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Finding Liminality in Literature: The Decentered Voice and Its Power to Rewrite Cultural Narratives

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Finding Liminality in Literature: The Decentered Voice and Its Power to Rewrite Cultural Narratives

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Abstract

This thesis will dissect the flaws within the current Western culture narrative and how specific works of literature have the ability to challenge and subvert this outdated narrative, teaching society to embrace and empathize with both marginalized and oppressed human and non-human communities. It will address how the decentered voices within the literature I have selected create liminal experiences for readers, blurring subjectivity and eradicating the cultural boundaries and binary oppositions that have kept us trapped and blinded for decades.

My first chapter will explore the psychological functions of the current cultural narrative, specifically Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal as a consequence of modernity. I will then utilize Hutcheon's understanding of the power of the decentered perspective, one I will argue is able to shatter the hyperreal fog humanity has fallen prey to.

My next two chapters will address specific texts that possess the decentered perspective and the abilities to rework the current cultural narrative and redefine human existence. My second chapter will turn to the past, specifically the Victorian literary catalog, where I will analyze both Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, both novels that center on the voices of oppressed and seemingly powerless women with liminal identities. My third chapter will then shift back to the modern age to look at Dillard's "Total Eclipse" and Jamie's "Aurora," both creative non-fiction essays from authors who guide their readers through mysterious and unexplainable encounters with the natural world and establish a liminal reading experience, one which minimizes the human perspective and amplifies that of the non-human.

I will conclude this thesis with a discussion of how society should attempt to go about this cultural shift and who should be entrusted with the responsibility to initiate and spread awareness of a liminal existence.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of human existence, we have attempted to manipulate and control the world we live in[1]. Because we possess a capacity for logic and reason, we see ourselves as the driving, authoritative force of life on this planet, which modern societies tend to see as our own: something we have a natural right to possess and own, as if it were made for us. We pride ourselves on our abilities to create art and beauty; yet, as a society, we have failed to learn from our own creations, falling prey to consumerism and the veneer of technological "progress." Instead, we attempt to use our talents to rule over one another and, though unsuccessfully, over the planet we call home. Our human desire for mastery and control, which is directly intensified and reinforced by culture, is getting in the way of seeing ourselves as a part of the whole of the world. This perhaps naturally egocentric feature of our humanity has led us to develop a constant recycle of cultural constructs that keep us trapped in our own simulations of reality. In order to break the cycle, we have to fight culture with a rewriting of culture, a culture that reconceptualizes the human species as of the same importance as the non-human. If the COVID-19 global pandemic and the increasing damage climate change has inflicted has taught us anything, it is that there are flaws in our current cultural narrative—which is an entanglement of anthropocentrism and modernity[2]—and we cannot hide behind them anymore. In order to render a new narrative, one that accurately shines light on human flaws and imperfections, we need to implement a narrative that encourages empathy, compassion, and introspection.

In John Green's newest book, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, he defines the Anthropocene—a term originally coined by chemist Paul J. Crutzen and marine science

[1] We, meaning the collective humanity for all time.
[2] The cultural belief that human beings are the central or most important entity in the universe. This thesis is in agreement with Amitav Ghosh's argument that the "Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our commonsense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general" (9). When a reference is made in this thesis to the current cultural narrative, it implies one of Anthropocentrism, modernity, capitalism, and patriarchy.

specialist Eugene F. Stoermer—as "the current geologic age, in which humans have profoundly reshaped the planet and its biodiversity" (4). Green reflects on many aspects of the Anthropocene and how it has framed human identity. In the chapter entitled "Bonneville Salt Flats," he addresses the complexities of human identity while recalling a trip he and his wife made out to a town called Wendover, which happens to straddle the borders of Utah and Nevada. Green's main focus in this chapter is his wife, Sarah, and how the two of them have found contentment and enchantment in one another's presence. While he and his wife are out exploring the beauty of the majestic salt flats, he wanders away from her and stares out at the natural landscape on his own. He begins to feel overwhelmed in the presence of this indescribable natural phenomenon and is overcome by an incredible bout of loneliness. However, when he returns to his wife's side and views the world with the presence, support, and love that both give him, he has an epiphany about the world: "Our gazes entwined. I felt calmer. I was thinking about the people I used to be, and how they fought and scrapped and survived for moments like this one. Looking with Sarah, the salt flats seemed to change — they no longer had the menace of indifference about them" (190). In this moment, Green experiences the harmony and understanding that comes with a state of being that is central to the argument of this thesis. That state is called liminality, meaning a sense of balance and unity between the human and non-human. This term was originally coined by folklorist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 and used in the context of rites of passage; liminality for him was defined as a quality of ambiguity and disorientation. And, in a way, my translation of it is still in the context of a type of rite of passage, one that all humans need to embark on in order to find a crucial sense of compassion and empathy lacking within us. In Green's epiphanic moment described above, he reaches a state of mind that exists on the threshold of the need for human connection but also the need for the indifference and enchantment of the non-human. He

came to recognize that with the help of a human companion, he had the courage to accept that which he could not and would not ever truly grasp—perhaps because all that he needs to ground himself in existence is by his side and out in front of him, he's no longer afraid of the unknown. As humans, we have an innate desire to define our own identities; however, what we don't seem to understand is that every single experience, person, place we come into contact with is what really defines who we are. Identity is constantly in flux; it is fluid and abstract and always shifting based on the varying stages of our lives. Even Green describes our identity as made up of a catalogue of selves: "[Y]ou are your current self, but you are also all the selves you used to be, the ones you grew out of but can't get rid of" (188). We are constantly internally negotiating the intricacies of our human selves in conjunction with the current cultural narrative and the mystifying, ever-perplexing natural world. In the most mundane terms, it is like trying to fit a square peg into a circular hole, a desperate search for the unattainable total control and understanding of our existence. So, the question becomes, *why* do our identities matter to us so much? Why can't we all just *be*?

