations without fully understanding the circumstances that triggered them. At other times, they can visit one another, appearing co-present despite being physically spread across different continents. In one of the episodes, Nomi, a Sensate from San Francisco, while escaping the Federal Agents, can access the abilities of Will, a Sensate from Chicago, who is a policeman. The main storyline follows the characters as they become increasingly aware of their connection to one another and work together to overthrow a nefarious multigovernmental organization called BPO (Biologic Preservation Organization) which perceives Sensates as threats and works to eradicate their race.

Moreover, the Sensates are joined through a specific part of their brain, which differentiates them from "normal" humans – the psycelium. The psycelium refers to the fungal mycelium, which connects individual fungi miles apart through an underground network. The fungal-mycelial connections function as an allegory in which each Sensate's individual self/consciousness is a small but vital part of a larger and invisible sub-surface consciousness. This correlation is mentioned in the series itself several times since the Sensates have a solitary existence "above" and are connected "below" via the psycelium. Therefore, the psycelium does not merely facilitate communication or skill-sharing; it enables a deeper, almost visceral limbic resonance, where feelings, memories, and bodily sensations are co-experienced. This model reinforces both Haraway's tentacular logic – thinking through webs and knots rather than lines and hierarchies and affect theory's assertion that affect circulates between bodies.

After realizing the depth of the relationship, some of the protagonists attempt to block it, perceiving the connection as bothersome and intrusive. For example, Kala Dandekar, a betrothed woman, worried about her growing feelings for her cluster companion, Wolfgang, isolates herself from other Sensates. Similarly, Sun, an independent businesswoman from South Korea, accustomed to her solitary lifestyle, often finds the entanglement uncomfortable and invasive. However, over time, the characters come to realize that embracing their belonging to the group allows them to feel stronger, more supported and less estranged. What once felt like a loss of autonomy for Sun transforms into a sense of companionship and collective resilience. In "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible", Braidotti introduces the notions of *potentia* and endurance, understood

in the spatial sense with “the body as an enfleshed field of actualisation of passions or forces” (2006,134). Therefore, the body, just like affect, is not a closed or static, autopoietic entity, but rather a dynamic site where energies and intensities circulate. Braidotti connects the idea of *potentia* to “the desire to become”, referring to the body’s capacity to channel affects that exceed what is individual and express the faithfulness to the potentiality (2006, 134). Thus, endurance emphasizes the body’s ability to sustain and hold these intensities, extending them through time and space, not in the sense of mere survival but as a form of persistence and transformation through hardships. It becomes clear that potential and endurance are inherently tied to relation; the capacity to endure depends on the openness to others and the ebb and flow of affects across bodies.

Revital Zilonka and Jennifer Job, whose article criticizes the neoliberal perspective, argue that the cluster moves along two axes: from despair to hope, and from social isolation to love. As the critics claim, “neoliberal paradigms, by definition, commit violence on community; by letting markets rule, and wiping out any structures in place that block the work of the marketplace, people and cultures are continually decimated by business forces” (2017, 392). This observation suggests that the challenges faced by individuals, and by extension the *Sensates*, are not merely personal or psychological, but rooted in wider political and economic structures. This perspective positions the *Sensates*’ ethical and relational practices as a form of resistance: the cultivation of hope, love, and community becomes both an affective and political response to the isolating and destructive logics of neoliberalism. In this sense, their collective endurance and care enact a counter-model to the commodification and instrumentalization of social relations. Zilonka and Job, relying on Erich Fromm and bell hooks, emphasize that love, care, commitment, and responsibility to each other are essential, reactive practices to the conditions of greedy, abusive, and divisive social and political structures (Zilonka & Job 2017, 393). In *Sense8*, the protagonists embody this idea when they realize that their strength lies in shared experience – not simply as a plot device but as affective interdependence. Their ability to access one another’s sensations, emotions, and abilities illustrates how connection, as an embodied process, becomes a condition through which knowledge, agency, and endurance are generated. Hence, Braidotti’s notion of endurance should be understood as a fundamentally collective practice, which can perhaps be best illustrated by the title of the second episode of the series “I am also a We”.

In “Tentacular Thinking”, Haraway highlights the importance of learning to grieve together, since apparently “neither the capacity nor the practice of mourning is a human specialty” (Haraway 2016, 38). Haraway claims that people have never learned how to share and process the difficult emotions:

Mourning is about dwelling with a loss and so coming to appreciate what it means, how the world has changed, and how we must ourselves change and renew our relationships if we are to move forward from here. Genuine mourning should open us into an awareness of our dependence on and relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction. (Haraway 2016, 38)

Therefore mourning should be understood as productive, not in the sense of linear progress or advancement, but rather as an opportunity for transformation. The theorist further clarifies this by stating that “grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve with, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing” (Haraway 2016, 39). Grieving, then, should not be a solitary act but a collective practice that reveals and strengthens the bonds. In Haraway’s terms, loss can turn into a recognition of a shared experience.

Almost all characters of the series experienced some sort of loss during their life, whether through the death of a family member, estrangement from loved ones, or the sacrifice of a relationship for the sake of surviving within hostile social and cultural structures. While these losses initially deepen their sense of isolation, reinforcing the individualism imposed by the world around them, over time, the Sensates recognize the strength in dwelling and grieving-with. The grief is shared, allowing the loss to transform into empathy and solidarity. The members of the cluster share advice help solve problems or simply remain present together in the emotions. After Sun’s incarceration, the Sensates appear co-present multiple times to help her survive and deal with the lack of freedom. These moments go beyond simple acts of support; they embody the collective mourning, as the other protagonists grieve with her the injustice of the sentence. Similarly to Braidotti’s endurance, the shared dwelling is not a mere coping mechanism but an essential survival strategy, one that actively incites rebellion against the world centered on individualism.

The first episode of the series titled, "Limbic Resonance", also hints at the biological nature of these connections. As defined by Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon in *The General Theory of Love*, limbic resonance is a state of deep emotional and physiological connection between people. It is established by the limbic system in the brain through the release of neurochemicals. When people are attuned to one another, they affect each other's physiological states such as blood pressure, respiration, and heart rate (Lewis et al. 2007). Therefore, their lives, begin to resonate against/with each other on an even more sub-surface level. The Sensates, once their abilities develop, stop experiencing life as disconnected individuals, but rather begin to merge and entangle, forming a self that is no longer confined within the limits of a single body and mind, but one that is constantly becoming and reforming together. Stephanie L. Young and Art Herbig, in their queer interpretation of the series call it not only a disruption of the traditional understandings of self/other but rather "an interpretation of being/becoming" (2020, 73). The queerness of *Sense8* lies in the refusal of rigid boundaries, whether cultural, gendered or social. The protagonists' identities are never fixed; they are constantly in flux, fluid, and shaped by the context of the affects of their entanglements. Therefore, the being and becoming are not mutually exclusive, but rather simultaneous, signalling the potential for transformation. And although the series is filled with queerness, it is less about sexuality and more about the porosity of the self, since the characters' identities are inherently relational and collective.

Moreover, the cluster, having what can only be identified as a collective consciousness, not only blurs the spatial and temporal boundaries of reality but actively co-creates it through their shared experiences. Precisely for that reason, the Sensates transcend the perception of the reality of an individual, and as Young and Herbig claim this allows them to "truly experience empathy and connectivity" (2020, 77). The collective perception expands the limits of what can be seen, felt, and known. Instead of experiencing the world through one lens, the Sensates inhabit multiple perspectives, which makes their lives significantly richer in relationships and sensations.

This idea of co-creating reality aligns closely with affect theory's emphasis on the intersubjective nature of experience. Affect blooms in the immaterial spaces between people and does not belong to the self alone. Therefore, the Sensates, through their openness to the emotional realities of others, show that they not only come to know one another more deeply but also transform each other and

the world around them. More importantly, this mechanism, their closeness, is not simply a form of defence against BPO, but it is primarily a source of hope, beauty, and resistance. The cluster becomes a way of life for them, since the characters learn how to navigate their daily struggles with the help and presence of others. The protagonists, such as Sun and Wolfgang, who do not have families of their own, find a surprising sense of belonging and companionship in others. The newfound kinship compensates for the absence of the often failed traditional family structures, offering them an alternative form of intimacy and solidarity. Throughout the series the Sensates are frequently hesitant to share their realities with those closest to them in fear of being rejected, which may emphasize the fragile yet transformative power of the new modes of being.

However, whenever different narratives introduce the notion of collective consciousness, concerns about the potential erasure of individuality or personal agency seem to emerge. Critics of the trope often argue that, when taken to its extreme, collective consciousness risks turning into collective mindlessness, where differences are flattened and individuals succumb to homogeneity. This anxiety might reflect the underlying tension in Western cultural and philosophical thought of unity and deep interconnectedness coming at the cost of personal freedom and autonomy. Alexis Lothian's reading of *Sense8* further complicates the solely positive outlook on the series' collective consciousness plot by foregrounding the tension between utopian connectivity and structural inequalities. Lothian claims that the show evokes the "1990s digital utopias", which imagined the internet as a space of pure textual connection and post-identity transcendence, a fantasy of "linking bodies without the benefit of visible technology and asserting that one mind can operate another's body just as well as his or her own" (2016, 93). Lothian further asserts that the Sensates' extreme closeness leaves them "no choice but to recognise every other member as an equal with whom they can empathise fully" (2016, 94). Hence, although, their connection begins with a state of reluctant co-operation or dependence, with time it transforms into a more complex interdependence. The author warns against "the dangers of the idea that one could transcend inequality by transcending one's body", reminding us that digital and global media have historically produced new modalities of exploitation even as they promise liberation (2016, 94). Lothian notes that *Sense8* treads dangerously, as it fails to address the possible racial, social, and political tensions that could arise when one's life and experiences are suddenly merged with a stranger. However,

Lothain contends that “the utopia of sensate connection seems to offer an alternative vision for globalisation, one in which the dehumanisation and exploitation by the rich world of the poor could be replaced by an empathetic diversity in which the full subjectivity of every person would incontrovertibly recognised” (2016, 94). The cluster’s developing interdependence, then, may serve as a speculative reimagining of global relationality itself. Rather than aspiring towards a post-racial, post-gender, or post-class sameness, the Sensates’ world portrays a form of global connection that insists on foregrounding mutual recognition and responsibility.

However, as Anna McFarlane suggests in her review of the show, the at times “broad brushstrokes in characterization” can be attributed to the series’ “ambitious effort at diversity”, an attempt to stage a global production within the constraints of mainstream television (2017, 150). Despite some shortcomings of the series, the cluster’s progressive merging into a shared consciousness does not erase their backgrounds, individual histories and personalities, but rather successfully employs them in the plot. The characters are capable of responding to one another’s experiences with deeper empathy. Biological families, whether functioning or not, are acknowledged, but the cluster is portrayed as a found, alternative family, built on empathy and understanding. Young and Herbig call it “a family that is defined by empathy” (2020, 81).

In *Sense8*, the cluster’s mode of relationality exemplifies a form of affective sympoiesis, an ongoing process of making-with, which resists fixed boundaries and static understandings of the self. Their connections unfold across shifting spatial and temporal dimensions, illustrating how subjectivity is continuously shaped through encounters with others rather than rigid in isolation. In the series, affect is both a pre-bodily, pre-linguistic force, as well as an interpersonal, societal property. The Sensates’ shared sensations and emotional resonances demonstrate that affect is “open-endedly social”, and dependent on context. Moreover, the circulation of affect within the cluster reveals how emotions, memories, and reactions are shaped by broader cultural, political, and historical conditions. Their sympoietic condition does not diminish the distinctiveness of each characters’ personal agency and history but rather enriches their capacity by situating them within a network of exchanges. Such a model resonates with Haraway’s and Braidotti’s work on relationality, where becoming-with others generated endless potentialities. The cluster’s interdependence reveals how individuality and collectivity are

not contrary notions but mutual and complementary states. The affective and sympoietic entanglement echoes in Zilonka and Job's framing of the series' movement from despair to hope, and from social isolation to love, care, and responsibility, which, as the critics suggest, might be a counter-response to the pressures of contemporary neoliberal modernity.

Sense8, then, can be understood simultaneously as a utopian dream and a critique of modern conditions marked by extreme individualism, loneliness, and rationalism. While it envisions a reality structured around entanglement, shared vulnerability, and affective attunement to one another, the series could also potentially be seen as a manifesto that calls for a reorientation of social values – from isolation and market-driven competitiveness to practices grounded in community and responsibility. Therefore, *Sense8* uses the device of collective consciousness not to erase difference but to foreground the importance of recognizing it and engaging with it. What emerges is a vision of social life in which reality, present or future, is not a fixed entity but rather a process shaped through mutual responsiveness and making-together.

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Received: 2025-10-01; reviewed 2025-11-03; accepted 2025-11-20
DPOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.2203

Varia

Hozier's "Eat Your Young" as a Modern-Day Response to Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"

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Abstract: Almost three hundred years after the publication of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal", the song "Eat Your Young" by the Irish singer and songwriter Hozier reveals the attitudes of the wealthy ruling class analogous to those prevailing in the political climate of eighteenth century Ireland. Whereas Swift's essay has been subject to various literary and political criticisms throughout the years, the research on "Eat Your Young", and Hozier's discography as a whole, is miniscule in comparison. Although Hozier's song offers apt critique of the contemporary exploitation of people under the capitalist system, neither its satirical commentary nor its connection to Swift's essay has been explored academically. This paper analyses the song as a modern social critique inspired by Swift's essay. The song's profound criticism is understood in this paper as a reiteration, with a difference, of Swift's critique of the aftermath of the British colonial exploitation of Ireland. The song is here considered as a parodic satire alluding to "A Modest Proposal" in order to illustrate and amplify its message: its censure of the unceasing abuse faced by the most vulnerable members of society at the hands of the powerful and the wealthy. The ensuing discussion concerns the theme the essays and the song share – the motif of cannibalism used to represent a figurative "consumption" of people and their resources, rendered in both as the literal devouring of children– as well as the ideological similarities in the critiques delivered by the two texts, which are three hundred years apart, yet similar in their sensibilities.

Keywords: "Eat Your Young", "A Modest Proposal", irony, anticapitalism, anticolonialism, Hozier, Swift

The song "Eat Your Young" by Andrew Hozier-Byrnes, singer and songwriter who uses the stage name Hozier, was released on March 17, 2023, and is a part of his album *Unreal Unearth*. The core idea behind the song, as Hozier admits in

an interview for the editorial publisher Genius, was to criticise the people who care only about their own gains with no consideration for the future of others. For Hozier, that kind of oppression afflicts the eponymous “young” – the children who are going to inherit the world after the people in power have exploited it (Genius 2023). As such, the song is a critique of capitalism, a system Hozier describes as a fatal “race to [the] bottom” (Genius 2023). He recognises the current tendency to exploit the poorest places in the world – where the resources and manpower are the cheapest – and the people inhabiting those regions. Due to that abuse, those people are going to face numerous challenges for many years in the future, whereas the capitalistic system is only interested in the short-term gain that can be consumed today (Genius 2023).

A similar “race to the bottom” appalled, nearly three hundred years ago, an Anglican cleric Jonathan Swift. For Swift, the concern for the condition of Ireland at the time of writing “A Modest Proposal” was the inspiration and the direct cause for the creation of his shocking pamphlet. When he was writing it, the living conditions in Ireland deteriorated so badly that they “bordered on unsustainable” (Welch 2013, 473). In his economic works, he frequently distinguished four main categories of the causes responsible for the state of Ireland: “famine, trade restrictions, increases in land rents, and the movement of leased land from cropping to grazing” (Welch 2013, 473). Each of the four groups was either directly or indirectly related to the treatment the English imposed on Ireland.

The 1720s, in Ireland, brought several years of famine. Due to scarce harvests, the poor Irish were pushed to consume their potato stock sooner, which, in turn, led to food shortages in the later months (Welch 2013, 473). The trade restrictions imposed by England on Ireland were even more destructive (Welch 2013, 474). Irish trade was severely impacted by the restrictions on the export of livestock and the complete ban on the export of woollen goods (Welch 2013, 474). The money coming to Ireland from export was essential to the livelihoods of the Irish and, as it decreased, the population grew poorer (Welch 2013, 474). The imported goods, such as clothing, were pushing Irish-made goods out of the market, reducing the revenue of Irish craftsmen and vendors (Welch 2013, 475). The landlords played a consequential role in the deterioration of the Irish economy (Welch 2013, 475). Apart from moving the money from leases of Irish land to England, they converted the leased land from farmlands to grazing lands (Welch 2013, 475). Therefore, the land that could provide work and shelter for many farmers

and their families was converted into barren grazing grounds that only required one or two herdsmen to be maintained (Welch 2013, 475).

In "A Modest Proposal", Swift intends for his speaker to be a member of the higher class, apparently, a level-headed observer who takes pride in finally finding the solution to Ireland's problems. Swift's Proposer goes as far as to say that whoever can determine the resolution "would deserve so well of the public, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2181). This self-praise of the speaker seems in disagreement with the proposal of the next paragraphs: the Proposer suggests that the children whose parents cannot provide for them and who are condemned to the fate of beggars can, after all, be "sound [and] useful members of the commonwealth" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2181). The gruesome "use" for those children is them being sold as food for the rich. Though being eaten here is a literal process, it is also an ironic mirror to the circumstances of the Irish, who have already been metaphorically "devoured" by the absentee landlords.

The Proposer's claim is based on two main elements of the essay: his estimates of the population of Ireland and a list of six benefits of the proposition (Welch 2013, 477). The calculations fortify the parodic aspect of the essay – similar figures are expected to be found in real political propositions. The impersonal character of the estimates is employed by Swift to underline the lack of actual consideration for the prosperity of the Irish people. The numbers are correct (Welch 2013, 477), but such calculations are devoid of the human factor. The Proposer uses the estimates to justify cannibalism. However, Swift also aims to criticise a broader notion of making political proposals that are only focused on the financial profit of the privileged.

Ironically, the potential monetary gain of the parents is immediately converted to the landlords' profit when the Proposer asserts that the arrangement will "help to pay their landlord's rent" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2185). Swift makes the claim that most laws are only enacted to serve the wealthy, and in the case of Ireland, the absentee English landlords. The landlords are, for the most part, the prime target of Swift's satire, with the Proposer repeatedly naming them the main benefactors of the proposition.

It should be noted that the societal and economic conditions in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland, indeed, prompted infanticide and child abandonment (Kelly 1992, 7). Most victims of infanticide were children of unmarried women, as female purity was one of the most prized virtues in the Catholic Ireland (Kelly 1992, 7). For those women, illegitimate children were tangible proof

of their transgression of proper sexual conduct, and thus “were afforded little sympathy” (Kelly 1992, 8). Economic pressures, along with social stigma, were also a deciding factor for many women (Kelly 1992, 9). For a young woman of lower status, marriage was the only way to gain financial security, and it would become near-impossible if she had had an extra-marital child; for a female servant, in turn, a dishonourable pregnancy warranted dismissal from work and the prospect of poverty (Kelly 1992, 9). Children were often abused and neglected by their parents and forced by them to beg in the streets or to work dangerous jobs (Kelly 1992, 26). Considering such standards, for the impoverished Irish of the eighteenth century, infanticide, Kelly observes, “excited no special revulsion” (1992, 26). Yet, even if in those circumstances the death and mistreatment of children would not have prompted that much outrage, Swift’s proposition includes the taboo element of cannibalism.

The uncompassionate and studious way Swift’s Proposer delivers the advantages only increases the satirical impact of the essay (Welch 2013, 480). The eponymous modesty, or rather the conflation of modesty and kindness, as recognised by Elizabeth Hedrick, is yet another target of Swift’s bitter criticism (2017, 857). Hedrick determines that Swift’s attack on modesty, understood as good manners, is a direct push against his political opponents (2017, 863). The contrast between the scandalous proposal and the mannerly and attentive tone taken by the Proposer accentuates Swift’s point that politeness, especially in the world of politics, is a concept separate from kindness.

Although the rhetoric of “A Modest Proposal” is tied to Ireland’s situation in the eighteenth century, its overarching message of criticism of the exploitation of the vulnerable can also be applied to our contemporary problems. The suffering of the poor and the underprivileged at the hands of the wealthy is still a pressing matter, even if this suffering takes different forms. A modern observer, much like Jonathan Swift in the eighteenth century, can recognise the problems and choose to comment on them in a satirical manner, emphasising the role of the elites in the perpetration of the harm.

Hozier’s song, written in 2013, engages with Swift’s essay published in 1729. And yet, the connection is seamless – it works through both authors’ concern with the exploitation of the dispossessed. “Eat Your Young”, similarly to “A Modest Proposal”, is a satirical piece where the speaker’s propositions are, on the surface, connected to devouring the most vulnerable members of the society, but, in reality, they are meant to draw attention to the issues introduced in the texts.

In an interview for Apple Music (2023), Hozier admits the importance of his Irish identity and of Irish art and literature in his music. When discussing "Eat Your Young" in the interview for Genius, he connects the song to Swift's "A Modest Proposal", recounting the Irish people's "suffering under the artificially created conditions of poverty" (2023, at 3:18–22). Later, he affirms that Swift's satirical essay allowed him to experiment with the themes present in both the essay and the song (Genius 2023).

The relationship between Hozier's "Eat Your Young" and Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is complex. Indeed, the reading of Hozier's song as a parody of Swift's essay can be based not only on thematic references to the hypotext, but also on the imitative nature of the song's structure. In "Eat Your Young", the target of the criticism is comparable with the target of Swift's essay, making the censorious aspect of the song essential to the parodic interpretation. Hozier uses the economic and political framework of "A Modest Proposal" to reimagine the pamphlet as transformed into a critique of the modern times. He extends the message of the essay; instead of commenting solely on the situation of one country in the face of exploitation, he encapsulates in his song a broad spectrum of modern-world issues faced by various underprivileged groups.

The unique way in which Swift utilises the motif of cannibalism to represent a figurative "consumption" of people and their resources – the literal devouring of children – is closely reiterated in Hozier's song. The theme of the cannibalisation of children has a long tradition in culture and art, including the myth of Kronos fearing that he might lose his power to his offspring, and the history of Ugolino torn between misery and hunger, forced to eat the dead bodies of his sons, the motif poignantly represented by Auguste Rodin's sculpture. Swift, however, uses the motif to represent cold and calculating greed. In his "Modest Proposal", it is applied to represent financial and political gain. Hozier, closely following Swift in that, extends the Swiftian message to carry out his criticism of the modern-day capitalism, colonial exploitation, and the arms industry. (It should be noted that, in the 1920s, in Brazil, the term's meaning was reversed by the Anthropophagy movement – it was used as a metaphor in urging the cultural appropriation of foreign influences in effort to create an originally Brazilian identity. This meaning, however, remains beyond the conceptual scope of the current essay).

"Eat Your Young" is composed of two stanzas – referred to as verses – two pre-choruses and a repeated chorus. While the chorus exposes the core satirical criticism of the song, the verses and pre-choruses help establish the song's lyrical

situation. Whereas Swift's proposal is delivered in the form of a mock-political pamphlet, in Hozier's song, the proposal is delivered through a conversation taking place at a lavish feast attended by the elites. This setting reinforces the song's cannibalistic theme, but it also adds a subtext of a power race. Multiple allusions to the image of "racing to the table" suggest it to be a highly desirable place. According to Cambridge Dictionary, a metaphorical "seat at the table" denotes "a situation in which someone is included in a discussion and can influence any decisions that are taken" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.) The choice of such a celebration for the setting, then, not only aims to satirise the insatiable greed but also to parody the world of politics earlier satirised by Swift.

The title "Eat Your Young" can also be considered an allusion to Swift's work. Though the titles are not direct parallels – the title of Hozier's song openly states its proposition, while the title of Swift's essay conceals the cannibalistic character of the proposal – the use of the imperative verb "eat" implies making a request or a proposal of some kind. The ideas of Hozier's Proposer, similarly to Swift's, are satirical. The ironic inversion present in both texts forces the reader – or the listener – to evaluate their claims in search of the true meaning. Full comprehension of the song and the essay requires from the audience an ability to decode the irony of the proposals. Both Proposers contradict the authors' stances on societal issues and serve as a satirical tool for them to attack those they deem responsible for the detrimental circumstances they describe.

The similarities between the two works are not strictly confined to their satirical messages and the way in which they persuade, but they are also evident in the form of the narrators' moral and political standing. The song, in parallel to Swift's essay, is narrated by a figure that remains unaffected by the fatal politics he preaches. Like Swift's Proposer, the Hozier's Proposer is aware of the suffering caused by the wealthy, yet he detaches himself from the consequences of the elites' actions. Despite the severity of his proposals, the tone of the statements made by the narrator of the song remains fully unconcerned, even when urging the shocking solution.

Remarkably, the addressees of "Eat Your Young", closely resemble the audience of "A Modest Proposal": in both instances, those who are impacted by the decisions and propositions are removed from the debate. Swift's Proposer intends for his pamphlet to reach those with the influence to launch the plan; Hozier's Proposer, in turn, speaks directly to his lover, who joins him at the table, and to other attendees of the feast. The people whose lives are at the heart of the discussion are notably deprived of any say in what is being determined about their fate.

The opening lyrics of the first verse, "I'm starvin', darlin', let me put my lips to somethin', let me wrap my teeth around the world" (Hozier 2023, 0:21), are directed to the Proposer's lover. Isolated from the capitalistic context that becomes clear only later in the song, the introductory lines may create an incorrect impression that the song is about sexual lust, not about the lust for wealth and power. Indeed, as Hozier admits, the first lines of the song are meant to mislead the listener (Genius 2023). Coupled with the term of endearment - "honey" - the initial lines lull the listener into a false sense of familiarity. The grotesque juxtaposition of sexual and cannibalistic imagery enhances the shock evoked by the next parts of the song. The contrast between what is anticipated and what is delivered is also a parallel to what happens in Swift's "A Modest Proposal". The opening paragraphs of the essay, as well as the title, purposefully obscure the main postulate of the pamphlet. In fact, the first time Swift's Proposer reveals his plan outright happens as late as the ninth paragraph of the essay (Swift [1729] 1993, 2181-83). Hozier, mimicking the structure of postponement established by Swift, hides the destructive intent of his Proposer in the first verse.

In the context of the feast, the lyrics "I'm starvin'" (Hozier 2023, 0:21) are hyperbolic, but in a broader political sense they are meant to denote the insatiable greed of those in power. Hozier's Proposer does not only want to eat, but to "wrap [his] teeth around the world" (Hozier 2023, 0:27). He and, by extension, those of similar position cannot be satiated and always desire more than what they already have. The idea of consuming the "world" exemplifies the same attitude satirised by Swift in "A Modest Proposal" when he concludes that "landlords, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2183). In both instances, the wealthy are taking away from those who have too little to support themselves. In comparison with those truly affected by food scarcity, the word "starving" takes on an ironic overtone.

Lines three through six of "Eat Your Young" are intended to enhance the food symbolism. When Hozier's Proposer says, "Start carvin', darlin' / I wanna smell the dinner cookin' / I wanna feel the edges start to burn" (2023, 0:31-40), he urges his lover to help prepare the feast. Specifically, the lines refer to the cooking of meat. The directions are very clear, echoing the specificity with which Swift's Proposer lists the numerous ways to, shockingly, cook a child's meat (Swift [1729] 1993, 2182). These moments in "Eat Your Young" and "A Modest Proposal" constitute the first instances in which the audience may experience

discomfort. They disturb the previous assumptions about the texts: that Hozier's song is about sexual desire, and that Swift's essay is meant to provide a genuine solution to Ireland's problems.

The sexual allusions in the line "let me put my lips to something" (Hozier 2023, 0:23) are reiterated in the second verse with the lines "Let me see the heat get to you / Let me watch the dressing start to peel" (Hozier 2023, 1:48–55). The supposed eroticism of these lines serves an additional purpose aside from working as a decoy and diverting our attention from the main theme. It represents the allure of the excessive and exploitative lifestyle of the wealthy, which is comparable with sexual temptation. Hozier's Proposer entices his lover to join the feast as if she were joining him in a sexual act. The seductiveness of the Proposer's words provides a justification for the act of consumption: the justification is in sheer desire. If the desire for power and money is analogous to sexual desire, then it must be just as natural.

The first line of the second verse, "You can't buy this fineness" (Hozier 2023, 1:46), seems to suggest a great level of exclusiveness to the event. Hozier's Proposer consolidates his high position by declaring it something impossible to reach. This overt belief in his own superiority distinguishes him from Swift's Proposer, who hides behind the titular modesty. Swift's Proposer is characterised by similar vanity, made evident when he says that for finding a solution to Ireland's problems, someone – meaning himself – would deserve the highest praise (Swift [1729] 1993, 2181). Unlike Hozier's Proposer, he later ostensibly tries to distance himself from any profit or recognition that his plan would yield (Swift [1729] 1993, 2187). They represent two different sides of political power, with one of them concealing his intention behind an illusion of care, and the other not bothering with the pretence of selflessness.

Although Hozier's Proposer does not feign selflessness, he maintains that the current system is supportive of everyone. He calls it "a kindness, highness" (Hozier 2023, 1:57), presenting the listener with a malformed depiction of empathy. This is a similar misunderstanding of kindness to that criticised by Swift in "A Modest Proposal". While the wealthy can enjoy luxuries, the line "Crumbs enough for everyone" (Hozier 2023, 2:00) serves as a twisted reassurance that, in the end, all people benefit from this structure of power. The line evokes a king throwing scraps from his table to his subjects, demonstrating his benevolence, but it might also represent Hozier's criticism of the "trickle-down economics" – a theory that "the accumulation of wealth by the rich is good for the poor since

some of the increased wealth ... trickles down to the poor" (Aghion and Bolton 1997, 151). Ironically, "everyone" does not really include everyone, but only the people who are deemed useful. Such an equation ignores all those whose lives are lost to sustain the status quo, those who are "eaten" by the system.

The last line of the second verse reveals another gruesome aspect of the song. Since "Old and young are welcome to the meal" (Hozier 2023, 2:03), the young people are no longer the only group bound to be sacrificed. This invitation to the feast directly contradicts the previous claim about the selectivity of the event. Hozier's Proposer makes an empty and deliberately misleading promise of wealth available for those who do not disobey the people in power. The discrepancy between the first and the last line of the verse stresses that such a level of prosperity is unobtainable for a regular person if they are trying to obtain it in a conscientious manner. The only way for somebody to join the people in power is by becoming complicit in the abuse. The inability of a regular person to make a change from within the capitalistic system is a grim reiteration of the fake incapability to mend the Irish economy that is satirised by Swift. In the essay, Swift breaks character to deliver his legitimate economic propositions ([1729] 1993, 2186). All of his solutions are then quickly rejected by his Proposer, who scornfully states that they should not be entertained, unless the people start to believe that "there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2186). "Eat Your Young" depicts an even bleaker reality: what binds people to their misfortune is not unwillingness for change, but powerlessness in the face of an oppressive system.

The first pre-chorus comes after the first verse. It begins with the line "Honey, I wanna race you to the table" (Hozier 2023, 0:42), which suggests some competitiveness between Hozier's Proposer and his lover. As explained by Hozier in the interview for Genius, this race between the rich is a competition in getting the most resources and manpower at the cheapest price (Genius 2023). Hozier's Proposer reveals the capitalistic tendency to exploit for profit the people and the land in the less developed places. This reliance of capitalist states on the resources of the poorest countries is described by Utsa Patnaik as a parasitic relationship (2012, 10). Hozier's criticism here is focused on the relocation of profit away from the exploited countries, which parallels Swift's criticism of the relocation of the rent money from Ireland to England.

Continuing to address his lover, Hozier's Proposer says: "If you hesitate, the getting' is gone" (2023, 0:48). Even though he intends to instruct her on the

inside workings of the elites, he still treats her as an opponent. Hozier, through his Proposer, satirises the constant rivalry happening between the wealthy by showing it as contrasted with a romantic relationship. The Proposer is focused on profit to the degree that he views his lover as competition. If he wants to secure his place at the top, the structure of power leaves him no room for any real affection, including the connection with his lover.

The next two lines of the pre-chorus reveal the central message of the song. Aside from yet again emphasising corporate greed, the lines “I won’t lie if there’s somethin’ to be gained / There’s money to be made, whatever’s still to come” (Hozier 2023, 0:52–1:03) indicate a complete lack of consideration of the future. The same sentiment is later repeated in the second pre-chorus with the lyrics “I won’t lie if there’s somethin’ still to take / There is ground to break, whatever’s still to come” (Hozier 2023, 2:18–28). Hozier’s Proposer is not concerned with any consequences that his actions might have, as long as those actions are profitable. As admitted by Hozier, this is the main idea behind the entire piece (Genius 2023). He intends for his Proposer to be a “voice of power that shrugs off any responsibility to any sort of future” (Genius 2023, 0:38–44). The cultural, economic, and environmental repercussions are going to affect people for many years to come. The future generations, too, will be forced to live in a world left in a disarray as a result of today’s senseless pursuit of monetary gain.

By stating that he is “makin’ sure the table’s made” (Hozier 2023, 2:09) at the beginning of the second pre-chorus, Hozier’s Proposer assures his lover that he intends to maintain the current capitalistic system. In truth, he wants to be in control of the event. The need to always possess more than the others applies even to the relationships between the participants of the feast, rendering any collaboration impossible. This line recalls the competitiveness already established in the first pre-chorus. Such compliance with the oppressive system emulates the irony of the proposition suggested in “A Modest Proposal”. Despite the assertions of Swift’s Proposer that his plan will benefit the Irish, it is meant to reinforce the authority England holds over Ireland.