Finding balance in one's sense of self—or, finding liminality, which is a concept I will be using and developing for the purposes of this thesis—can allow for growth and acceptance of our finitude, which arguably preconditions our capacities for compassion and empathy. We only need to actively and consciously search for this balance in our daily lives. Fortunately for us, we can find many examples of liminality—or, characters and voices who blur the lines of human and non-human identity—within the history of literature. The stories that we have shared since the beginning of our existence can be the vessel we use to find the balance we need to finally just exist. The human imagination is, arguably, what makes our species so remarkable and seemingly dominant. Literature and art are an extension of that imagination: they allow us to explore,

escape, contemplate, and critique the human experience, entire existence, and even coexistence. However, they both also expose human flaws and emotions, the ones we hide from and keep dormant out of fear, the ones we finally need to face head on.

My thesis will juxtapose texts from two different eras of the human experience, the Victorian and the Modern. Both eras are impacted by monumental human progression and change; they're also driven by cultural issues involving class, gender, religion, and science. They are both going through a reinvention of sorts and allow for voices previously ignored or powerless to come to the surface of society. I will argue that texts—such as *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Tess of the D'Urberville's* by Thomas Hardy, "Total Eclipse" by Annie Dillard, and "Aurora" by Kathleen Jamie—are examples of the type of literature that focuses on "decentered others or situations," meaning situations, voices or stories that exist on the fringes of dominant cultural narrative. In other words, narratives that bring to light those voices and characters who have been repressed and suppressed by oppressive hierarchical structures. These "decentered situations" have the power to subvert modern capitalist ideology—the driving force behind our societal division in the forms of economic inequality, exploitation of the workforce, and the erosion of human rights—and teach us how to embrace all beings as equals, both human and non-human. While Brontë and Hardy focus on the everyday lives of two women from the lowest classes of Victorian society, Dillard and Jamie push nature into the forefront of their writing. All four center the narrative of the "other" and force readers to reexamine their understanding of our relationship with those "others." Reading literature from a variety of voices—especially those silenced and hidden in the face of our current societal constructs—may shed light on our own identities and natures. They may teach us that we can stop searching for what we should be— and to accept ourselves for who we actually are.

Political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett, in her book *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, advocates for humanity to engage in "intra-species crossings" whether in person or through the interaction with literature. She argues that these experiences can rehabilitate enchantment with our world and the beings in it, and in turn, help motivate more ethical human behavior: "My wager is that if you engage certain crossings under propitious conditions, you might find that their dynamism revivifies your wonder at life, their morphings inform your reflections upon freedom, their charm energizes your social conscience, and their flexibility stretches your moral sense of the possible" (32). I also wager that engagement with nature does "revivif[y]," "energiz[e]," and "[stretch]" the human mind, and I would further argue that each of the four texts that will be discussed in the following chapters offer the "dynamism," "morphings," and "charm" Bennett refers to. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum claims we need to cultivate a moral society, and to do this, we need both classic and contemporary literature. In "Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education," Nussbaum discusses the creation of the "world citizen," a person who has "an ability to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern" (2140). As humans, we have quite a difficult time understanding the world that exists outside of ourselves and our present time. Nussbaum also argues not just that we shouldn't simply read books that come from a variety of cultures, just so we might come to the facile conclusion "that we are all alike under our skin" (2149). Instead, it is the fact that literature teaches us that our own life experiences—as well as our linguistic and cultural environments—actually create who we are. That said, it is the vessel that "can transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another", allowing us to gain a newfound "comprehension" on the various forces and factors that compose human identity (2149). This

new knowledge will in turn develop "an expansion of sympathies that real life cannot cultivate sufficiently" without the help of literature (2149). These "sympathies" she refers to may expand our understanding of not only ourselves, but other beings as well: each one of us experiences life differently from the rest, and these experiences are what lead to how we perceive the people and the world around us.

Unfortunately, our modern societal and cultural environments—much of which has become separated from natural environments—can hinder our ability to reach this awareness. We have become consumed by our technology and the digital realms that allow us to escape from reality, which presents an uphill battle in the fight for a balanced, or more liminal existence. Nussbaum claims that in order to break out of this culture-induced coma, we need to spend time studying the arts of both the past and the present, specifically through the literary lens. She quotes Aristotle when discussing the effects literature can have on a society: "[L]iterature shows us 'not something that has happened, but the kind of thing that might happen.' This knowledge of possibilities is an especially valuable resource in political life" (Nussbaum 2142). World literature that depicts a wide variety of different settings and perspectives helps us to develop more open-minded personal and political mindsets. This type of ethical lifestyle is essential to the creation of a successful, just, and harmonious democracy. Ultimately, this thesis argues that both past and present literature that brings the "decentered other" to the forefront of our awareness can used as a tool to help humanity find liminality, which may also help us to consciously accept, perhaps even embrace our kinship with other beings, human and non-human alike, an alternative to the hate and division plaguing our current moment.