The bitter irony of the character of Hozier’s Proposer becomes more apparent in the second pre-chorus. Whereas in the first pre-chorus he has no inhibitions to depict himself as a person utterly uninterested in the wellbeing of anyone else, here he praises himself by saying “We can celebrate the good that we’ve done” (Hozier 2023, 2:13). Though none of his previous statements could be attributed to a “good” person, he congratulates himself and his lover on their kindness.

The inconsistency in his words matches the similarly conflicting logic of Swift's Proposer. The essay's macabre proposition to sell children for meat is portrayed as a kindness extended to the Irish nation, with Swift's Proposer going as far as to call a man who contributed his ideas to the plan "a very worthy person, a true lover of his country" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2183). Both Proposers see philanthropy in their actions; both authors satirise the performative and misconstrued kindness of people in power.

In the chorus, the Proposer begins to address the participants of the feast instead of his lover. By switching his attention to his associates, he can finally disclose his propositions. Although he views them as his rivals, they are complicit in the practices he is about to discuss. There is a distinguishable tonal difference between the seductive persuasions intended for his lover and his authoritative and demanding speech in the chorus.

He starts by urging the participants to "get some" (Hozier 2023, 1:04), recalling the sexual undertones present in the verses of the song. This time, the erotic allusion is not conveyed through figurative language, but rather a very direct order. Hozier's Proposer blends financial gain with sexual gratification to make it seem even more enticing. In the chorus, he operates on instructions, assuming leadership over the gathering. Swift's Proposer, on the other hand, is more reserved in announcing his authority. In the penultimate paragraph of the essay, he asserts that he is "not so violently bent upon [his] own opinion, as to reject any offer, proposed by wise men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2186). He seems to accept the possibility of a better solution to Ireland's economic problems, but in the next sentences he, in fact, discredits any such future attempts. The narrator of "Eat Your Young" is thus a version of Swift's Proposer that has abandoned any pretence of modesty, just like he has abandoned the pretence of selflessness.

When Hozier's Proposer delivers his first command to "pull up the ladder when the flood comes" (Hozier 2023, 1:06), he evokes the symbolism of the biblical flood. The flood represents a punishment for humanity's sins, yet his self-assuredness makes him believe he would be saved from the catastrophe. Even in the case of a disaster, he places himself above all others, escaping the dire consequences of his misdeeds. The flood could also be a metaphor for climate change. In this context, his indifference to the lot of the future generations is even more offensive. The Proposer can shelter himself from the destructive effects of the climate crisis and he admits that he could help those already experiencing them.

There is a ladder leading up to the safe ground, and the Proposer orders for it to be removed, dooming everyone below him. In relation to "A Modest Proposal", this ladder evokes the genuine propositions rejected by Swift's Proposer. Despite being aware of better solutions that would be beneficial for the Irish, he chooses to propose one that would lead to the death of thousands of Irish children. Sardonically extending the metaphor of the flood, Hozier's Proposer expands his order with the line "throw enough rope until the legs have swung" (Hozier 2023, 1:08). The rope is an illusion of help. Extended to the underprivileged, the line is not to save them but to lead them to their demise: it invokes a gruesome image of a person hanging from the gallows. This deceitful "kindness" offered to the struggling people mirrors the plan designed by Swift's Proposer – it is a kind of kindness premised on death.

Considering the song's connection to "A Modest Proposal", the line "seven new ways that you can eat your young" (Hozier 2023, 1:10) appears to be a natural continuation of the six ways to cook a child's meat listed by Swift's Proposer: "stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; ... in a fricassee or a ragout" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2182). Hozier's Proposer refers to the numerous ways the system "consumes" the vulnerable, including the exploitation of resources, economic struggle, and climate change. An additional method becomes apparent in the next part of the chorus, where Hozier's Proposer refers to war. "Skinnin' the children for a war drum" (Hozier 2023, 1:16) lends new meaning to the recommendation of Swift's Proposer to "flea the carcass" (Swift [1729] 1993, 2183) of a child to make gloves and boots out of the skin. In his song, Hozier reimagines the outrageous practice in order to criticise the arms industry. This highly profitable branch depends on war that devours the lives of those fighting it. The lyrics "puttin' food on the table, sellin' bombs and guns" (Hozier 2023, 1:19) affirm the anti-militaristic context of the chorus by showing that the arms industry is directly connected to the table where the feast is held.

Finally, Hozier's Proposer blatantly concludes that "it's quicker and easier to eat your young" (2023, 1:22). Whether he sees it as an act of mercy or convenience, his proposition to "eat the young" is parallel to that made by Swift's Proposer in so many ways. The lives and futures of children are sacrificed by the wealthy to uphold their political power and wealth. In the same manner as Swift, Hozier makes it apparent that this privileged existence is based on the exploitation not only of human beings but also of their available resources, rendered metaphorically as the consumption of people from whom they have been wrenched.

The two texts work as parallel critiques of the abusive systems of power, with Hozier's song drawing heavily on the symbolism and metaphors established by Swift almost three centuries before. Highly sarcastic, Hozier's song nods in Jonathan Swift's direction, proving the universality of Swift's appeal and of the power of his irony. Swift speaking through his Proposer is the eiron par excellence – and as the supreme ironist, he chooses a point of view dramatically different from his own beliefs, with his essay hinting subtly at an incompatibility of Swift's opinions with the views held by the Swiftian Proposer. Such is also Hozier's irony – the subtly revealed irony of the singer concerned with the unchanging flaw of the human heart, the insatiable greed whose severity can only be exposed as a crime against the most vulnerable.

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Received: 2025-06-05; reviewed 2025-07-20; accepted 2025-09-14

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.3502

The Serious and The Frivolous: Parodic and Thematic Dualities of Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost"

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Abstract: This paper examines Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" as his multi-layered satirical commentary on Anglo-American cultural tensions and on Victorian and Elizabethan patriarchy, as well as his critique of what he perceived as Victorian moral superficiality. As the story remains under-read, the existing critical approaches focus narrowly on its feminist or religious dimensions. This paper offers a new critical perspective by paying equal attention to the cultural tension between the British aristocratic traditionalism and American pragmatism-cum-expansionism. It does so through a literary analysis conducted in the context of historical research with regard to feminist conclusions. It demonstrates how, through the character of the ghost, Wilde portrays British aristocracy as theatrically entrapped in obsolete customs and values, while the Otis family embodies the no-nonsense practicality and pragmatism of a rising industrial powerhouse. It also shows how Virginia Otis serves as a vehicle for Wilde's proto-feminist critique of both Elizabethan and Victorian patriarchal social structures and how she subverts traditional gender roles not through an open rebellion but through her emotional intelligence, courage, and compassion. This paper also examines the way Wilde reimagines the Christian doctrine of salvation by replacing the theological framework of sin, repentance, and divine judgment with a model rooted in empathy and emotional connection. This vision of redemption mirrors Wilde's ambivalence towards organised religion, shaped, on the one hand, by his fascination with Catholic ritual and, on the other hand, by his lifelong struggle to reconcile aesthetics, moral freedom, and religious sensibility.

Keywords: The Canterville Ghost, Oscar Wilde, salvation, patriarchy, American pragmatism

Introduction

Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" is a masterful parody that cleverly intertwines humour with conventions of the traditional ghost story. This paper explores

how Wilde's use of parody operates on two levels: first, as a humorous critique of the social and cultural concerns of his time, and second, as a serious narrative tool to reimagine the Christian doctrine of salvation and to challenge traditional Victorian gender roles. To determine the exact sources of parodic frivolity and the serious concerns of Wilde's narrative, this paper takes into consideration his religious beliefs as well as his allusions to the socioeconomic realities of both late sixteenth- and nineteenth-century Great Britain and nineteenth-century America.

While considerable critical attention has been devoted to Wilde's essays, tales, and his only novel, "The Canterville Ghost" remains comparatively under-read. Existing studies tend to concentrate on its critique of the Victorian institution of marriage or its commentary on the patriarchal objectification of women. However, few focus specifically on the story's satirical critique of the British-American relations and their satirical characterisation. This paper addresses that critical gap, drawing on historical and cultural research on the United States and Great Britain, as well as existing analyses of "The Canterville Ghost" carried out in the context of its representation of the rigid patriarchal structures.

It presents "The Canterville Ghost" as a subversion of the traditional ghost story, pointing to the gothic elements that the author has comically twisted. It also refers to the socioeconomic realities of nineteenth-century America and late sixteenth-century British aristocracy to outline the story's ideological context. Through this contextual conjunction, the paper presents how all the characters emerge as symbolic embodiments of the historical attitudes and behaviours Wilde seeks to critique. It also shows how he reinvents the idea of salvation to create a doctrine where salvation does not stem from the divine judgment but from human compassion. Drawing on the work of Maureen O'Connor and Marija Milosavljević, the paper further explores Wilde's jabs at the Victorian unease with female sexuality and his critique of the traditional Victorian gender roles.

American Pragmatism Meets Tradition

As befits the convention of the proper ghost story, the whole action of "The Canterville Ghost" takes place in Britain, at home. But this is where its generic predictability ends. Its characters are from abroad, and its American heroine travels in time. The story is set in the stately house that has remained, for centuries, in the possession of Lord Canterville. Its action, however, starts when the mysterious mansion is bought by a pragmatic American minister. Indeed, this

ghost story, published for the first time in 1887, is imagined to be happening in the times of the great American growth. In the nineteenth century, the United States grew in terms of population, economy, and size starting with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which, as asserted in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "doubled the size of the United States, greatly strengthened the country materially and strategically, provided a powerful impetus to westward expansion, and confirmed the doctrine of implied powers of the federal Constitution" (Volle 2023).

The mentality of its citizens was shaped by the idea of American exceptionalism, which proposed "that the United States of America is a unique and even morally superior country for historical, ideological, or religious reasons" (Volle 2023). The term is believed to be derived from the works of Alexis de Tocqueville, who argued that "the position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one" (Tocqueville 2013, 55). The belief of American exceptionalism was further reinforced by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which emerged prominently in the mid-nineteenth century and held that Americans were divinely ordained to expand across the North American continent, spreading their values, beliefs, and institutions. "The expansion was deemed to be not only good but also obvious ('manifest') and certain ('destiny')" ("Manifest Destiny" 2022). The nation's industrial boom, referred to by some as the Second Industrial Revolution, positioned the United States as a global leader in innovation and production. The philosophy of pragmatism – emphasising practicality, progress, and the utility of ideas, materialism, and realism – were deeply rooted in the American identity during this era of rapid expansion and industrial growth.

Then, even though "The Canterville Ghost" is set in England, its narrative serves as a satirical commentary on the values and attitudes brought over by its American characters. The Otis family, representing the industrial expansionist mindset of nineteenth-century America, moved into the ancient British mansion with their strictly down-to-earth and practical outlook. Their rejection of the supernatural and their pragmatic attitude towards the mysterious are epitomised by their rejection of the ghost's very existence and later by the lack of fear they exhibit towards him. This down-to-earth mindset parallels the pragmatic American ethos, where belief is often inferior to what is useful or rational. As emphasised by Mr Otis, "I have come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy [...] I reckon that if there were such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we'd have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums" (Wilde

2019, 4). The materialist underpinnings of nineteenth-century America, shaped by industrial growth and mechanisation, shine through the family's confidence that any problem, even a supernatural one, can be solved with ingenuity and modern products. This is humorously illustrated during Mr Otis's very first interaction with Sir Simon of Canterville when he offers the ghost a bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator to fix his chains, which can be read as a symbolic representation of American belief in practical solutions as superior to British traditions.

The Otis family embody a modern, no-nonsense attitude that clashes with the centuries-old customs and mystique of Canterville Chase, the customs which they disregard. Their American expansionism shows in situations as simple as the dispute over a blood stain on the carpet in Chase's living room. For the British, the stain is an important symbol of the mansion's dark history that must be respected, while the new owners are determined that it must be removed at once, as it contravenes their sense of what is aesthetic. This power struggle between two nations can be read as a metaphor for the American westward expansion of the nineteenth century, where the push for progress and dominance came at the expense of the existing traditions and cultures. The idea of Manifest Destiny has justified the appropriation of land and resources in the name of progress and liberty, just as the Otis family seeks to reshape Canterville Chase to fit their values and aesthetics.

British Aristocratic Tradition Clashes with Modernity

While Mr Otis is a representative figure of his progressive and pragmatic times, firmly rooted in the ideals of late nineteenth-century American modernity, Sir Simon de Canterville stands as a relic of the past, entrapped in the bygone era. As he confesses to Virginia Otis during one of their conversations: "For three hundred years I have not slept, and I am so tired" (Wilde 2019, 46). It is evident that Sir Simon still belongs to the rigid social structures and customs of the English aristocracy of the late sixteenth century. Even though Wilde never specifies his exact age at the moment of his death, Mrs Umney, the housekeeper, reveals part of Sir Simon's story, saying that he murdered his wife in 1575 and was himself murdered nine years later by the wife's vengeful brothers, which places his passing around 1584. At the time of his demise, Sir Simon was already married and firmly established in his role as the master of Canterville Chase; he must have already been a middle-aged man in the Elizabethan era. It was a time of great development, cultural and economic growth, change, and exploration, prompted by technological

advancements; yet it was also a time of great fascination with the mystical and supernatural. "Elements of religion and magic formed an integral part of the fabric of Elizabethan society, infusing it with a sense of wonder, mystery, and spiritual exploration" ("Shakespeare in Context" 2023), which sharply contrasts with the practical and pragmatic mindset of nineteenth-century American society.

The Elizabethan society was divided into four social classes: the nobility, the gentry, the yeomen, and the poor. While Wilde does not openly state whether Sir Simon represents nobility of the gentry, it is the gentry to which the ghost most probably belongs. Unlike the nobility, whose status was derived from their ancient titles and political authority, the gentry were defined primarily by their ownership of land, which "supported their gentrification, in that they didn't need to toil in manual labour, enjoying passive wealth from their assets and estates". This condition "gave rise to the term Landed Gentry" ("What is Landed Gentry?" 2021). Sir Simon's position as the master of Canterville Chase, a large estate passed down through generations, is characteristic of the landed gentry, who held significant wealth and social influence. Similarly, his title indicates knighthood and thus points to this social class, as members of the gentry were typically knights, squires or gentlemen. Hence Wilde, having created a parodic image of an aristocrat hopelessly clinging to outdated ideals of honour and desperately trying to exert dominance over his mansion even after his death, in fact, parodies the high society's obsession with status, honour, and performance.

Sir Simon's persistent adherence to his role as a spectre indicates the gentry's inability to adapt. They are portrayed as relics of a bygone era, frantically performing for an audience that has already lost all interest in the act. His elaborate costumes, scaring techniques and dramatic recollections of the past hauntings in which he performed "The Strangled Babe", "Gaunt Gibeon", and "The Bloodsucker of Bexley Moor" (Wilde 2019, 18) – suggest that he views haunting as a form of art, reflecting Elizabethan preoccupation with theatricality and the Jacobean taste for masques. Wilde also pokes fun at the sixteenth-century British obsession with the supernatural by creating an image of the British as seen through the eyes of nineteenth-century Americans and humorously exposes the absurdity of a social class clinging to rituals that no longer hold much meaning in a modern, industrialised world. As for the matter of honour, for the gentry it was not simply pride – to use Anthony Fletcher's words – "their reputation was the very essence of their ability to govern" (1985, 115). Wilde turns this aristocratic dignity into a source of comedy, as Sir Simon's increasingly desperate attempts

to maintain authority result only in repeated humiliation, ultimately stripping him of both dignity and ghostly powers. His haunting career is not simply a matter of evoking dread but a performance of aristocratic superiority and a forceful continuation of his role as the master of Canterville Chase. However, when met with modern, down-to-earth Americans, his efforts become entirely futile. Instead of inspiring fear, he becomes the subject of ridicule, reduced to a powerless figure desperately attempting to assert his position in a world that no longer respects him. Wilde, quite seriously, utilises the modern American perspective to critique the British aristocracy's failure to evolve beyond the traditions they so desperately hold onto. Mr Otis functions as a foil to Sir Simon's Britishness. While the Americans are flexible, efficient and forward-thinking, Sir Simon is inflexible and nostalgic, relentlessly striving to restore the infamous bloodstain each morning, despite Mrs Otis's tireless efforts to scrub it away.

Subverting Elizabethan Patriarchy

Apart from the preoccupation with social status, what prevailed in the Elizabethan era was patriarchy. As noted by Lawrence Stone, "there is evidence to suggest that a trend towards greater patriarchy in husband-wife relations was also developing in the sixteenth century" (1995, 136). While the gender division was not always so apparent in the lower social classes, the English aristocracy placed men in positions of authority while relegating women to submission. Women's most desirable traits were obedience and faithfulness, as reflected in their letters, habitually finished with words: "your faithful and obedient wife" (Stone 1995, 139). Emotional distance was the norm within aristocratic households, and marital relations were often transactional rather than affectionate. As explicated by Stone:

In the sixteenth century, relations between spouses in rich families were often fairly remote. Living in big houses, each with his or her own bedroom and servants, husband and wife were primarily members of a functioning social universe of a large household and were rarely in private together. (1995, 81)

Matrimony for love was uncommon, and arranged marriages, based on the objective of amassing wealth and advancing to a higher social class, prevailed. Wilde parodies this strict patriarchal structure by subverting it entirely. Sir Simon,

who stands as a relic of the oppressive system and "murdered his wife for not meeting the oppressive gendered expectations as a woman, wife, or homemaker" (Ponciano 2025, 81), is not aided in his misery by another man, but, instead, he finds salvation through a young woman. Her role in freeing him from his eternal torment directly undermines the Elizabethan expectation that only men should wield power and authority. Unlike the distant and transactional relationships of Elizabethan families, Virginia approaches Sir Simon with genuine compassion, contradicting the cold atmosphere of the sixteenth-century home. Her kindness, sacrifice, and bravery completely challenge the rigid patriarchal values dictating women's roles. Wilde's decision to grant Virginia, and not any man, the agency to break the ancient curse subverts the outdated structures of Elizabethan-cum-Victorian patriarchy, highlighting its irrelevance in a changing world.

Victorian Gender Roles and Transactional Marriages

As the narrative unfolds, the story's tone shifts from light-hearted and comedic to solemn and contemplative; and as the tone changes, so does the main subject of parody: the story makes a leap from past to present, focusing not on the Ghost but on Otis's daughter, and with her, on Victorian England. The humorous critique of the socially specific standards gives way to the themes of religion, Christianity, and salvation. The critique of patriarchy prevails but, focuses on a different period. To Wilde critics, his feminist sympathies are not novel: his views on gender roles are apparent in many of his works, including his plays. As noted by Marija Milosavljević, "*The Importance of Being Earnest, A Woman of No Importance, Lady Windermere's Fan and Salomé* all feature female characters and themes relevant to the domains of research of feminist literary theory including relationships between men and women, marriage, the complexity of female characters, their treatment in literature, gender roles and how they are portrayed" (2021, 227). Specifically in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "Wilde satirized the gender roles of the Victorian society and how men had power over women and their choices" (Milosavljević 2021, 227). Similar critique is visible in *The Canterville Ghost*, published the same year, "in which Wilde embarked on an important phase in the development of the consistently proto-feminist cultural critique" (O'Connor 2004, 332). Wilde's feminist sympathies were visible when he assumed the role of an editor of *The Lady's World*. Declan Kiberd observes that "Wilde's first act on taking up the *Lady's World* in 1887 was to rename it *Woman's World*, and in his

plays, he argued for those feminine qualities deemed irrelevant to a thrusting industrial society" (1998, 19). However, it would be rather a stretch to attribute purely feminist views to all of Wilde's works. Jarlath Killeen states,

Oscar Wilde has recently been appropriated by feminist scholars in two distinct ways. On the one hand, he is read as a proto-feminist writer, with feminist sympathies, whose editorial work publicised many women writers, and who publicly supported the causes of female education, especially to university level, female suffrage, and female participation in the workplace. However, many others have pointed out that despite this, there remains a powerful and important level of extreme misogyny running throughout his work. (2004, 46)

Wilde, as he suggests, simultaneously holds up women as potential societal transformers and as angels of the home – a role that, while empowering in one sense, also reinforces patriarchal constraints (Killeen 2004, 56).

The first clear indication of the theme of Victorian gender roles in "The Canterville Ghost" arises in the very situation that brought the Otis family to England and then led to their purchase of Canterville Chase. While the precise reason for their relocation is not specified, what is known is that Virginia, despite her young age, is engaged to Cecil, the Duke of Cheshire. This union mirrors the social reality of Victorian Britain. As Victoria Howard points out, "As the 19th century ended, the great aristocratic families of Britain began to struggle. A number disappeared, ruined by their expensive lifestyles, and the depression in agriculture – an estate's lifeblood – while others clung on for dear life" (2015). The rescue came from abroad in the form of American heiresses, who would marry into the British aristocracy to exchange their wealth for social status. These women, commonly known as "Dollar Princesses", entered purely transactional marriages. Such exchanges were profitable for both parties as "upon marriage, the Victorian brides relinquished all rights to property and personal wealth to their husbands" (Nsaidzedze 2017, 1). This is a topic Wilde also addressed directly in his essays "The American Invasion" and "The American Man". While Virginia is not explicitly labelled a "Dollar Princess" in the story, the socioeconomic context and Wilde's feminist interests indicate so. The engagement between Virginia Otis and the Duke of Cheshire serves as both a mirror and a critique of these transactional relationships. However, Wilde complicates the traditional dynamic through Virginia's character. Unlike a typical

Victorian woman, passive and subordinate, she is portrayed as autonomous and courageous. Moreover, she is the most rational member of the Otis family. Wilde does not, however, strip her of her softness, love, and compassion, traditionally regarded as feminine features but rather reclaims them as the sources of strength. This blend of traits forms a deliberate stylistic strategy. As observed by O'Connor, "Wilde continues to deploy these modes traditionally codified as feminine. His stylistic engagement with feminised discourses in this story, as elsewhere in his work, is a deliberately dissident strategy, an adaptation of 'feminine' rhetoric as a means of affronting masculinist imperatives of orthodoxy and order" (2004, 331). Wilde's skilful combination of seemingly opposite character traits results in Virginia regaining her autonomy and overcoming the perceived weakness associated with stereotypically feminine features.

Innocence, Sexuality, and Women's Agency in "The Canterville Ghost"

Another trope that Wilde subverts is the stereotypical linking of women to sexuality and the cultural preoccupation with their purity. In Victorian reality, women's roles were often reduced to those of homemakers and child bearers, and their intellectuality was suppressed under a veil of enforced innocence. The fifteen-year-old Virginia is repeatedly referred to as "little"; however, she is stripped of her innocence through the extramundane journey with Sir Simon. Although she is not physically forced to face the Angel of Death, she lacks true agency, as not only a prophecy states that she must do so, but once she agrees, "she is physically impelled forward by the ghost" (O'Connor 2004, 336), eliminating the possibility of changing her mind. The fact that Wilde uses the relationship between Virginia and the Ghost to satirize the cultural preoccupation with women's purity becomes evident in Virginia's parent's reaction to her disappearance: "Mr Otis goes in search of local gypsies he suspects have kidnapped his daughter, a suspicion which all but explicitly raises the possibility of rape" (O'Connor 2004, 336). After her return, Virginia is transformed, which is symbolised by the blooming of the graveyard almond tree. Her innocence is gone as, metaphorically speaking, she "has given birth to death" (O'Connor 2004, 336) and is substituted by emotional maturity.

These themes have recently been reconsidered by Regina M. Ponciano in her article "Haunting the In-Between: Gender and Genre in Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost'", where she argues that the story's seemingly comedic surface

masks a disturbing undercurrent of gender violence. Drawing on O'Connor's earlier analysis, Ponciano highlights how Sir Simon's confession of murdering his wife for failing to perform traditional domestic duties reveals the normalisation of patriarchal brutality through a tone that remains flippant and comedic. As O'Connor observes, "the unconscious-seeming ease with which wife-murder can facilitate comedy is a devastating indictment", a point that Ponciano uses to challenge any comfortable reading of Wilde's tone as merely satirical (quoted in Ponciano 2025, 85). This reading deepens the feminist implications of Virginia's role by suggesting that her transformation comes at the cost of an experience that is "gothically unspeakable" and perhaps even traumatic.

The satirical commentary on sexuality and purity continues in the story's last section. Even years after the incident, Virginia's husband continues to press her about what happened during her disappearance. There is implicit sexual jealousy in his words: "You never told me what happened to you when you were locked up with the ghost" (Wilde 2019, 71). But despite Duke's relentlessness, "Virginia is finally allowed to maintain possession of her own story. She is not mastered by her husband's will to know and to read her" (O'Connor 2004, 337), and she never reveals the truth, nor does Wilde. Indeed, his work deftly uses satire to critique the gender expectations of its double, the Elizabethan and Victorian eras. Through Virginia, Wilde questions the sexualisation of female innocence and the objectification of women in marriage. However, Ponciano argues that Virginia is both elevated and constrained by the narrative, interpreting the silence surrounding her disappearance not as an empowering act of agency but as a moment steeped in ambiguity and discomfort. The text's refusal to narrate what occurs during her absence, combined with her physical transformation and the family's fears of sexual violence, positions Virginia in a liminal space between victimhood and sainthood. By highlighting "the condensations of multiple identities" within Virginia's character, Ponciano asserts that the story "situates Virginia at the intersection of times, places, and identities", thereby deliberately complicating "any readings of her as active or passive, radical or reactive, feminist or traditionalist" (2025, 87).

The Concept of Salvation Reimagined

Returning agency to the female protagonist, proposing a subversive image of women (as formed from within patriarchal structures), Wilde also offers insight into his private theology. His relationship with faith was complex and often

contradictory. Raised in the spirit of Protestantism, Wilde, against his father's wishes, developed a fascination with Catholicism. As stated by Noel O'Mahony:

Wilde's interest in Catholicism dates from his student days at Trinity College. There is evidence that he sometimes attended Catholic services and that he was friendly with some priests, probably in Gardiner Street. Unhappily, his father, Sir William, though a great surgeon and antiquary, was also a great religious bigot and would not have countenanced any such interest in his son had he known about it. He did make it a condition in his will that Oscar was not to inherit property in the West of Ireland if he abandoned Protestantism. (1951, 27)

Contrary to his father's will, Wilde grew more and more fond of "the beauty of the Church's ritual" (O'Mahony 1951, 27). Despite this fascination, he did not decide to convert until his very deathbed, when he received the Catholic sacraments less than 24 hours before dying of meningitis. His ambivalence towards religion stemmed from the conflict between his personal life and conduct, on the one hand, and traditional Christian doctrine, on the other. As John Allen Quintus explains, "Wilde could reject Christianity and embrace atheism or any religious position that countenanced his behaviour and freed him of religious scruples regarding his mode of life" (1991, 514). This led to him being perceived by scholars "as someone caught in a dilemma, someone almost immobilised at times between 'pagan' pleasure and religious conscience" (Quintus 1991, 514). Even when engaging with Christianity, he selectively embraced elements that resonated with his aesthetic and moral philosophy: "Wilde, therefore, distinguished between Christians and Christ, between the human institution that by fiat upholds Christian teaching and the fountainhead of this institution" (Quintus 1991, 515). For Wilde, Christ was not so much a son of God but an ideal person who embraced freedom, fully realising his potential, "the arch-enemy of convention, the Man whose life was a poem" (O'Mahony 1951, 29) and "a 'released' man, who was free from trammels of social convention" (Quintus 1991, 515). This approach might have been his way of easing his conscience, allowing him to reconcile his pursuit of individual freedom with the moral weight of religious tradition. Wilde's religious beliefs greatly influenced his literary works, including "The Canterville Ghost", where religion is parodied not to be rejected or mocked but to be reimagined. As put by Joseph McQueen, "For Wilde,

therefore, words offer an escape from the stifling immanence of this utilitarian, positivist and moralising secular age" (2017, 881). He believed in the transformative power of art, beauty, and empathy – the qualities he also saw in Christ. "He viewed Christ and Christianity as capable of transforming human beings into sentient people who demonstrate sympathy as well as self-reliance; and for Wilde, both attributes render people conscious of art and culture and aware of the importance of their souls" (Quintus 1991, 515). As famously expressed in Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism": "He who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself" (1891, 300).

In "The Canterville Ghost", Wilde transforms the traditional Christian notion of salvation through the character of Virginia. In Christian theology, salvation is typically rooted in the idea of repentance, which is a process involving the recognition of one's sin, the feeling of remorse, turning away from sin, and seeking forgiveness from God. Traditionally, this spiritual journey requires an intercessory figure, usually a saint, to plead on behalf of the sinner. However, Wilde subverts this model and creates a form of redemption that depends on human compassion and is free from the theological constraints of repentance and divine judgment. Sir Simon does not undergo a dramatic moral transformation, does not confess his sins before God, nor is he subjected to divine judgment. In fact, he does not even show any genuine remorse for his actions, which, according to the Christian doctrine, is a crucial step in receiving forgiveness. When he speaks to Virginia about his past wrongdoings, he states, "I hate the cheap severity of abstract ethics! My wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery" (Wilde 2019, 26). His sorrow is not born of regret but stems from the weariness of his long existence. Despite this, redemption comes to him through the character of Virginia Otis, who hears him and forgives him not out of divine command but out of human compassion. She embodies an interceding, yet secular saint, who mediates between the realms of the living and the dead, not because of religious duty but of pure empathy. She does not preach but listens, understands the Ghost's suffering, and offers forgiveness through an emotional bond. The journey to the Garden of Death, which she makes to plead with the Angel of Death on Sir Simon's behalf, is one of mutual transformation, as Virginia learns the gravity of sorrow and grief while Sir Simon finds peace. This vision of salvation is profoundly anti-dogmatic, challenging the traditional necessity of ritual, penance, and the concept of salvation as a transactional process

governed by divine law. Rather, as in Wilde's fairy tales, such as "The Selfish Giant", it reflects Wilde's own belief in the redemptive power of empathy and love. "The Canterville Ghost" parodies religion – if parody is understood in the ancient Greek sense, as a parallel, not to dismiss it but to reconfigure it. By presenting redemption outside the purely religious framework of repentance, Wilde offers a more compassionate understanding of salvation, one that agrees with his own understanding of Christianity.

Satirical Subversion of Superficial Morality

In the context of Wilde's broader critique of his contemporaneity, the story becomes an attempt to destabilise the superficial seriousness with which the Victorian middle-class society approached the notions of morality, punishment, and the supernatural. Sir Simon, as the ghost condemned to roam Canterville Chase for murder, should, by all religious convictions, and according to gothic conventions, be a figure of fear and pity, an embodiment of the archetypal damned soul. Wilde, however, deliberately undermines the traditional gravity associated with this archetypal figure, portraying the ghost not as terrifying or tragic but as a source of humour. Sir Simon's elaborate haunting techniques, meant to introduce terror, are met not with horror but amusement, mockery, or indifference. These comedic reversals elicit laughter, yet they also function as a satirical deconstruction of the conventional assumptions underlying traditional ghost stories. Moreover, they serve a critical function by undermining the Victorian tendency to limit the supernatural to moralising. What should be solemn is rendered absurd, and what was once morally charged becomes resolved on mundane terms. Wilde strips the ghost story of its horror, reducing it to a farce viewed from the perspective of rationality and modern practicality. Rather than evoking fear, Sir Simon evokes pity and irritation. His sombre backstory of murder and punishment, instead of serving as a cautionary tale, becomes a story of melodramatic exaggeration. But Wilde also uses this inversion to parody the solemnity of moral narratives, particularly those concerning sin, retribution, and redemption. The ghost's torment, while theatrically expressed, seems to lack genuine moral weight. Sir Simon pleads with Virginia: "You must weep with me for my sins, because I have no tears, and pray with me for my soul, because I have no faith" (Wilde 2019, 29).

His suffering is poeticised and aestheticised rather than portrayed as a genuine moral crisis – like the Victorian pieties, it is reduced to a spectacle. And, in

this way, the frivolous story becomes a serious critique of superficial morality, suggesting that morality concerned with mere appearances, like the ghost himself, has become a relic. His suffering is poeticised and aestheticised rather than portrayed as a genuine moral crisis. By stripping Sir Simon's suffering of moral depth, Wilde accuses Victorian morality, so preoccupied with religion, punishment, and piety, of superficiality and claims that morals have been reduced to a spectacle. He mocks the whole system of Victorian moral expectations, which places superficial rituals and codes of conduct over genuine inner reflection. The story suggests that morality, like the ghost himself, has become a relic. It is performative, empty, and stripped of its sacredness.

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Received: 2025-06-05; reviewed 2025-07-15; accepted 2025-09-26
DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.0972

The Reception of American Literature in Fascist Italy Based on the Example of John Steinbeck's Novels

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Abstract: This paper explores the reception of American literature in Fascist Italy, focusing on the interaction between censorship, translation, and the *mito americano* – the cultural myth of the United States as an object of desire and a symbol of anti-fascism. While the regime exercised strict control over mass media, literature remained comparatively less regulated, enabling a flourishing of Anglo-American works. Among these, John Steinbeck's novels occupied a unique position: despite censorship and selective omissions, *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* resonated strongly with Italian readers, who interpreted his depictions of poverty, struggle, and dignity as indirect critiques of their own society. In contrast, Jack London, already established as a literary classic, inspired Italians through adventure and survival narratives less threatening to the regime. At the same time, Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse offered escapist entertainment and was even tolerated by Mussolini until wartime hostilities demanded its Italianization. Steinbeck, unlike London and Disney, evoked complex emotions – admiration for his moral vision and empathy for the oppressed, combined with unease from authorities wary of his social critique. His popularity illustrates how American culture, mediated through translation, became a subtle but powerful form of literary resistance under Fascism.