Chapter 1 Hyperreality and Decentered Situations

In the simplest of terms, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal is the realm in which reality goes to die. According to Baudrillard, the hyperreal is humankind's new reality: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept…. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (*Simulation and Simulacra* 1). These "models" Baudrillard refers to are the symbols or simulations humanity has created to represent the real, like Disneyland, Santa Claus, or social media. He argues that these models serve as "space[s] of the regeneration of the imaginary" and are just like "waste-treatment plants" because, just as we "must recycle waste", these models allow us to purge or excrete our wasteful "dreams, the phantasms, the historical, fairylike, legendary imaginary" (13). They are a perversion of reality, of the reality of our human existence; they represent a realm where human limitation, unsettling emotions, and mortality are eradicated or rendered invisible. Ultimately, this perversion masks actual reality, making humanity feel comforted and numb. We derive pleasure from inhabiting these models because they create a culture that is none other than a manifestation of our attempted escape from the "uncanny"—or, in other words, the awareness of humankind's unavoidable finitude and seeming purposelessness. This false attempt at escape originates with the birth of capitalism and the cultural desire for more than what we have and more than what we are. Humanity has defined its existence and sense of purpose by the "more" we are in search of, which ultimately leads us on a never-ending search to fill an unfillable void. The problem is that these models we have created do nothing except allow us to keep pretending that our death isn't inevitable and create the false pretense that we, as a species, are somehow the center of the universe, in control of all. As a society, we struggle to make rational sense of our

existence and to come to terms with the fact that, when it comes down to it, we are and will always be just *a part* of the universe—not the sole species that rules it.

As the Age of Enlightenment came to an end and humanity shifted into the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, we became obsessed with constantly "progressing", without any real care for how this human "progress" might affect the natural world. This drive toward progress is none other than a security blanket meant to shield us from the innate feeling that we don't truly have a full or accurate understanding of the "meaning" of our existence. We think that if we can keep creating new inventions, conquering new feats, and owning more things, then maybe we will finally fill the void that threatens to swallow us whole. Ultimately, this obsession with human "progress" is what created the heavily entangled partnership between modernity and capitalism. We are under the illusion that capitalism is the only ideality associated with reason, but it's not. In an attempt to fight against our fears around lacking identity, individuality, and purpose, Baudrillard claims we have "cross[ed] into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth" (*Simulation and Simulacra* 2). He argues that Western civilization will never enter the realm of the real or come to terms with our finitude because our identity is forever rooted within the realm of the hyperreal. Furthermore, he asserts that we will continue to live in a realm that "deter[s] every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (2). However, I wish to contend that in order for the hyperreal to exist, the real must also exist. While Baudrillard would argue the "real" has been eliminated thus impossible to return to, I disagree and maintain that humanity possesses the tools to reestablish reality. If humans have the ability to envisage a collective identity rooted in the hyperreal, then we also possess the ability to alter the conception of our identity into one that is able to decipher the

difference between the real and the imaginary—or the true and the false. I also contend that we can resurrect the real if we face it head on and shift our cultural narrative concerning what it is or means to be human to that of literature. Instead of relying on models or simulations to guide or define us, humanity needs to appreciate literary culture because it has the "more" that we're all searching for: it has the ability to short-circuit the hyperreal and can help spur reflection on the ways our capitalist ideology has isolated us and made us feel separate from not only each other, but also from the natural world. Because humankind's identity is rooted in our capitalistic culture, the constant drive towards the newer and the better camouflages the people, places, emotions, and natural beings that our identity should be rooted in. While Baudrillard would argue that capitalism in itself is just a hyperreal re-representation, I again would disagree; instead, I contend that our cultural values spurred on by capitalism are a driving force behind why we are unable to escape the hyperreal realm. We need to displace these economic notions of cultural production, escape the simulations and models we have created to stimulate this current culture, and shift our focus to the now, to compassion, to the real. Literature has the ability to expand the human mind and its scale of thinking, disrupt ideology and thereby unsettle, thus bringing us out of the electronically-induced coma we have yielded to.

To be clear, I wish to argue that the concept of hyperreality isn't uniquely American, but Baudrillard's hyperreal does originate from his experiences living in the United States. According to Baudrillard in his book titled, *America*, "[t]he Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model" (29). For him, American culture is constantly trying to define itself, trying to nail down an identity that doesn't exist. Because America was built on the myth of the American Dream—this belief that if we just work

hard enough and do more, we can become something more than what we are—hyperreality seems to be much more pronounced in the United States. Baudrillard claims that "America is neither dream nor reality. It is hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were achieved" (29). There exists an American mentality that we are the epicenter of the globe—the most powerful, most talented, and richest country, the place everyone else wishes they could live. It's as if we wear a cloak of invincibility—that no matter how much many of our actual lives might not reflect it, we still see ourselves above all others simply because we're "American." After spending many years examining this version of Western culture and witnessing the American egocentrism, Baudrillard became convinced that Americans have become consumed by our own technological advancements and capitalistically-charged cultural values because they provide us with the distraction we need to avoid accepting our own finitude. In doing so, we search for the empty happiness and fulfillment in simulations and imitations instead of reality. Because "[t]he unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, or a beyond or a within, it is that of a hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 142). Technology opens up a limitless, metaphorical (or virtual) world because it allows us to manipulate and alter our reality in a way that humanity has never been capable of before; it allows us to escape the boundaries of human capability and grants us newfound power over our world. This leads us towards a desire to strive for the unobtainable: immortality and total control. We find a false sense of this control in our technological advancements because we created them—we determined their existence, like gods. With them, we're able to create imaginary worlds, personalities, and narratives that flatter us; basically, we can create whatever our unique imaginations can dream up. More importantly, technology also diminishes or erases reality, meaning it can aid the collective

repression of images, concepts, and emotions humanity doesn't want to experience or feel. We have begun to utilize our technology to avoid anything that even remotely reminds us of our feelings of emptiness, meaninglessness, and our finite existence. It numbs us and gives us a false sense of security, continuously keeping us blinded to the reality of our own existence, coexistence with the natural world—not to mention our dependence upon it. The hyperreal is this numbing and blinding realm, and in it, the simulation becomes more real than actual reality. "[T]oday this "material" production," or our technological and cultural creations and consumption, "is that of the hyperreal itself. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production," or real human stories, emotions, and experiences, "but it is no longer anything but its scaled-down refraction" (23). We have shaved away all the reminders of our mortality and glimpses of human error and weakness within our cultural narrative. We are now just a paled, drugged, and numbed shell of a species because we rely on the wrong cultural armor. Instead of hiding out in hyperreality, we need to refill the void we've created for ourselves with a new narrative, one that centers around literature and rewrites our conceptions of both ourselves and our relationships with the non-human world.

Some critics, such as Mark Nunes in his article, "Jean Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity," comment on how the internet is the driving force of hyperreality. The internet allows humanity to "replac[e] the one world with possible worlds" and "offers both the seductions and subductions of a postmodern 'world'" (315)—perhaps meaning the hypnotizing images of what we could be or could accomplish and the fantastical and mythological dimensions that lack any correlation to reality. It's almost as if the endless possibilities provided by the internet beguile humanity and deflect our attention away from the real world that we actually need in order to survive. We no longer see our real world with awe or

wonder because we have allowed our capitalistic values to drive us; and in an effort to constantly "progress" and amass as much as we possibly can, we have successfully avoided dealing with what we don't understand. That "progress" has allowed us to create a cultural narrative that instills within us a false sense of power, one which Baudrillard would say "[fulfills]" humanity's "modern drive to master the world" (316). Perhaps deep down, we know we will never be able to fully control the natural world, and maybe "[we abandon that] world for one that can be fully realized and fully encompassed: a world of transparency and immediacy": in other words, a technologically-based, hyperreal one (316). The natural world—no matter how much we might think we know about it—will always be a mystery to us, a discomfiting reminder of the fact that we aren't fully in control of our existence. We consume everything in sight and bury our heads in our jobs in hopes that we will eventually feel in control of our own fate, but we have failed to realize the impossibility of this task. Instead, the hyperreal world has become our new playground: it allows us to explore a boundaryless terrain that will never fully satisfy our human needs and desires, yet it mimics the appeal, reiterating and feeding belief in our godlike mastery of the world. We have succumbed to this virtual reality because it fulfills our compulsion to control every aspect of our existence and provides us with the false hope that we can possibly escape our inevitable death. Because an ultimate comprehension of our real world will forever be just out of our reach, we flock to the hyperreal in hopes of feeding our appetite for complete control. There is no waiting, no confusion, no pain, no death in hyperreality; we can surpass our own finitude. The hyperreal serves both our innate, animalistic need to survive and prosper, and our capitalistic, cultural need to progress forward and forge our own supposedly individualistic paths.

While the idea of "limitless terrain" might seem appealing, Baudrillard, as do I, would argue that the hyperreal realm is barren and bleak. Instead of simply providing humanity with the ability to socialize and communicate on a universal level with all communities and cultures of humankind, the hyperreal is so boundless and immediate that communication almost becomes entirely irrelevant. With the hyperreal, we have the ability to create and manipulate our realities into anything we desire, and that innate need to connect and build relationships with people is temporarily filled with whatever fantastical universe we fall under the spell of in hyperreality. We have become hypnotized by these delusional and artificially concocted human connections and in turn, whether we're aware of it or not, feel even more lost and alone. Even though hyperreality serves as a conjunction, intertwining reality with simulation, it does not supply us with the balance necessary to reunite us with the natural world nor restore our purpose in coexisting with it. Additionally, it also fails to re-establish our human to human connection. Baudrillard even contends that the simulations and hyperreal worlds we surround ourselves with are actually more dangerous to our existence than the literal violence we inflict on one another: "Transgression and violence are less serious because they only contest the distribution of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 20). This, in turn, makes humans experience a false sense of control or "a simulation of power," rendering us even more vulnerable to the allure of the hyperreal. To a certain extent, it even makes us oblivious to the real violence we inflict upon each other and the non-human world. Ultimately, Baudrillard seems to present the idea that we as a species will become so lost in simulations that we will cease to exist altogether.

William Bogard, a sociologist who studied Baudrillard's challenge on sociological theory, finds some truth in Baudrillard's analysis of the erasure of the real in modern society, but, like myself, also struggles to believe that humanity has no weapons against the hyperreal and simulations. Specifically, Bogard disagrees with Baudrillard's argument that "care, however highly we regard this virtue, is sacrificed in order to oppose an enemy for whom care no longer has any meaning. At best, one can only challenge the present order—the simulated order—with a simulated indifference" (13). To say that "care" is what should be sacrificed to attack this simulated enemy seems to go against one of the most innate human qualities: our compassion. As this thesis will argue, indifference of any kind, simulated or not, would only perpetuate the existence of the hyperreal and further stunt humanity's, arguably, most precious and unique capability. Ultimately, Baudrillard has settled on the idea that humanity can never escape the simulations we have created; however, Bogard finds it highly disturbing "that an *entire* tradition of social theorizing and critique is incapable of refining or modifying its tactics to challenge the present order of things" (13). Instead, just as I intend to argue, Bogard thinks that "ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, the sociology of emotions, and the various branches of feminist sociology… [all] have great and still largely untapped possibilities for disrupting the coopting power of mass mediational society" (140). These concepts, fields of thought, allow for us to redefine our human identity and find balance amongst our own species and amongst a world indifferent to our existence. Immersing our minds in the emotions and experiences of those different from ourselves will open us up to the powers of empathy and compassion and will create an environment where all living beings will not only coexist in peace, but will thrive.