This article, by analyzing correspondence, regime directives, and translation techniques, demonstrates that the reception of Steinbeck was shaped not only by ideological pressure but also by translators and publishers operating within Fascist policy. The Italian editions reveal an interesting negotiation between compliance and subversion, where omissions and lexical adjustments served as protective strategies that made publication possible. Ultimately, the case of Steinbeck confirms that translated literature could open a limited yet meaningful sphere of intellectual exchange allowing alternative visions to circulate within an authoritarian system.

Keywords: Fascist Italy, *mito americano*, censorship, translation, American literature, cultural reception

American culture has always enjoyed significant importance in Italy, especially during fascism. For many Italians, being pro-American then meant manifesting their anti-fascist attitude. As Cesare Pavese wrote,

without fascism to oppose, that is, without a historically progressive mindset to embody, even America, no matter how many skyscrapers and cars and soldiers it produces, will no longer be at the forefront of any culture. Without a mindset and without a progressive struggle, it will indeed risk giving itself to allure, even if in the name of its best traditions. (Pavese 1951, 196)

The idea of American culture as a form of literary anti-fascism became especially noticeable in the case of publishing the *Americana* anthology. The whole episode of fighting against censorship soon became a real legend.

At this point, it seems necessary to explain the concept of *mito americano*. I have opted to retain the original term *mito americano* to preserve its rich, specific connotations in Italian literary studies and its numerous meanings. First of all, and generally speaking, *mito americano* is understood as “the idea of America as an object of desire” (Dunnett 2015, 40). However, in literary studies, it refers to the twenty years of Fascism during which the Italian intellectuals presented a particular interest in the United States. And *Americana* anthology became the embodiment of *mito americano*, as far as the role of American literature in Italian society is concerned.

The present paper analyzes the role of American culture in Italy under Fascism, with a particular emphasis on literature. Furthermore, the objective is to determine whether the dictatorship affected its reception, and if so, to what extent. What I am especially interested in are the translations of American writers and the role of censorship in preparing their final versions for publication in Italy.

While conducting the research, I worked mainly with historical, literary, and cultural sources in English and Italian, such as the essays by the Italian writers like Pavese and Vittorini, as well as two editions of the *Americana* anthology. Due to the unavailability of the Italian printed resources, all translations from Italian, unless otherwise noted, are my own. In many cases, I tried to retain the flamboyance of the Italian language, especially when it referred to the translation of correspondence, or in order to reflect the atmosphere of the statements.

The article will focus on the Fascist approach towards censoring books and the publishing industry at the time. In the 1930s, Anglo-American fiction became highly popular amongst Italians, which resulted in a genuine boom in translation. Consequently, during the Fascist years, three important publishing companies were established by private individuals, which have played a vital role in the Italian publishing market to this day. Furthermore, some examples of the Italian State's attempts to regulate the publishing market will be presented. To illustrate how censorship or self-censorship worked, examples of translations of three Steinbeck novels will be given. The article ends with two curious cases of great popularity among Italian readers at the time, namely Jack London's prose and the character of Mickey Mouse.

Fascist Censorship and Publishing Policy

In order to secure as much support as possible and to eliminate the voices of dissatisfaction, Fascism gave special attention to the press, to the cinema, especially the so-called newsreels, and finally to the radio. In fact, the idea was to foster friendly opinions toward the Fascist dictatorship by depicting the reality from a perspective favourable to the regime. Much less attention was paid to books, especially in the early days. It is not surprising that a country with such a high percentage of illiteracy¹ and a low level of readership treated literature with such neglect. The first regulation was a law passed in 1935, which "elevated the State Secretariat for the Press and Propaganda to a Ministry level". With this legislation, the Ministry was granted the authorization to confiscate any "offending publication" (Rundle 2000, 71). Even before the introduction of this law, books could be sequestered after publication. That is why publishers had to self-regulate to prevent the confiscation of books already published. Even though, during the 1920s, there was no official guidance regarding what could be published and what could not, publishers tried to avoid certain topics.

1 According to some statistics, 20,9% of Italians were illiterate in 1931. However, if we consider the South separately, this number rises to over 38%. One should remember that after the unification of Italy in 1861, the concept of one Italian language was rather abstract, the population from different regions, provinces and even cities or villages spoke their own dialects. Whereas the standard Italian was almost like a foreign language that was taught at schools, or during military service, it was also the official language of the press, radio and cinema.

Among them were pacifism, abortion, incest, suicide, and rape. Other taboos were related to depicting Italians in a negative light or making comments on Italians that could be considered offensive (Dunnett 2002, 101–102). Needless to mention that such obvious matters as the criticism of Mussolini or Fascism were completely unacceptable. After the Lateran Pacts were signed in 1929, the “passages describing sex were not encouraged”. However, not only was sexual behaviour not approved, but also “depiction of emancipated women which [...] might undermine the received view of the male superiority or challenge the centrality of the family to the fascist society” was considered ‘immoral’ and unpublishable (Dunnett 2002, 103).

The Translation Boom and Foreign Literary Hegemony

As far as literature is concerned, there was no distinction between foreign and domestic works; there existed no regulations regarding translations before 1938. Even though the majority of publications in Italy were translations, the regime did not consider their propaganda potential on the same level as that of the press, radio, or films. For Italian readers, translated books played a major role in communicating any novel ideas and trends originating abroad. In fact, only a small group of well-educated readers could read works in the original, while the vast majority resorted to translations. With regard to what may be called the favourite literature among Italians after the unification, the most popular was French, British, and Russian literature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, more than half of the books sold were translations (mostly from French and English) (Forgacs 1990, 26).

Beginning in the 1920s, there was a growing interest in contemporary literature, mainly from Great Britain, the US, Austria, and Germany. The most significant change, however, was the growing popularity of American prose, which became visible especially towards the end of the 1920s (Dunnett 2015, 275–276). Italians highly appreciated Anglo-American popular fiction, leading to a real boom in translation in the 1930s, which contributed to the enormous success of publishing houses such as Mondadori and Bompiani. As odd as it may sound, and despite the limitations of Fascism “throughout the thirties, [...] Italy translated consistently more than any other country in the world” (Rundle 2000, 72).

State Preventive Activities

The growing popularity of foreign literature became an increasingly important issue for the regime. Attempts to put pressure on publishers to increase the share of domestic books did not bring any tangible results, because, firstly, there was no good contemporary Italian literature, and, secondly, by buying foreign books, readers made their choice and thus determined the demand, especially for crime, romance, and adventure novels. Deliberating on Italians and their attitude towards literature, philosopher and historian Antonio Gramsci claimed,

In Italy there is a detachment between the public and writers and the public looks for his/her literature on the outside because it feels more his/her own than the so-called national one. [...] Each nation has its own literature, but it may come to it from another nation, that is, the nation in question can be subordinated to the intellectual and moral hegemony of other nations. (Gramsci 1975, 2253)

For that reason, namely the lack of reference to domestic literature, the gap was filled by foreign literature in the form of translation. What was the reason for the change in the literature censorship caused by the introduction of new bodies and centralization? As mentioned above, censorship activities were sporadic and relied heavily on publishers' actions. Publishers preferred to avoid certain topics rather than take the risk of the regime confiscating inappropriate content and, consequently, of losing invested funds and the potential profit. This had been the case until 1938, when anti-Semitic legislation was introduced after the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. Even earlier (in the 1930s), a publication permit was required. This procedure included sending to the Ministry a list of items that a publishing house intended to publish and waiting for permission or, in brief, a word that there were no objections.

In 1938, a special commission was set up to check all the translated books back from 1914 and to determine whether their authors were or were not Jews. The following years brought a total ban on publishing books by Jewish authors, except the so-called classics, which, according to the Commission for the Purifying of Books (*Commissione di Bonifica del Libro*), "are by now part of our universal cultural heritage" (Rundle 2000, 76). The Commission also prepared a register

of banned authors, known as the List of Unwelcome Authors in Italy (*Elenco di autori non graditi in Italia*). This register listed writers of Jewish origin, as well as anti-fascist authors.

Key Players: Mondadori, Bompiani, and Einaudi

The popularity of imported fiction contributed to the development and success of some editors. Among them, it is necessary to mention the Mondadori publishing house, which was established in Milan in 1919 by Arnaldo Mondadori. It had been publishing such authors as Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and Francis Scott Fitzgerald. Another important company, as far as American fiction is concerned, has been Bompiani, founded also in Milan by Valentino Bompiani in 1929. The firm acquired the rights to publish John Steinbeck. When his novels appeared on the Italian market, they were followed by a successful advertising campaign and became highly popular. For instance, *The Grapes of Wrath* was translated as *Furore* and was promoted as "the book at the top of all the charts" (Dunnett 2015, 279). The third one, a little less eminent, was Einaudi, founded in Turin by Giulio Einaudi in 1933. Its series *Narratori stranieri tradotti* (Translated Foreign Storytellers) contributed to the presence of translated fiction in Italy with the publications of the works by such American authors as Henry James, Herman Melville, and Gertrude Stein. During Fascism, publishing companies remained in private hands and, especially at the beginning, they were required to regulate themselves in order to survive in the market, competing for a rather small readership.

Censorship and Self-Censorship: Analysis of Steinbeck's Translations

The idea of self-censorship of the publishing industry holds considerable appeal as a research topic. In this case, it enables me to examine the changes made in the translation of Steinbeck's novels. One should note right away, however, that it is not entirely clear whether and to what extent the changes were a result of external censorship and to what extent they were due to intentional self-regulation. Sometimes it was the change of the title; for example, *God's Little Acre* by Erskine Caldwell was transformed into *Il piccolo campo* (literally: *The Small Field*). Despite this alteration, the already published novel was confiscated due to its licentious content (Dunnett 2002, 103).

As far as Steinbeck is concerned, *Tortilla Flat* was his first novel translated into Italian in 1939 by Elio Vittorini as *Pian della Tortilla*. Earlier, Vittorini wrote to Bompiani recommending the book and offering himself as a translator. Given the novel's subject matter, it may be surprising that the editor chose to publish it in Fascist Italy. Topics such as the freedom of an individual and the freedom from all constraints and restrictions might have been considered offensive to the regime; however, because the novel is set in the United States, it was most likely read as having anarchist properties. Nevertheless, had it been written by an Italian author, the novel would likely not have been accepted by the authorities, which issued guidelines emphasizing the need for a cautious approach to anti-fascist sentiments. For instance, measures were taken by the Ministry of Popular Culture to prevent "any further circulation in Italy, both in the original and Italian translation, of those foreign books whose content does not appear to be consonant with the principles of Fascism, either politically or morally speaking" (Dunnett 2002, 106).

Although the novel was published after all, some changes concerning anti-Italian remarks had been made. In the original version, we read,

Race antipathy overcame Danny's good sense. He menaced the fishermen. "Sicilian bastards," he called them, and "Scum from the prison island," and "Dogs of dogs of dogs." He cried "Chinga tu madre, Piojo." He thumbed his nose and made obscene gestures below his waist. The fishermen only grinned and shifted their oars and said. "Hello Danny. When'd you get home? Come around tonight. We got new wine." Danny was outraged. He screamed, "Pon un condo a la cabeza." They called, "Good-by, Danny. See you tonight." (Steinbeck 1995, 6)

The translator had to resort to using certain translation techniques, such as the omission of an entire passage that may have been offensive for Italian readers: "Ohi," egli gridò vedendoli. Quelli gli risposero: "Ciao, Danny. Passa stasera" (Steinbeck 1939, 14) ["Hi", he called out when he saw them. They replied: "Hello, Danny. Come by tonight"]. On the other hand, all the anti-Semitic references are present in Vittorini's translation. We can only wonder what would have happened before 1938 (when anti-Semitic legislation was introduced): whether Vittorini would have translated or omitted them.

Another novel, *In Dubious Battle*, was translated by Eugenio Montale as *La Battaglia* and published in 1940. Because of its subject, Bompiani had certain doubts about obtaining the censors' approval, which he expressed in a letter to Emilio Cecchi, a literary critic. In response, Cecchi expressed his approval, adding that the novel would bring the image of the American worker closer to the Italian reader. What is more, "the author's attitude is impartial, and he ends with a condemnation of the 'Reds'; an intelligent censor would support publishing the book in Italian" (Dunnett 2002, 108). As is well-known, Bompiani felt reassured by Cecchi and decided to complete the project. Another letter, this time written by Montale and addressed to the editor, reveals to us the translator's workshop. More precisely, he reveals some difficulties he encountered while translating American slang, as well as his approach towards some unfavourable observations regarding Italians:

The book is full of slang and so far removed from our own world that I was unable to attempt a complete transfusion that might make an Italian book out of it. I have trodden a line between a literal translation and re-creation. I have rendered the slang (not always, however) using coarse colloquialism and even some anacolutha – so as not to create too great a gap between the dialogue and the narrative. I removed two disagreeable references to Italy, and all allusions to Communism, given that Steinbeck talks mostly about the "radical party," which is the expression that I employed. But apart from this, the translation is unabridged. I'll make some slight amendments to the proofs but these won't incur expenses or cause any difficulty. (Dunnett 2002, 109–110)

Those "disagreeable references to Italy" were omitted in Montale's translation. The first one reads, "They've got this valley organized like Italy. Food supply's cut off now" (Steinbeck 1974, 156), while the translation: "La valle è troppo organizzata. E ci hanno tagliato i viveri" (Steinbeck 1940, 232) [The valley is too organized]. In the second reference to Italy, we read,

Doc Burton was snatched last night. I think he was. Doc was not a man to run out on us, but he is gone. This valley is organized like Italy. The vigilantes are raising hell. [...] if we don't get some

outside help I am afraid we are sunk. I never ran into a place that was so God-damn organized. About three men control the situation" (Steinbeck 1974, 227).

Here the key sentence was translated as follows, "La valle è troppo organizzata. I vigili fanno un putiferio"² [The valley is too organized].

There is also a third remark regarding Italians, which was left untouched: "With Dakin in the tent sat Burke, a lowering, sullen Irishman, and two short Italian men, who looked very much alike" (Steinbeck 1974, 110). The translation into Italian is practically literal: "Erano con Dakin, Burke, un basso e tetro irlandese e due italiani di bassa statura e molto somiglianti tra loro" (Steinbeck 1940, 164). Most likely, Montale felt that this kind of racial discrimination or stereotyping would not lead to the censors rejecting the book.

Prior to publication, it was required by the Ministry of Popular Culture to prepare an introductory note that "emphasizes that the novel contains interesting passages on the social struggles and the economic conflicts of American democracy" (Dunnett, 2002, 111). The writing was prepared by Montale, however, in the book it appeared as an anonymous editorial note (on Montale's explicit request). As recommended by the Ministry, there is a reference to the context of the novel: "This is a novel about labor, and about strikes and, as such, it reflects the social and economic distress of North America today". Writing as required by the Ministry, Montale further mentioned that various situations described in the novel may seem "unfamiliar" to the Italian reader, since they live in "a country where class struggle, as understood by Steinbeck, no longer exists" (Steinbeck 1940, v). By saying so, Montale emphasized that the novel could not be considered a threat to Fascist ideology because the action takes place on a different continent and the Italian reader cannot identify with it. Cunningly, he suggests that the publication

2 In this case, I cannot personally agree with the translation of 'vigilantes' to Italian 'vigili'. They are not equivalents, as 'vigilantes' should be translated as 'vigilanti' or 'giustizieri', and not 'vigile', which adequately would have to be translated as 'traffic policeman' or 'traffic warden'. On the other hand, the choice seems intentional because this term is translated in that way throughout the entire novel. What is more, in one passage the term 'vigilante' is explained: "who in hell are these vigilantes? Why, they the dirties guys in any town. [...] The owners use 'em, tell 'em: 'We have to protect people against reds.' Y see that let 'em burn houses and torture and beat people with no danger. And that's all they want to do, anyway. They've got no guts; they'll only shoot from cover, or gang a man when they ten to one. I guess they're about the worst scum in the world" (Steinbeck 1974, 133-134).

of the novel would highlight the tolerant approach of the regime: "Perhaps Steinbeck, who sees the reactionary forces at work everywhere, will be astounded to see his book translated into our language" (Steinbeck 1940, vi).

The last of Steinbeck's novels to be presented here is *The Grapes of Wrath*, translated by Carlo Coardi as *Furore* (Fury) in January 1940. By November 1941, there had been six reprints, and they all sold out. As John Diggins, a professor of history, has stated,

Fascist authorities deliberately published John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, assuming its depressing agrarian scenes would demonstrate the virtues of Corporate State to Italian intellectuals. But the strategy backfired; instead, Italians came to admire a country which allowed authors like Steinbeck and Lillian Smith to write such caustic social criticism. (Diggins 1972, 251)

In the case of this novel, there are no evident signs of intervention in the translated text, only a refusal of another reprint in 1942 with the following explanation: "the Ministry does not consider it opportune, at least for the time being, for the volume in question to be reprinted, since the content of the novel is incompatible with our ideas and our customs" (Dunnett 2002, 114).