When accepting our occupation within the hyperreal, Bogard argues that we will also come to accept the origin of this downfall. According to Bogard, if we're "to follow

[Baudrillard],” society must come to terms with “what began in the eighteenth century as a project to realize the Utopian ideal of a perfect society,” and continued “in the nineteenth century…[by] scientific engineers of sociology, has [now become]...a Utopia of ‘personalized’ consumption, leisure, and artificial comforts” in the modern age (11). Humanity has been constantly recycling its attempts at perfection and fulfillment. We choose to continuously hide in our simulations instead of turning our attention to the voices that don’t meet the standards of the “Utopian ideal” or “perfect society” deemed appropriate by culture, who might help us navigate toward the fulfillment we so desperately seek. If today’s society chose to study and compare the minority and marginalized voices of this age with those of the now, we will see that not all back then were blinded by this obsession with consumerism and human domination. Specifically, some Victorian authors actually caught onto the flaws within this cultural ideology and attempted to bring to light society’s muted voices, the same weapons Bogard and many others champion in the fight against the hyperreal. Authors such as the Brontë sisters, Hardy, Dickens, Eliot as well as many others of the time highlighted all of the lower branches of both social and natural hierarchy in an effort to challenge the status quo and quell the human need for more.

The recognition of this connection to our past further proves that hyperreality and this drive for more are not just an American issue, but a human one. While he obviously considers America the epicenter of the hyperreal, in his essay entitled, “The Precession of Simulacra,” Baudrillard also argues that this hyperreality we have created for ourselves began with humanity’s creation of religion. Humanity attempted “this omnipotence of simulacra” or this “effacing God from the consciousness of men” (1485). Because we as a species are plagued by the desire to understand our purpose and what led to our creation, we have long attempted to develop icons and beliefs that represent the divine. According to Baudrillard, these efforts to

recreate only further distorted our comprehension of our existence because without truly coming into contact with the divine, we are solely promoting our own human perspective. We see an extension of this belief as far back as Longinus' "On Sublimity," where he discusses how humanity's ability to create literature and art deems us worthy of "god-like" praise. He argues that "sublimity raises us towards the spiritual greatness of god" (161). While it is evident that the sublime in literature or the arts has the ability to uplift us and can show us beauties we have never been privy to in this world, we will still never possess anything remotely close to that of god or the supernatural. This comment from Longinus exposes humanity's narcissistic and egotistical habits of mind, and reveals the old age belief that our human imagination is meant for a divine purpose. Quality literature does not put us on a supernatural or god-like pedestal; instead, it should do the opposite and remind people of our place in comparison to Nature's immense power.

Baudrillard believes that the beginnings of "[a]ll Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation," meaning the moment we started recreating images and symbols to represent our God, we rendered the meaning of him useless and tainted by human imagination. Our God "was reduced to the signs which attest his existence," and he became nothing but "weightless" and "a gigantic simulacrum" ("The Precession of Simulacra" 1486). The inner human desire to put our footprint on every component of the world around us, Baudrillard would say, causes all that we imagine and interact with to recycle into recurring symbols of previous human thought. This process is what initiated the hyperreal for us. We see all that the natural world and existential world as a convoluted version of ourselves, and this is exactly what needs to change in order for humankind to finally pacify our self-inflicted skirmishes with both each other and that which we don't understand. Baudrillard even states that

"[i]t is now a principle of simulation, and not of reality, that regulates social life" amongst humanity, and "[t]here is no longer such a thing as ideology; there are only simulacra" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 120). This "principle of simulation" seems to suggest that our daily lives have become nothing but a constant simulation, and what we once thought was an example of an ever-changing and progressing human culture is really just a regurgitated version of the same age old, human-centric beliefs humanity just can't seem to rid itself of.

Baudrillard argues that the only way to fight against the power of the hyperreal or simulacra "is to reinject the real" into our daily lives and hope that it can "[persuade] us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 22). He seems to have very little faith in humanity actually winning this fight against our simulations, and because of that, other critics see his pessimism as useless and even a deterrent to humanity's cultural rehabilitation. In response to Baudrillard's theoretical approach to hyperreality, N. Katherine Hayles does agree that "the point of simulations is precisely to overcome the limitations of physical existence," and because Western culture has been rooted in unlimited possibility or the American Dream, "we are fascinated with simulations." However, when it comes to borders between simulation and reality, which Baurdillard claims no longer exist, Hayles has a different argument, one which I am inclined to agree with. In her article, entitled, "The Borders of Madness," she states:

> The borders separating simulations from reality are important because they remind us of the limits that make dreams of technological transcendence dangerous fantasies. Hyperreality does not erase these limits, for they exist whether we recognize them or not; it only erases them from our consciousness. Insofar as Baudrillard's claims about

> hyperreality diminish our awareness of these limits, it borders on a madness whose likely end is apocalypse. (322)

In a similar fashion to Bogard, Hayles also finds Baudrillard's doomsday outlook on human society a bit far-fetched. She likens his writing on the age of simulacra to an "implosion metaphor," meaning it "suggests a sudden, violent, and irreversible change" from reality to hyperrealism. While Hayles does agree that simulation is visible in many aspects of modern society, she argues that "[w]ithin contemporary culture...simulacra are unevenly dispersed, dominant in some places and scarcely visible at others" (321). She, as well as I, still believe that there are too many voices that exist in our world, both human and non-human, for hyperreality to have completely blurred any and all boundaries between reality and simulation. To say that we are too far gone, that there is no way for us to return to reality and shift our social, political, and cultural mindsets, is to say that we might as well just give up and succumb to our inevitable death. While we should be aware that death is coming for us all and there isn't anything we can do about it, to accept Baudrillard's belief fully would be humanity abandoning both ourselves and the natural world. It would be falling victim to a pointlessness in life entirely, and while we will never truly comprehend the purpose of human existence, I can't accept, and neither should the rest of humankind, that living only in the hyperreal is it.

In order "to reinject the real," as Baudrillard would say, or begin a massive cultural shift away from the hyperreal, society needs to immerse itself in the experiences of the decentered perspective. The decentered perspective, as literary critic Linda Hutcheon calls it, and the decentered situation, as Baudrillard refers to it, are essentially the same concept with one major difference: Baudrillard would of course contend that these voices are none other than hyperreal simulations as well and do not actually exist anymore in reality. Instead, Hutcheon would argue

they represent the marginalized "other" whose voices, life experiences, and stories have been silenced: women, minorities, LGBTQ+, even the non-human natural world—an "other" that has no voice to share its experiences or stories with. These communities have never been at the forefront of human society, have never had the social standing or ability to drive the cultural narrative, meaning they also have not been able to contribute to the simulations and simulacra within our hyperreality. They exist on the outside of "the bourgeois public sphere" or what has always been deemed as the norm in our Western societal constructs. Our culture orbits what Hutcheon refers to as the "homogeneous monolith (that is middle class, male, hetero-sexual, white, Western)" and because this "monolith" is at the center or has always served as the basis of human identity, it has the ability to manipulate and control the social order, placing any and all that differ from it on the outside, decentering them (12). This process is an "assertion of, not centralized sameness, but of decentralized community," that is to say, a community made up of the "haves" and "have nots."(12) Ultimately, this assertion is the basis of human identity in postmodern thought. We think we define ourselves "through difference and specificity," but rather, we reject any difference that falls outside of the current cultural narrative. Instead of embracing our unique identities and accepting the fact that our stories and life experiences will never all be the same or be tied up in a neat, little bow, we allow ourselves to fall into line with the binary oppositions our culture has deemed necessary and appropriate for us to exist within. Because "[d]ifference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion," it becomes a threat to the "homogeneous monolith."(61) Ultimately, in order to fight against or shift the current cultural narrative, we need to allow ourselves to orbit these differences instead and re-enchant ourselves, as Bennett might say, with the simplicity of just coexisting. We need to have numerous "centers" and not just one "homogeneous monolith" that

rules all. In his review of Linda Hutcheon's discussion of "decentering," Hamid Shirvani addresses Hutcheon's belief in "the creation of many postmodern centers as an opportunity for innovation and creativity in art" as well as the fact that "[i]n her view, postmodern art problematizes representation, not [reducing] it to a meaningless simulacra but [calling] attention to the dangers…of the act of representation itself" (Shirvani 293, 295). While this thesis contends that other variations of art outside of the "postmodern" also have the capability to provide "opportunity for innovation and creativity in art" and "problematize representation," it is clear that Hutcheon agrees that shift or a "decentering" is necessary for society to escape the hyperreal. While Hutcheon is clearly aware that our current cultural and artistic production stems from our capitalistic ideologies, Shirvani comments on how successfully she argues that we can utilize this production so that it "merges and rearranges the borders between art and life," and she sees it "as an opportunity to promote a decentered multicultural society" (296). Hutcheon calls this type of art "historiographic meta-fiction," or fiction with the ability to educate on the past, expose major contradictions within human society, and shed light on the decentered perspective. Shirvani also suggests that Hutcheon's ideas differ from critics like Baudrillard because "[a]s a woman, Hutcheon draws more effectively on the attention to difference and the questioning of divisions between public and private…[and] speaks from the standpoint of someone who stands to gain voice and power by postmodern cultural ideologies" (292). Being a woman, or a member of the decentered perspective already, Hutcheon can see what Baudrillard cannot: we have not yet "degenerat[ed] into the 'hyperreal'"; instead, we still have the ability to use art "to call attention to the dangers and possibilities of the act of representation itself" (293). Just like Hutcheon, I too see opportunity, and by utilizing our current and past literature to question, challenge, and deconstruct the existence of our capitalistic ideology, we can outrun the hyperreal

and rebuild our human identity and find the balance, harmony, and fulfillment we as a species have desperately been searching for.

Val Plumwood, in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, agrees with Hutcheon's need to shift the cultural narrative and specifically addresses how we as a society need to go about redefining ourselves. For Plumwood, focusing on our kinship with nature is where we need to begin. She argues that in order to create "centralized sameness" or the equality that Hutcheon was referring to, we need to stop perceiving ourselves and the world around us through the Platonic and Cartesian lens of duality. We cannot see ourselves as "this" or "that," "human" or "non-human," "good" or "evil" because this type of thinking or way of perceiving the world polarizes us and breeds further hate and misunderstanding. Of course, we cannot deny difference because obviously, it exists, but according to Plumwood, we can and need to change how we define ourselves individually and in relation to the natural world. She contends that "we [need to] reconceive ourselves as more animal and embodied, more 'natural'...[and remake] our relations with nature, and beings in nature, on the basis of recognising them not as things but as creative, self-directed, originative others" (124). Once we alter our understanding of who we are and finally accept how much synchronicity actually exists amongst all species on this planet, we will be able to "recognize in the myriad of forms of nature other beings—earth others—whose needs, goals and purposes must, like our own, be acknowledged and respected" (137). The acknowledgement and approval of the decentered other will pave the way for a society built on mutual understanding rather than predetermined judgment.