As argued earlier, American culture played an important role in Italian society. Italians loved American films, music, and books; moreover, the regime did not restrict access to them, even though Fascism appeared anti-American. The situation changed in December 1941, when the United States became Italy's official war enemy. For this reason, the Ministry announced that the timing of publication was inadequate. Afterwards it was also impossible to reprint novels already in circulation, such as *La battaglia*, which the Ministry turned down with the following justification: "Given that the content and the spirit of the book *In Dubious Battle* by John Steinbeck do not appear generally speaking to be in conformity with the principles of our age, we believe it is opportune for your publishing house not to undertake any further reprints of this volume" (Dunnett, 2002, 115).

Alternative American Cultural Products: London and Disney

In order to acquaint oneself more specifically with the regime's approach towards America and its cultural products, I wish to present two interesting cases.

The first one is the relentless popularity of Jack London's books, which were translated in the 1920s and, amazingly, "have never been out of print in Italy" (Dunnett 2015, 310). His novels and short stories were published as regular collections, and some of them appeared in episodes in magazines and newspapers. Of course, this was not only the case in Italy, as London's writing was much adored in most European countries.

The second one is the cartoon character Mickey Mouse. For the first time, it appeared in *Illustrazione del Popolo* in 1930, a supplement to *Gazzetta del Popolo* (Fossati 1980, 77). Topolino (the Italian translation of Mickey Mouse) gained immediate popularity. Among its fans was the youngest son of Mussolini, Romano, who had been subscribing to comics since 1936. According to a legend, Mussolini, being a great fan of Disney's cartoons, "gave the comic book series a reprieve" (Dunnett 2015, 348). Equally important is Walt Disney's visit to Italy in 1935, when he was officially received by Mussolini and then hosted at the Duce's house, Villa Torlonia.

Notwithstanding, in 1942, when the United States became a potential enemy of Italy and fascist authorities banned everything 'made in the USA', Topolino was converted into a boy called Tuffolino and Minnie into a girl called Mimma. Due to the enormous popularity of the comics, the regime decided to Italianize its main characters, instead of banning them entirely. The comics with the new characters were published until the end of 1943. Finally, the real Topolino returned in December 1945.

Undoubtedly, Italian children, who loved reading comics with their favorite characters, succumbed to the charm of Mickey Mouse. Similarly, yet in a quite different fashion, Mickey Mouse appeared appealing to Fascist authorities. A positive approach to life, widely promoted in the youth and children's organizations, could be easily found in Topolino's personality.

Conclusion

The article has examined the reception of American culture in Fascist Italy, focusing on the translation and censorship of American literature. While Mussolini's regime tightly controlled mass media like cinema, radio, and the press, books initially received less scrutiny, which allowed Anglo-American literature, especially contemporary fiction, to flourish in translation throughout the 1930s. Italy became one of the most active translators in the world, largely due to the popularity of American authors.

American literature became tied to the concept of *mito americano* – an idea of the United States as a land of freedom, modernity, and anti-fascist aspiration. Publishing houses such as Mondadori, Bompiani, and Einaudi thrived by translating American works, with Steinbeck becoming a central figure. His novels, though censored or slightly altered to omit offensive references to Italians or to downplay communism, resonated strongly with readers. *The Grapes of Wrath* in particular gained immense popularity, despite Fascist hopes that it would showcase the failures of American democracy. Instead, Italians admired a society that tolerated such critical voices.

By contrast, Jack London's works had been consistently popular since the 1920s, admired for their adventurous spirit and socialist undertones. Disney's Mickey Mouse (Topolino) represented another facet of America's cultural allure – an apolitical, cheerful icon embraced by both children and even Mussolini's own family, until wartime hostilities forced an Italianized version.

Steinbeck's impact lay in the immediacy and realism of his themes. Unlike London's allegorical adventure or Disney's comic optimism, Steinbeck's novels (*Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) addressed class struggle, migration, hunger, and dignity. Italians under Fascism recognized parallels with their own hardships. Steinbeck's empathy for the marginalized resonated as both a literary and moral force. Reading his works meant not only enjoying a foreign novel but also encountering a vision of justice and human solidarity absent in Fascist rhetoric.

Thus, Steinbeck embodied the *mito americano* in its most political sense: America as a land where dissent was possible, where literature could speak truth to power, and where the oppressed had a voice.

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Received: 2025-10-24; reviewed 2025-11-05; accepted 2025-11-30

DOI 10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.0820

The Role of Register-Specific Semantic Prosody in ESL Advanced Instruction: “Environmental” Discourse in Academic and Journalism Registers of British English

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Abstract: This article explores semantic prosody (SP) and the pedagogical need for teaching register-specific SP to advanced learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), using the corpus linguistic analysis of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL* as a case study. Semantic prosody, the evaluative “aura” a word acquires from its typical lexical surroundings, is a crucial component of pragmatic competence often overlooked in L2 instruction. While dictionary definitions provide denotative meaning, they frequently fail to capture the nuanced, register-dependent evaluative associations that shape native-like language use. This paper builds on a previous study of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in general online discourse by presenting a more granular, comparative analysis of its semantic prosody across journalistic and academic registers drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC). Using a corpus-assisted methodology, the study reveals a significant divergence in narrative framing: journalistic texts frame the term with a neutral semantic prosody, balancing negative concepts like *pressure* with responses, effectively depicting a narrative of societal reaction. In contrast, academic writing employs a markedly positive prosody centered on constructive action, typified by collocates such as *performance*, *development*, and *sustainable*. These findings demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach to vocabulary instruction leaves learners ill-equipped for specialized contexts. The article concludes by outlining key implications for language pedagogy (glottodidactics), specifically advocating for Data-Driven Learning (DDL) strategies. It argues that fostering awareness of register-specific semantic prosody allows advanced L2 learners (above B2 level) to move beyond simple grammatical correctness to achieve pragmatic appropriateness. Ultimately, this approach empowers learners to navigate complex discourses and contribute agency-driven narratives to specialized fields such as environmental education and policy.

Keywords: semantic prosody, English as a Second Language (ESL), British English, language pedagogy, corpus linguistics

Introduction

Reaching proficiency in a second language (L2) is a multi-layered process that extends beyond the memorization of vocabulary and grammatical rules. For advanced learners, the ultimate goal is the ability to produce contextually appropriate, natural-sounding language. This recognition points learners to the idea of vocabulary, not as a set of items accompanied by their denotative definitions, but as a net of words that co-occur with each other and, by doing so, acquire features that make using a given word natural and contextual. A phrase coined by J. R. Firth (1957), “you shall know the word by the company it keeps,” encapsulates this idea that the competence in vocabulary use is linked to the linguistic environment of a word. A noteworthy aspect of this competence lies in understanding semantic prosody: the attitudinal and pragmatic “aura” of meaning that a word acquires from its consistent collocational environments (Louw 1993). This concept originates from corpus linguistics, notably in John Sinclair’s analysis of the phrasal verb *TO SET IN*, which he found consistently co-occurred with unpleasant states of affairs, thus giving it a negative prosody (Sinclair 1987). As Sinclair (1996) noted later on, this evaluative coloring operates “on the pragmatic side of the semantics/pragmatics continuum,” shaping speaker attitude and intent. Moreover, some scholars (e.g., Tognini-Bonelli 2004; Widdowson 2000) point to the hidden, covert nature of semantic prosody. For instance, a word like *TO CAUSE* appears semantically neutral in its dictionary definition. However, after examining large bodies of text (corpora) we can uncover its tendency to co-occur with predominantly negative words, such as *DAMAGE*, *PAIN*, or *PROBLEMS* (Partington 1998; Stubbs 1995). This recognition provides a rationale for inquiry, even into seemingly well-understood vocabulary, looking for additional information that helps to comprehend and produce language more proficiently. While the concept of semantic prosody is growing in popularity among corpus linguists, its application in L2 pedagogy remains underexplored. Traditional L2 instruction typically relies on dictionary definitions, which, by their nature, provide decontextualized, denotative meanings. This approach can leave learners ill-equipped to navigate the subtle connotations that differentiate near-synonyms or understand why a word may be appropriate in one context but not another (Xiao & McEney 2006).

The challenge can become particularly demanding in specialized contexts where linguistic framing is critical to the discourse.

One example of such context is environmental education. It was recognized that the language used to discuss environmental issues is not a neutral conduit for information but a constitutive force that shapes perception, cognition, and behavioral intent (Lakoff 2010). A prior study (Klimska & Rutkowski, forthcoming) analyzed the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in a broad, non-specialized corpus drawn from the World Wide Web, revealing a predominantly negative semantic prosody, amounting to technocratic and emotionally detached discourse. This general prosody, laden with terms of damage and risk, was identified as potentially counter-productive to the aims of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which seeks to foster hope and agency (Ojala 2012). Equipped with this insight, non-native English users become aware of potentially negative connotations of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* when addressing a general audience. They might choose to counteract this by involving more positive framing and/or including a message of hope in otherwise impersonal, dispassionate discourse. Equipping L2 users with an understanding of evaluative hues of meaning found in the vocabulary of the field not only makes them more aware participants of the discourse; it also gives them the linguistic tools to shape, influence and change the narrative. However, in the preliminary study of *ENVIRONMENTAL*, a crucial dimension was highlighted as needing further investigation: the variation of semantic prosody across different genres and registers found by other scholars (Cheng 2006; Tribble 2000). This article addresses that gap by presenting a comparative, register-specific analysis of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL*. By contrasting its use in journalistic and academic texts, this study aims to:

1. Contribute to the growing body of research on semantic prosody, adding an example of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL*.
2. Demonstrate the pronounced effect of register on the semantic prosody.
3. Illustrate the limitations of a non-differentiated approach to L2 vocabulary instruction.
4. Propose pedagogical implications for teaching advanced English learners how to effectively and appropriately engage in specialized discourse.

Semantic Prosody and Its Importance in L2 Pedagogy

Semantic prosody describes the subtle positive or negative connotation a word acquires through its frequent association with other words (Stubbs

2001). This “aura of meaning” is said not to be found in the word itself, but it is discoverable in the cumulation of the contexts in which it typically appears. It ought to be distinguished from the relationship between the word and another lexical item it co-occurs with (collocation), e.g., *TO PAY* + *ATTENTION* or the relationship between a word and a grammatical category (colligation), e.g. the auxiliary *WON'T* + *BUDGE* (Sinclair 1998). As in the example cited in the first section, the verb *TO CAUSE* in general corpora exhibits a strong negative semantic prosody because it habitually co-occurs with words denoting unpleasant outcomes, such as *TROUBLE* (Partington 1998; Stubbs 1995). For advanced ESL learners, being unaware of these patterns is a primary source of pragmatic error. A learner might produce a grammatically correct but pragmatically odd sentence because they have selected a word whose semantic prosody clashes with the intended meaning of the utterance. For instance, a non-native English learner could produce an utterance “This event has *CAUSED* my happiness,” which complies with the dictionary definition of the verb “to serve as a cause or occasion of” (source: Merriam-Webster) but would nevertheless be recognized as awkward or unnatural by a native speaker. As has been argued, this information is “vital for non-native speakers to understand not only what is grammatically possible in their language production but [...] also what is appropriate and what actually happens” (Partington 1998, 8). Notably, semantic prosody has been seen as playing a major role in irony, sarcasm, and humor, whereas these phenomena are supposed to stem from the “collocative clash” of inappropriately matched vocabulary (Louw 1993). Proficiency in decoding and deploying these forms of language use is seen as a manifestation of high language competence. The need for this nuanced understanding becomes critical at advanced proficiency levels (CEFR B2-C2), where learners are expected to differentiate finer shades of meaning even in complex or highly-specific situations and use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. At this stage, educators ought to move beyond simple denotation and equip learners with the tools to analyze language as it is authentically used. Corpus linguistics provides this methodological toolkit, allowing both teachers and students to uncover the subliminal evaluative meanings encoded in language. The following study, therefore, adopts a corpus-assisted approach to reveal the register-specific prosodies of *ENVIRONMENTAL*, providing an empirical basis for targeted pedagogical interventions.

A Register-Specific Study of the Term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in British English

Building on the findings of the initial study on *ENVIRONMENTAL* in online discourse, this analysis narrows the focus to two distinct and influential registers in British English: journalism and academia. The objective is to determine whether the term’s semantic prosody shifts depending on the communicative purpose and conventions of the register in which it appears.

Methodology

As an introductory note, it is worth pointing out that while the term “collocate” often implies a statistically significant association, this paper adopts a frequency-based perspective, defining collocates as the most common words appearing in the vicinity of the node word. This terminological choice is made for the sake of clarity (avoidance of repetitions of the phrase “habitually co-occurring lexical items”) and is justified on theoretical and pedagogical grounds in the discussion of the quantitative analysis below. This study employs a corpus-assisted methodology to compare the semantic prosody of the adjective *ENVIRONMENTAL* across two distinct registers. The data was elicited from the British National Corpus (BNC), using the BNC lab software, which is a free online resource meant to facilitate the exploration of language (Brezina, Gablasova & Reichelt 2018). The BNC corpus consists of two large corpora, one created in 1994 and the second in 2014, totalling over 100 million words of authentic British English. In order to provide sufficient instantiations of the analyzed term, and to limit the scope of the research, the diachronic considerations have not been included in the study. For the purpose of this register-specific analysis, two subcorpora were chosen:

1. Academic: Comprising the 20-million-word academic prose subcorpus.
2. Journalism: A combined corpus created from the newspapers subcorpus (20 million words) and the magazines subcorpus (15 million words). This combination was deemed appropriate as the magazines’ subcorpus yielded only 3 significant high-frequency collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* on its own, and both text types share the broad communicative function of public information dissemination.

Subsequently, the analysis followed a two-step process:

1. **Qualitative Analysis:** The top high-frequency collocates for *ENVIRONMENTAL* in each subcorpus were identified. Each collocate was then qualitatively analyzed in context (KWIC) to assign it an evaluative load: positive,

negative, or neutral. One could justly argue that a result of such ascription is a subjective view of the author. Hence, to avoid bias to the largest extent possible, the researcher strived to analyze each instance of the word through the lens of “desired state,” i.e., the question: does the term refer to a preferred outcome, as it is applied in the elicited concordance line? For example, if the adjective *NEW* would be found modifying undesired nouns (say, *PROBLEMS*, or *DISEASES*), it would earn the label of a negative evaluation.

- 2. Quantitative Analysis:** Following the qualitative coding, the raw frequencies of the positive, neutral, and negative collocates for each register were accumulated. This quantitative summary provides a clear, data-driven overview of the dominant semantic prosody in each context. The study focuses exclusively on the highest frequency words, with no reference to statistical associative measures (such as Log Dice or MI). Following Sinclair’s (1996) view that semantic prosody arises from habitual and recurrent co-occurrence, the frequency-based profile of the lexical items was deemed sufficient to reveal the evaluative tendency, and the analysis in this study focuses on the semantic field surrounding the node word *ENVIRONMENTAL* rather than on the strength of individual node-collocate relationships. Moreover, such a study design facilitates replication in the classroom settings and empowers both learners and educators to explore the language similarly using the BNC lab.

In order to analyze the immediate linguistic surroundings of *ENVIRONMENTAL*, the size of the context window chosen was L10-R10 (10 words to the left and right of the node). This design feature follows Hoey’s work on lexical priming (2005), where he underlined the context size as a differentiating factor between semantic prosody and lexical priming, which was supposed to apply even to entire texts.

The Analysis of the Most Frequent Collocates

The term *ENVIRONMENTAL* occurs 29 times in the subcorpus of journalism (newspapers and magazines subcorpora) in the BNC. After the exclusion of stop words (articles, pronouns or other words deemed non-evaluative in nature), we analyzed the most frequent collocates, together with their concordance lines, and found that 3 were positive (*NEW*, *SINGLE-MINDED*, *FIRM*) appearing 7 times in total, 13 were neutral (*SAY*, *GAS*, *GROUP*, *IMPACT*, *SUBARU*, *RESPOND*, *DO*, *SYSTEM*, *WOULD*, *LEAD*, *CAR*, *MORE*, *OFFICER*,

CLUB, PIPELINE) amounting to 40 occurrences, and 3 were negative (*PRESSURE, FACE, IMPACT*) which occurred 9 times. When accumulated and compared, the lexical surroundings of *ENVIRONMENTAL* exhibit a near-perfect balance between negative collocates like *PRESSURE* and *FACE* and positive ones like *SINGLE-MINDED* and *NEW*. This could suggest a narrative structure where problems are consistently being met with responses. The overwhelming majority of collocates, however, remain neutral, reinforcing the register’s primary function of reporting on the actions and statements of various actors (*SAY, GROUP*). Since it might be surprising that the term *FACE* was assigned with a negative load, it is worth pointing out that it was found referring to the confrontation with a negative state of affairs:

Every car company faces *ENVIRONMENTAL* pressure

Moreover, the lexical item *MORE* was identified as evaluatively neutral, because its 2 instances were referring to either achieving positive results to a greater extent (the first concordance line), or dealing with an increasing number of problems (the second concordance line), which we decided to interpret as a “canceling out” of the evaluative aura:

ENVIRONMENTAL groups say they want firms to do much more
 In terms of *ENVIRONMENTAL* impact, the cellulose fibre is potentially more of an issue

One can summarize these findings by stating that the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in British English exhibits neutral (however, not homogeneous) semantic prosody in the register of journalism.