Plumwood, similarly to Baudrillard, believes that we have become too focused on the mechanical and technological lenses of the world: "Mechanistic views of nature represent the kind of hyperseparation from the other in which the other is treated as alien, a non-self whose

kinship is denied" (137). This cultural outlook on the world creates a rift between all groups, species, others and prevents us from ever truly comprehending how humanity fits into the fabric of existence. Instead of allowing the mechanical to determine the way we perceive the world and our place in it, I agree with Plumwood when she argues that "[t]he ability to apply ethical concepts (for example, respect) to earth others is largely a matter of concept formation and of individuating them in appropriate ways, in terms of discerning others as autonomous intentional systems, rather than in terms of an instrumental and mechanistic system of individuation" (138). This is where literature can fill in the gap; these ethical concepts that Plumwood is referring to, such as compassion, empathy, recognition, and even appreciation, have always existed within our literary catalog, and if implemented in the realm of education and brought to the forefront of daily human life, we might just be able to rewrite the narrative into one that is harmonious or, at the very least, centered around the veneration of the other. In order to fill in the gaps that exist in human identity and find symmetry within our world, we need to read stories that exhibit humanity and nature in conjunction. Plumwood states, "Life in active dialogue with earth others is exhilarating and many dimensional[;…t]he earth other is a being whose company may be fearful or enticing…intimate or indifferent, but whose presence is always more than the nullity and closure of the world presented by mechanism" (139–40). The "more" that we have always been desperately searching for has been in front of us all along in the form of these "decentered others," both human and non-human, or "earth others" as Plumwood calls them. but our fear of the unknown, the different, the painful has driven us to rely on "mechanism" and the fantastical lives we can create with it.

Jane Bennett, would call this "disenchantment" or an inability to see the beauty, wonder, and awe that exists within all of the beings around us, including the non-human ones. She argues

that “disenchantment describes the contemporary condition” and that “modern science and ‘ethically’ oriented religions collaborated in disenchanting the world; they were sources of, even while they proffered solutions for, the problem of the meaningless that haunts us” (*The Enchantment of*... 32, 62). This critique of “‘ethically’ oriented religions” directly correlates with Baudrillard’s argument that religions have contributed to the expansion and nourishment of the hyperreal. We have allowed our belief in our god-like potential to make us blind to the beauty and awe-inspiring beings, events, and ideas that exist all around us. Bennett also says:

> What is needed is a stance that consists, above all, in the acknowledgement of human finitude. This acknowledgment entails the paradoxical acceptance of one’s own death as ungraspable and meaningless, as happening for no reason. It requires, in other words, that one accede to what one cannot understand. Such untranquil acceptance contributes to a positive ethical result (i.e., the “unworking of human arrogance”). (76)

If we come to accept our fate, it will lead to a deconstruction of the egotistical, self-centered human identity, leaving us open to accepting the “decentered other” as a component of our reformed sense of self. We will grow to no longer view ourselves as separate from any other being. Obviously, this restructuring of human identity and the current cultural narrative is not something that I, or Bennett, consider a quick transition. Bennett would say that we have to start amplifying “an ethic for a disenchanted world [that] requires humility” and one that allows us to “exercise [our] imagination” (76). The most vivid examples of the human imagination exist within our literary catalog. However, the stories we read and tell need to focus on the unheard, marginalized voices. We need to hear stories “with the power of the new and startling and wonderful” and those that “combat the everyday” because those are the stories that will

re-enchant our hyperreal world, decenter the subjectivity of readers, and break down the human arrogance that dominates modern society (76).

Baudrillard's definition of the "decentered other" does seem to differ from both Hutcheon and Plumwood slightly. He argues that a true or authentic "decentered other" doesn't actually exist anymore because we have succumbed to hyperreality. Our understanding of the differences between the decentered and the centered or dominant, he would say, is none other than simulation. Baudrillard also contends that Western science (our technology), not the "homogeneous monolith," controls the definition of "otherness" and "then artificially revive[s] [it] as though [it were] real, in a world of simulation" ("The Precession of Simulacra" 1488). In reality, we all possess otherness; we're all "living specimens under the spectral light of ethnology," meaning that we, no matter our gender, race, sexuality, or species, are in constant study, reflection, and judgment of one another. For example, if we were to look at what Baudrillard argues is Western civilization's "perfect model" of hyperreality, Disneyland, we will see a completely manufactured version of "otherness." Characters such as Mulan, Aladdin, and even Simba are just simulations of actual marginalized groups and supply Western society with one fabricated image of worldly cultures and people. There is a complete lack in authenticity, and it causes a further divide in power and understanding while at the same time, enhancing binary oppositions. While I see the validity in Baudrillard's belief that hyperreality is powerful enough to disrupt the binary opposition between reality and illusion because it blurs the lines between what is real and what is imaginary, I do not support the argument that hyperreality has the power to disrupt the binary oppositions that cause us to destroy one another and our own planet. I instead contend that hyperreality does not disrupt our perception of the other, whether human or non-human, or our judgment and isolation of those others; that perception exists in

both the real and the hyperreal. While hyperreality is a balance between reality and illusion, it isn't the threshold humanity needs to straddle.

As a species, we have accomplished many great feats through the lens of science. However, one trick that science has always placed up our sleeves actually seems to be keeping us trapped within hyperreality: the ability to camouflage. Science not only exposes what we really are, but also gives us the tools to mask it or manipulate it into something else. For example, we have always been obsessed with preserving youth in order to mask our inevitable death, but now we have developed things such as Botox and age-reversing gene therapy that create the illusion that we will stay forever young. Because the "homogeneous monolith," as Hutcheon refers to it, is at the center of our social order, it (and everyone else outside of the monolith for that matter) is under the false impression that it holds all the power over humanity and our cultural narrative. However, according to Baudrillard, power no longer "real" in hyperreality, which means that humankind's "critical obsession with power—obsession with its death, obsession with its survival" is really just a "total hallucination—a haunting memory" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 23). Within humankind's conquest to control, to go beyond the only planet we have ever known, we have "derealized" our current human space. The natural world has lost its wonder and its ability to captivate us. We see ourselves as above it or separate from it, and we are falsely under the impression that we have already grasped the ability to conquer it. Because we have convinced ourselves that our connection through hyperreality supplants our more genuine connection to the natural world, all aspects of nature have become "decentralized" from our daily lives. Instead, we have allowed the hyperreal to become the figurative planet we now orbit.