Tab. 1: 20 Most Common Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the Journalistic Register

Collocates of <i>ENVIRONMENTAL</i>	Frequency of Occurrence
<i>SAY</i>	6
<i>GAS</i>	4
<i>GROUP</i>	4
<i>IMPACT</i>	4
<i>SUBARU</i>	3

<i>RESPOND</i>	3
<i>PRESSURE</i>	3
<i>DO</i>	3
<i>SINGLE-MINDED</i>	3
<i>SYSTEM</i>	3
<i>WOULD</i>	2
<i>LEAD</i>	2
<i>CAR</i>	2
<i>MORE</i>	2
<i>NEW</i>	2
<i>OFFICER</i>	2
<i>FACE</i>	2
<i>CLUB</i>	2
<i>PIPELINE</i>	2
<i>FIRM</i>	2

In the BNC's academic register, the word *ENVIRONMENTAL* occurs 75 times (2,5 times more often than in journalism). An analysis of the most frequent collocates and their concordance lines revealed that 7 of those were positive (*PERFORMANCE*, *DEVELOPMENT*, *GOAL*, *PRACTICE*, *GOOD*, *SUSTAINABLE*, *DEVELOP*) totaling 45 instances, and 12 were neutral (*CITY*, *INFRASTRUCTURE*, *SOCIAL*, *CAN*, *PROJECT*, *MORE*, *LEAD*, *CHANGE*, *YEAR*, *POLICY*, *REGULATION*, *HOST*) accounting for 98 occurrences. Notably, only one of the collocates (*IMPACT*) was found to be negative, totalling 7 occurrences. The list of top collocates is dominated by words associated with constructive, solution-oriented action: *PERFORMANCE* (used synonymously with improving the ecological situation), *DEVELOPMENT*, *GOAL*, *SUSTAINABLE*, *GOOD*, and *PRACTICE* (appearing in the phrases akin to *GOOD PRACTICE*):

European Commission to celebrate *ENVIRONMENTAL* performance within European cities

European cities promoting *ENVIRONMENTAL* values and good practice

The only negative item – *IMPACT* – was seen in the phrase *ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT*, referring to the influence humans have on the environment, similarly to the journalism register. The semantic prosody of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the academic register of British English is markedly positive. The discourse is not one of conflict but of systematic, rational, and positive endeavor.

Tab. 2: 20 Most Common Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the Academic Register

Collocates of <i>ENVIRONMENTAL</i>	Frequency of Occurrence
CITY	17
INFRASTRUCTURE	12
SOCIAL	12
CAN	8
PROJECT	8
PERFORMANCE	8
DEVELOPMENT	7
MORE	7
IMPACT	7
GOAL	7
LEAD	6
CHANGE	6
YEAR	6
PRACTICE	6
POLICY	6
GOOD	6
SUSTAINABLE	6
REGULATION	5
HOST	5

The Comparative Analysis Between the Registers

The comparison between the lexical surroundings of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* across the registers of academic prose and journalism in British English reveals a fundamental divergence in semantic prosody. While journalistic writing frames

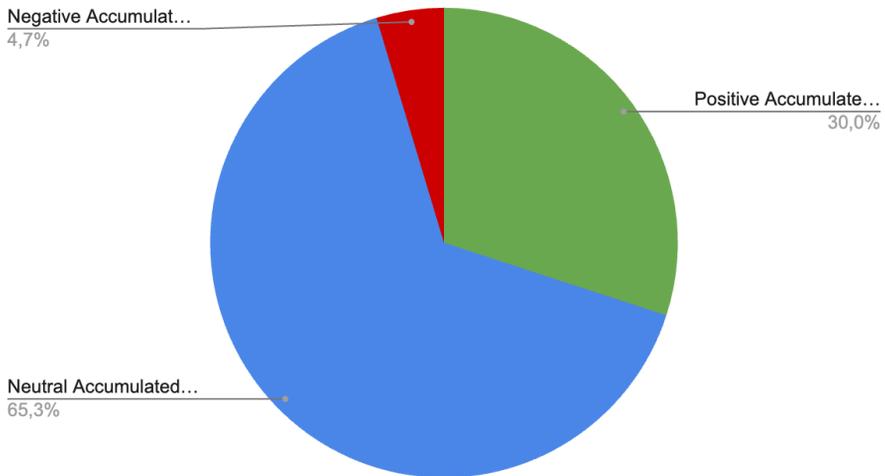
the term through a lens of conflict and reaction – balancing negative collocates like *PRESSURE* with positive ones like *SINGLE-MINDED* – academic discourse constructs a significantly positive narrative centered on systematic, solution-oriented action, typified by collocates such as *PERFORMANCE* and *SUSTAINABLE*. Moreover, this narrative divergence is quantitatively significant: academic writing not only contains over six times as many instances of positive collocates (45 vs. 7) but also a proportionally smaller share of negative ones (4.7% vs. 16.07%), underscoring a clear discursive shift from a focus on reporting to one of constructive solutions.

Tab. 3: Accumulated Frequencies of the Collocates of ENVIRONMENTAL in the Academic and Journalism Registers

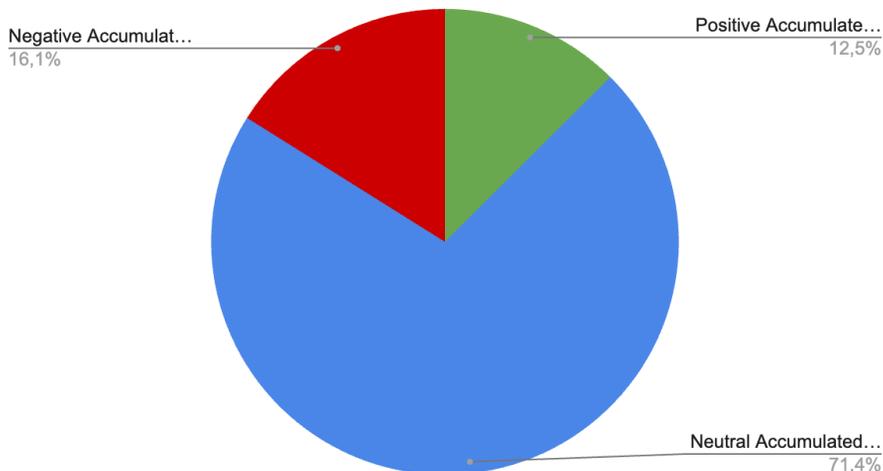
Register	Positive Collocates (N)	Neutral Collocates (N)	Negative Collocates (N)
Academic	45	98	7
Journalism	7	40	9

Fig. 1 The Evaluative Dimension of the Collocates of ENVIRONMENTAL in the Academic (below) and Journalism (on the following page) Registers

Academic Genre



Journalism Genre



Discussion

The contrast between the registers provides insight into native-like usage of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in British English. The journalistic register constructs a narrative of environmental reaction, where society is *FACING PRESSURE*. The academic register, however, builds a narrative of environmental construction, where the focus is on achieving *SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT* and disseminating *GOOD PRACTICES*. The understanding of such register-dependent variation is beneficial to advanced ESL students. First and foremost, it has been argued that semantic prosody for near-synonyms (e.g., *COMETER* vs. *COMMIT*) varies across languages, e.g., Portuguese and English (Berber-Sardinha 2000), which renders extrapolating the evaluative load from one’s native language futile. Moreover, if a learner’s primary exposure to English is through news media, they would likely associate *ENVIRONMENTAL* with different collocates and therefore construe an underdeveloped attitudinal “feel” for this term. This learner would be ill-prepared for academic contexts, where this word exhibits distinct evaluative patterns. This demonstrates that teaching the meaning of *ENVIRONMENTAL* without reference to semantic prosody (and its register-dependent nature) provides learners with an incomplete understanding of the term. This could impact their communicative competence, as they may unintentionally import a journalistic, problem-focused

tone into academic settings that value a more constructive and solution-oriented discourse. Consequently, their ability to build credible arguments and participate effectively in specialized fields might be compromised. This highlights the fact that true language proficiency lies not just in knowing a word's meaning, but in mastering its context-driven pragmatic use.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged, which in turn open up avenues for future research. First, the findings are specific to British English, as the analysis relies exclusively on data from the British National Corpus (BNC). Consequently, the semantic prosodies identified for the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* may not be directly generalizable to other varieties of English. Furthermore, the corpora used for this study were compiled in 1994 and 2014. Given that language is dynamic, particularly in discourse surrounding rapidly evolving topics such as environmentalism, it is possible that more contemporary corpora might reveal different lexical patterns and evaluative shifts. Given the fairly young nature of register-specific semantic prosody studies, further investigation is essential to build a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and compile a larger body of case studies. Future research should aim to replicate our findings across a wider range of corpora, first by examining other contemporary collections of British English to validate the patterns observed here. Crucially, research must also move beyond this language variety to explore others, such as American or Australian English. A comparative, cross-varietal analysis would be of practical use for L2 pedagogy in a global context, where learners are exposed to diverse forms of English and require a more nuanced understanding of vocabulary in use.

Implications for Advanced ESL (and Other L2) Learners

The findings carry implications for language pedagogy, particularly for advanced learners (B2+) who need to operate in specific academic or professional domains. The differing semantic prosodies of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in journalism and academia provide a rationale for the role of register-specific instruction for advanced ESL learners. This paper demonstrates that the evaluative meaning of a word is tied to its generic context—a concept often missed in traditional language teaching. Addressing this register-specific variation is therefore

advantageous to fostering true pragmatic competence and enabling ESL learners to become confident, effective communicators in their chosen fields. Moreover, the inclusion of semantic prosody into L2 curricula, as a supplement to dictionary-based instruction, becomes a worthwhile avenue for educators. Consequently, educational systems could move from incorporating a single, homogenous semantic prosody for a given word to exploring its register-specific prosodies. Educators should guide learners to understand that a word’s evaluative meaning is not fixed but dynamic and context-dependent. This aligns with the necessity for advanced learners to understand how language functions differently across various communicative contexts (Tribble 2000). However, instead of simply providing rules, educators can empower learners by introducing them to user-friendly corpus tools (such as the BNC lab introduced in this article). By conducting their own simple analyses, students can actively discover these linguistic patterns for themselves. This data-driven learning (DDL) approach fosters analytical skills, promotes deeper processing of vocabulary, and helps learners build an intuitive “feel” for the language that mirrors native-speaker competence (Mansoori & Jafarpour 2014). For instance, similarly to this study, an ESL learner could be tasked with comparing the top collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in a news corpus versus a science corpus to identify and internalize the difference in the evaluative load of the word. Another benefit of incorporating semantic prosody into L2 pedagogy is fostering critical linguistic awareness among learners. By examining how words such as *ENVIRONMENTAL* are framed in different registers, learners can become more critical consumers of information. They can learn to identify the underlying attitudes and ideologies present in a text, whether it is the conflict-driven narrative of a newspaper or the solution-oriented narrative of a policy document. This skill is useful not just for language learning, but for academic and civic engagement. Lastly, for ESL learners involved—or wishing to get involved—in sustainability or environmental protection, this analysis provides a linguistic blueprint for action. As argued in Klimska & Rutkowski (forthcoming), a default negative framing of environmental issues can lead to “cognitive dissonance and fatalism.” By consciously shifting to the more empowering and solution-oriented language found in academic discourse (e.g., focusing on *ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE*, *INNOVATION*, and *SUSTAINABILITY*), English users can create a linguistic environment that fosters agency and constructive hope.

Conclusion

The concept of semantic prosody offers a way of enhancing advanced L2 instruction, as demonstrated on the example of British English. The comparative analysis of the term *ENVIRONMENTAL* in two distinct registers offers the view that the evaluative aura of a word is not monolithic but is shaped by the register in which it is used. The journalistic framing of “environmental reaction” stands in contrast to the academic framing of “environmental construction,” and ESL learners should be empowered to navigate this variation. For glottodidactics, this requires a shift in approach: from teaching static vocabulary lists to fostering a dynamic, inquiry-based exploration of language in use. By incorporating corpus-based methods and a focus on register-specific analysis, educators can provide learners with a more accurate and nuanced understanding of their target language. Ultimately, discovering and teaching semantic prosody is not just about preventing pragmatic errors; it is about giving learners the linguistic tools they need to become confident and effective communicators in their chosen fields.

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Fig. 1 The Evaluative Dimension of the Collocates of *ENVIRONMENTAL* in the Academic and Journalism Registers



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Received: 2025-08-06; reviewed 2025-10-15; accepted 2025-11-20

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.5327

Reviews

Philip G. Zimbardo, Robert L. Johnson; *Psychology According to Shakespeare: What You Can Learn about Human Nature from Shakespeare's Great Plays*, Prometheus Books, Guilford, Connecticut, 2024.

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When tracing the line of cultural evolution, one should recall the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: “Nothing is new under the sun”. Zimbardo and Johnson’s work is not the first to tackle this subject – it belongs to a lineage of earlier attempts, such as *The Psychology and Shakespeare* by physician Sir John Charles Bucknill (London, 1859), or *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Psychology* by Murray W. Bundy (*The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 1924), to name only a few. Nor should we overlook Sigmund Freud, who fused psychology and literature through Sophocles to later label Hamlet’s inner turmoil as the *Oedipus complex*.

Particularly in the humanities, creation is achieved not through the object of study but through the method applied to it – not *what*, but *how*. Here, two eminent psychologists join forces for an in-depth deconstruction of Shakespeare’s psychological insight – though not necessarily a work of psychoanalysis. Their intention to penetrate the psychological depths of Shakespeare’s dramas remains, but the methods and scientific framework are distinctly modern, drawing on contemporary psychology and literary theory. Unlike many co-authored works where chapters are divided, these authors write in a single voice – “we think, we suggest...”

The title *Psychology According to Shakespeare* implies not merely the psychology in Shakespeare but of Shakespeare – his authorship, his creative mind.¹ Shakespeare and psychology here are inseparably intertwined. Thus, the often-used expression “bridging Shakespeare and psychology” seems misplaced, for there is no real gap between them. Psychology is intrinsic to the characters and situations Shakespeare created. It takes a person of Zen-master-like insight to reveal what is both obvious and hidden – to spark the disciple’s “Aha! It’s here!”

1 In the Polish edition, the title has been translated neutrally as *Shakespeare and Psychology*, implying these two plains as parallel, not interlaced.

In this constellation, Shakespeare becomes not only the object of analysis but also, perhaps more importantly, the subject – a conscious teacher, even a “pro-psychoanalyst”. As the authors put it: “All some four hundred years before scientists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman rediscovered the same concepts (confirmation bias, rationalist delusion, sunk cost heuristic - O.W. after the authors). Arguably, our man from Stratford even grasped what we now call cognitive dissonance”.

Labels change; the object endures. Before “cognitive dissonance”, there was “paradox” – discovered by ancient philosophers – or “absurdity”, favoured by the modernists. And then comes the sophisticated English “incongruence”, from Latin *incongruentia* – literally, “not coming together”. In every case, the unsuspecting witness must confront it existentially. Are not all classical tragedies, after all, built upon such a discrepancy?

Many elements attributed by the authors to Shakespeare’s time – medicine, magic, potions, anatomy, the theory of humors – were already known to the ancient ancestors of Europe.

The book rests on four conceptual pillars that represent dualities, the tensions between attraction and repulsion. These are its guiding signposts:

1. heritage vs. environment,
2. a person vs. a situation,
3. conscious vs. unconscious,
4. ratio vs. emotion.

As in most academic works, the table of contents serves as an X-ray of its structure.

„ PROLOGUE: Why Shakespeare and Psychology?

INTRODUCTION: Shakespeare’s Psychology and the Roots of Genius

PART I: NATURE VS. NURTURE CHAPTER 1 Nature–Nurture, Neuroscience, and the Brain of the Bard: The Tempest CHAPTER 2 The Ages and Stages of Man (and Woman): As You Like It

PART II: THE PERSON VS. THE SITUATION CHAPTER 3 Henrys, Humors, and the Psychology of Personality: Richard II–Henry V CHAPTER 4 Social Influence from Stratford to Stanford: Measure for Measure CHAPTER 5 Heroes Ancient and Modern, Major and Minor: Othello ---

PART III: INTO THE MIND CHAPTER 6 Sleep, Dreams, and
 Drugs: Windows into the Unconscious: A Midsummer Night's
 Dream CHAPTER 7 Mental Illness and Other Ill Humors: Richard III
 PART IV: REASON VS. EMOTION CHAPTER 8 Emotion, Mo-
 tivation, and Elizabethan Love: Love's Labour's Lost CHAPTER 9
 Reason, Intuition, and the Prince of Denmark: Hamlet
 EPILOGUE: Psychology, Shakespeare, and Beyond
 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, NOTES , BIBLIOGRAPHY ,,

The modest word "beyond" in the epilogue speaks volumes. The book extends well past drama analysis. The extensive bibliography – dense with psychological and literary references – nearly deserves a chapter of its own.

Besides the principal plays discussed, others appear in passing: *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Winter's Tale*... none of the playwright's creations seems neglected. Still, one wonders whether Shakespeare's psychological richness can truly be condensed into a single 344-page volume.

The authors think beyond disciplinary boxes, passionately advocating interdisciplinary cooperation. Instead of hermetic specialization, they weave a fine web of interdependencies. Yet one lingering wish remains – that of a fuller balance between psychology and literary science. Ideally, one might imagine this book co-authored by a psychologist and an Elizabethan scholar.

The text contains glimpses into Shakespeare's biography, his everyday world, sketches of his contemporaries, and numerous cultural vectors radiating from the central theme. The authors manage to accommodate an impressive cast: Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I, Columbus, Luther, Catherine of Aragon, Hobbes, Paracelsus, Mary Stuart, and many others. The work is dense with professional terminology – deconstruction, alchemy, Stanford Prison Experiment, gluttony, infidelity, Alzheimer's disease, bipolar disorder – each connected to Shakespeare's characters and dramatic situations.

Beyond psychology, the book engages with literary studies, history, culture science, sociology, and anthropology. Within psychology itself, the text freely references both classical and modern thought – from Freud to Tversky, Kahneman, and, fittingly, Zimbardo himself.

The authors also venture into "charlatan" or unofficial medicine as it appeared in Shakespeare's world – astrology, potions, poisons, anatomical dissections, and

above all, the four psychophysiological humours. With a playful scientific irony, they attempt to reconstruct Shakespeare's psyche according to the paradigms of his own era. Based on contemporary accounts, Shakespeare was likable, conciliatory, and – depending on the colour and density of his bile – alternately extroverted, sanguine, or melancholic, as any true poet was expected to be. The resulting “diagnosis” resembles a horoscope profile from a weekly magazine. Unsurprisingly, the Bard emerges as the quintessential Renaissance man.

All these components – structural, historical, and imaginative – had to be joined into a living whole, demanding both discipline and devotion. Some readers may feel overwhelmed by the flood of information, others by the sense of unfinished thematic meanders.

Visually, the book satisfies. Its modest design appears classical, avoiding unnecessary experiments, harmonizing perfectly with its content. The cover depicts Shakespeare in a purposefully “imperfect”, slightly jagged Renaissance-style font. Inside, the text is richly illustrated with period paintings and Romantic interpretations of his plays, as well as occasional modern diagrams of psychological interplay.

In 2025, the book received the “Book of the Year” award from the American Psychological Association's Division of General Psychology, “for its accessible and thought-provoking bridge between literature and psychology, exploring human nature through Shakespeare's plays and relating it to modern psychological concepts”.

A final question arises: Who is this book for? Though written by two psychologists, it is paradoxically less aimed at practising clinicians. Contrary to “Oedipus complex”, it is doubtful that *Richard III's pathology* or the *bastard complex from “King John”* will enter the psychological lexicon. Nor can one imagine a therapist prescribing: “To understand your issue, turn to Lady Macbeth and study her compulsive drive”, or “Read *King Lear* as a case study in your dementia”.

And yet, from the reverse angle – from psychology to literature – the concept works brilliantly. By embracing or debating the text premises, by delving into playwright's speleology of the human spirit, shakespeareologists may add an extra dimension to their interpretation. Such discourses may bewilder potential academic purists and enchanted classroom audience alike.

Finally, with its gently raconteur tone, *Psychology According to Shakespeare* can serve as both a stimulating academic study and a comforting bedside companion for the more demanding reader.

**REVIEW of *Flannery O'Connor's Manhattan*,
Katheryn Krotzer Laborde, Fordham University Press,
New York, 2024 (208 pp. Also available as an eBook.)**

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Flannery O'Connor's Manhattan, by Katheryn Krotzer Laborde, seems to be a book like no other. In part a memoir, in part a biography, and in part a reference work, it is at the core a minutely annotated and contextualized scholarly account of Flannery O'Connor's five address books, focusing on those contacts that had their addresses located in New York City, or – more precisely – in Manhattan. When approached with attention to detail, and put in larger contexts, the address books become a valuable resource able “to toss light on previously unexplored avenues of [Flannery O'Connor's] life, such as the Southern midcentury writer's time in, and connections to, New York City” (xiv): the place important for the experiences it provided, but also, for a writer, for being “the heart of the publishing world” (4).

O'Connor lived in New York for several months in 1949. The stay followed her departure from the Yaddo Artist Colony in Saratoga Springs in March 1949, and ended in August of that year, when she moved in as a boarder with her friends, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald – whom she met in New York – to their house in Connecticut. Broadening the view a little, this was part of the writer's precious period of independence, after she graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1948 and was awarded a place at Yaddo to continue work on her first book, *Wise Blood*, and before the time when her deteriorating health forced her to return to Georgia from the Fitzgeralds, to live with her mother, the finality of the move confirmed when she asked the Fitzgeralds to send her the belongings that she kept at their home, in 1952. While accounted for in her biographies, O'Connor's 1949 stay in New York has not been given much scholarly attention. Katheryn Krotzer Laborde's book fills in this gap, firmly anchoring her work in O'Connor's published and unpublished correspondence, biographies and other secondary sources. Thanks to the structure of the book, which will be discussed below, and Laborde's engaging writing style, the work never becomes a dry

listing of people and places and remains throughout a rich and highly readable account of interwoven locations – and lives.

The five address books are part of the holdings of the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia; they were acquired, together with letters, from the Mary Flannery O'Connor's Charitable Trust in 2014. In the Preface, subtitled "In search of Flannery's Manhattan", Laborde writes how in 2016 she visited the Library aiming to study O'Connor's newly acquired letters from Iowa, and how instead, in a life-changing moment, she shifted her attention to the address books. What followed was her search for "Flannery's Manhattan": studying the entries from the address books, as well as visiting New York in 2016, 2017 and 2019 and walking in Flannery's footsteps there.

The Introduction, subtitled "The Tour Begins", features first an imaginary tour around the most significant places of Flannery O'Connor's Manhattan. It carries more or less overt references to O'Connor's life and works. The presence of an imagined guide who leads the tour allows for the inclusion of further details from O'Connor's life, as does the brief section "Flannery O'Connor 101", which places her stay in New York in the general context of her biography – should there be a reader not acquainted with it before reaching for the book. The Introduction, next, in addition to explaining the structure of the book, also describes the address books themselves as artefacts and, collating and juxtaposing information of various kinds – the work of a scholar-detective, many examples of which can be found also elsewhere in the book – it attempts to date and correlate them.

Part I of the book, entitled simply "New York City", offers a narrative account of O'Connor's visits and stays there. Of course, the most significant was her stay in Manhattan, which she began in March 1949 and which came to a close with the end of August of that year. Yet, as it appears, she first visited the city, including Manhattan, on two brief summer occasions in 1943, before starting the junior year at Georgia State College for Women in her hometown of Milledgeville. This is described in Chapter 1 of the book, "The Education of Mary Flannery O'Connor". Chapter 2, "City Life", offers an account of the time when she either lived in Manhattan before moving to the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut, or when stayed close to New York City, which made it possible for her to pay short visits there. These close-by stays included O'Connor's time at the Yaddo Artists and Writers Colony in Saratoga Springs (from June to

July 1948, and from September 1948 to February 1949), and then, after living in Manhattan in 1949, the time that she spent as a boarder at the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut (began in autumn 1949; involving travel – notably short trips to New York, and long stays in Georgia; and coming to a definitive end in 1952). Chapter 3 describes O'Connor's visit to Manhattan in May 1955, which she undertook in connection with the publication of her second book, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (such is also the title of this chapter). Chapter 4, "Lourdes Bound", contains an account of her stay in Manhattan in 1958 as part of the pilgrimage that Flannery, a devout Catholic, made with her mother to Lourdes, on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to St. Bernadette Soubirous. As her health deteriorated, this turned out to be the last time that Flannery visited Manhattan – although she continued to travel, mostly in connection with the public talks and readings that she gave at many locations. Chapter 5, "New York, O'Connor, and Lee", is devoted to the correspondence between her and Maryat Lee, a New-York based playwright whom she met in 1956, who on numerous occasions invited Flannery to visit New York, but each time Flannery declined or evaded her invitation. In 1963 she also declined the invitation by *Esquire* to a party held to honour the authors published in the magazine's July issue. As Laborde poignantly writes at this point, to close this chapter and Part I of the book, "(...) the glitz and the glamour of such an event did not appeal to O'Connor. It never did, just as the fast pace of the New York lifestyle never appealed to her. She had been to Manhattan, had lived in Manhattan and, in the end, couldn't be bothered. Her sights were set on bigger things. Bigger, even, than New York City" (50). In 1964, after long struggle with lupus, Flannery O'Connor died.

Part II, "The Listings", contains richly annotated and cross-referenced entries for all O'Connor's Manhattan-based contacts that can be found in the five address books. Laborde's writing is never tedious, but as if further to avoid any danger of tediousness, the three chapters with alphabetically organized general listings (6, "A through G"; 8, "H through N", and 10, "O through Z") are separated with two themed chapters: 7, "Writers and Other Artists", and 9, "Three Correspondents". Among the writers and artists listed and annotated in Chapter 7 there are the playwright Maryat Lee, and the painters Margaret Sutton and Clifford Wright. Chapter 9 discusses three Manhattan-based fans of O'Connor's prose, and writers themselves, who reached out to her and with whom she decided to correspond afterwards: Crandell Price, Beverly Brunson,

and Fred Darsey. The persons listed and annotated in the themed chapters are also included in the chapters with general listings.

After Acknowledgements, the book has an Appendix in which the names of persons and businesses listed and annotated in the preceding sections of the book are organized geographically, according to the parts of Manhattan in which they resided. Finally, the scholarly apparatus of Abbreviations, Notes, Bibliography and a general Index follows. The book includes several illustrations: it opens with an outline map of Manhattan with some of the most significant locations marked, and then, in the chapters, there are a number of reproductions of pages from the address books, as well as a reproduction of a cartoon drawn by Flannery.

Flannery O'Connor's Manhattan has been published by Fordham University Press, New York, as part of the Studies in the Catholic Imagination: The Flannery O'Connor Trust Series, with four books included in the series to date.

Katheryn Krotzer Laborde is writer of creative non-fiction and a scholar, and her both fields of activity show – to her contribution's advantage – in the reviewed study. To date, she has authored three non-fiction books, including *Flannery O'Connor's Manhattan*. She is a professor of English at Xavier University in Louisiana. Because of the mixture of genres that she employs in *Flannery O'Connor's Manhattan*, her writing style, as well as the comprehensiveness of the scholarly apparatus used, the book is an accessible and informative gateway to Flannery O'Connor's network of Manhattan-based contacts and, through this, to her life, especially as many of the contacts discussed in the book remained important to O'Connor long after she visited New York for the last time. One can only hope that also the other, non-Manhattan-based contacts from the address books will be examined in the future in an equally engaging and informative publication.

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.1233

Terminology throughout History. A discipline in the making,
edited by Kara Warburton and John Humbley, John
Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam /
Philadelphia, 2025 (678)

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Terminology throughout History. A discipline in the making, edited by Kara Warburton and John Humbley, is the 24th volume in the acclaimed John Benjamins series *Terminology and Lexicography Research and Practice*. The focus this time is on the history of terminological thought, practice and research.

The editors of this book, with its emphasis on disciplinary establishment, aimed to trace the history of terminology up to the twentieth century, leaving for another publishing opportunity the significant contributions of megacorpora, artificial intelligence, and other modern technological achievements. They do mention the potential of terminology in aid of artificial intelligence systems in view of terminology's preparedness for semantically structured knowledge representation (21), thus envisaging a bright future for this field.

The introduction, apart from providing a summary of the individual contributions, revisits the question of the status of terminology as a scientific discipline. The authors/editors, perhaps too cautiously, begin by quoting criticisms of terminology as a discipline, but also state more optimistically that "if it is not yet a fully-fledged discipline, as the 31 chapters of this volume attest, it certainly has the ambition to become one" (2).

The 31 articles, or chapters, that follow were written by a total of 63 scholars. They are divided into three sections. The first is titled *Early history* and accordingly explores practical and pretheoretical endeavours in terminology from antiquity to the nineteenth century. As the editors aptly note, terms were not called terms then and the concept and lexical unit 'terminology' did not exist. However, glossaries of what would today be recognised as terms were published and there were scholars reflecting on the relationship between language and knowledge. To shed more light on those beginnings, individual chapters in the first section delve into terminology in the Roman empire, developments in scientific naming

in the Middle Ages in France (with an emphasis on vernacular equivalents to Graeco-Latin terms) and work towards nomenclatures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, also predominantly in France. The nineteenth century sets the time frame for several chapters, discussing the evolution of names of clouds, expounding on Charles Peirce's views of language in philosophy and presenting a detailed analysis of the surprisingly modern terminographic approach of Heinrich Paasch.

Part 2, *Developments in theory and methodology*, traces major approaches to terminology science and terminology work that have emerged over the last century or so. It begins with an article about international languages and knowledge communication, followed by a chapter about E. Wüster. Then, there are articles exploring terminology scholarship in particular countries or regions, namely the former Czechoslovakia (Prague School), Soviet Union, Canada, France, Spain, Mexico, the Nordic countries, Lithuania, and African countries, with separate chapters in between them addressing socioterminology and terminology standardization. The focus in Part 2 is on theoretical developments potentially of significance for the entire community of terminology researchers, while national developments in terminology practice and terminology science are generally dealt with in Part 3. Still, many of the contributions concerned with particular countries or regions combine summaries of developments in terminological thought with reports on terminological activities over the decades.

Part 3, *Terminology the world over*, brings reports from countries as diverse as Indonesia and North Macedonia, South Africa and Wales, Arab countries (collectively) and France, and European Union-level activities at the IATE. Each report has a different focus reflecting the many facets of the creation and dissemination of terminology in specific historical and cultural contexts: shaping national terminology in a colony and then a newly-independent country where a neighbouring state uses essentially the same language (Indonesia), path towards autonomy from a politically intertwined and somewhat more potent neighbour (Slovakia), a unique multilingual context (South Africa), or efforts to (re)create terminology in a Celtic language in the United Kingdom (Wales). These chapters may readily serve as tutorials and/or forewarnings for terminologists working in similar settings.

Equally interesting, though regrettably absent, would be a list of countries that were not granted a separate article. In the *Introduction*, the editors apologetically note that certain articles "could not be included", acknowledging the

work of terminologists from the United Kingdom and the United States, Ireland, Austria (but, in the latter case, there is the chapter on E. Wüster, and the work of Infoterm is presented at length in the chapter on standardisation), and Belgium and the Netherlands. The omission of Belgium unfortunately means that R. Temmerman's sociocognitive terminology is not showcased, which is disappointing given that T. Cabré's and P. Faber's approaches are given ample space in the article about Spanish terminological research and that Prof. Temmerman's views are referenced across multiple chapters. Missing from the volume are also contributions by Japanese and Chinese authors.

In this context, it is a little disappointing, too, to also note the absence of an article about terminological thought in Poland. Like other central European countries, Poland can boast a terminological narrative spun by a host of major terminologists. A possible starting point could be the wide acceptance and use of borrowed terms until the nineteenth century, followed by work towards creating national terminologies throughout the nineteenth century in the vernacular of a partitioned country, the need to eliminate the many terms borrowed from the languages of the partitioners (i.e. Russia, Prussia and Austria) when Poland regained independence in 1918, limited access to Western scientific achievements in the Socialist era until 1989 and coping with a massive influx of Anglicisms since then.

There is an index towards the end of the book, and one can see there how certain terms are distributed quite evenly throughout the volume, to mention *onomasiology*, *terminology/language planning*, *concept orientation* and some others. An electronic copy naturally makes it possible to locate instances of a particular word or phrase, and this activity can turn out to be very educational for readers of *Terminology throughout History...* A quick contextual analysis of a few key words, such as *systematic*, *onomasiological* or *standardisation*, will reveal some recurring themes in the national/regional terminology accounts: how, historically, terminology issues first became relevant to domain specialists rather than linguists; how those specialists set great store by ensuring monosemy and, more generally, the stability of term meanings and forms; and how in many of the localities described there have been controversies over whether it should be domain specialists or linguists that take the lead in terminology work. While many of the authors in this volume can be linked to ISO's Technical Committee 37, the inclination towards prescriptive activities in terminology is probably more than a nod towards this focus of Wüsterian thought, mirroring, as the narratives

show, the needs of domain specialists. Efforts to describe the non-ideal discourse realities of terminology use that stop at description are apparently not regarded as highly as actions to eliminate what is wrong.

In the words of the late Professor Jerzy Lukszyn of the University of Warsaw, the ultimate goal of terminology research and terminology work is to improve specialized communication. Under this philosophy, terminology-related activities are a prescriptive enterprise, but the outcomes of corpus-based descriptive studies of terminology in discourse may well serve the same overarching goal.

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.0384

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