Every aspect of our lives is replicated from what we create and see within our media and technology, and we allow it to determine our identity. Baudrillard believes we can sense this lack

of authenticity, which leads to an overwhelming sense of panic. So, we have allowed science, our various and vast technological conquests and virtual realities, to recreate the "other" in order to "conceal the fact that...this world, our own,...has become savage again, that is to say devastated by difference and death" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 9). We build our culture-influenced personas on our social media accounts and spend our money on whatever materialistic fad deemed necessary by the societal constructs we're so desperate to fall in line with. Our science arms us with the weapons to rebuild and reimagine ourselves as something everlasting and ethereal. What we fail to see through our hyperreal fog is that we have always been a part of the natural world or the savage, animalistic world, and no matter how hard we try to detangle ourselves from our animal roots, we will not be able to rewrite our origination and supposed divine purpose. While Baudrillard might say that our science has brought us to the point of no return to the real, present, and natural world, I, with the help of Theodor Adorno, Bennett, and Plumwood as well as many other critics, want to contend that a literary catalog which brings to focus the "decentered others" of the past and present possesses the tools to help us fully realize and accept our connection and coexistence with nature.

Baudrillard, as well as I, sees these "decentered situations" or others as "animal" or "vegetal" in an attempt to include the non-human beings of the natural world, and they also encompass the banality of our everyday human lives. I want to argue that the decentered other is a combination of both Baudrillard's natural banality and Hutcheon's marginalized communities. Both the non-human animal and vegetal beings and the oppressed minority groups fall outside of the white, male, hetero-sexual circle, or the "homogeneous monolith". Their stories have been consistently sent to the background of our culture, and Hutcheon argues that art, specifically novels, possess the ability "to subvert but not reject history" and give humanity the opportunity

to rework our cultural landscape (Shirvani 292). However, because Baudrillard asserts that we have succumbed to the hyperreal in which reality no longer exists, he argues that there is technically nothing left to change or rethink because nothing really exists anymore in the hyperreal; we just live vicariously through all of the cultural models and simulations we have created. He contends that "[i]t is no longer possible to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real," almost as if we can no longer tell the difference between the threads belonging to reality and those of the imaginary (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 124). He would say that our models and simulations have been replicated too many times now for reality to ever be anything else but symbolic representations of the world deemed acceptable by our capitalistic cultural narrative nor the "homogeneous monolith" in control of that narrative.

Now, while he may not believe that a reconnection with reality can ever be accomplished, Baudrillard, in a similar fashion to Hutcheon, does also hint at a potential escape from the hyperreal, one that he believes could potentially "revitalize" and "reactualize" our current universal simulation. Where Hutcheon advocates for the use and refocus of all art and literature, Baudrillard narrows the field to just the genre of science fiction. According to him, the only choice we have is "to reinvent the real as fiction," and place any and all decentered situations, stories, experiences, cultures, voices, in a position "to contrive to give them the feeling of the real" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 124). Baudrillard states that science fiction has always been "a romantic expansion with all the freedom and naivete that the charm of discovery gave it." He argues that science fiction would need to "evolve implosively, in the very image of our current conception of the universe, attempting to revitalize, actualize...fragments of this universal simulation that have become for us the so-called real world" (*Simulacra and*

Simulation 124). Now, while I agree that we should be turning to literature and specifically, that which brings the decentered other or situation to the forefront, I disagree that we need literature to center around our current perception of our world. If anything, we should be engaged in literature that brings to light perceptions of our world that don't exist in the current narrative. While I do see value in science fiction as a vessel, it seems that genres, such as historical fiction, memoir, and climate fiction, possess just as much vitality to break through the facade of the hyperreal.

My argument stands closer to Hutcheon on this point in the sense that I am arguing that we can still do *more* than recreate feelings of the real. We still have the chance to utilize the novel in a way that deconstructs the hyperreal realm and re-establishes reality for good. Specific texts, both historical and contemporary, have the potential to bring recognition to decentered situations in the face of our current social order and help humanity to come to terms with the fact that our Western science and the "homogeneous monolith" are both responsible for the hyperreal realm we have succumbed to. We as a species need to rewrite our cultural narrative and utilize the novel to celebrate the "other" and reject our obsession with power. Ultimately, this rewriting of our narrative should stem from none other than an aesthetic revolution.

Chapter 2 Victorian Society and Its Decentered Voices

Money, class, and social standing were at the heart of what mattered most in Westernized society during the Victorian era. A set of social and political constructs defined by the wealthy and powerful elite, consistent with Linda Hutcheon's "homogeneous monolith," fueled the standards of social life. Ironically enough, these values clearly still have a strong influence on current American society as well. In her article on the liminality within Charlotte Brontë's novels, Sarah Gilead refers to the Victorian era "as an 'age of transition,' a liminal period in a history of spiritual, moral, and intellectual as well as material progress" (186). Because it was a period in human history where divergent, scientific thinking challenged cherished, religious tradition, it serves as the perfect scaffold for an aesthetic revolution. Rooted in Victorian culture is a literary catalog that exhibits decentered voices and characters who expose society's shortfalls and injustices and attempt to provoke cultural change. These novels juxtapose protagonists whose perspectives are those of the marginalized and silenced against a backdrop of a rich and patriarchal culture. Additionally, these novels possess what Margaret S. Kennedy refers to as an "eco-consciousness," in which they "[address] the deterministic influence of nonhuman nature," "[amplify] concerns about environmental problems," and "awaken sympathy and consciousness…[that] opened readers' eyes" to the deteriorating relations between humanity and their non-human habitats and counterparts (511). Two Victorian novels in particular depict stories of marginalized European women because they possess the capacity to decenter the European, Westernized notions of the human. They can blur the lines between hegemonic binary oppositions and deconstruct the definition of what it is to be human. The power of these novels lies within the liminality of the two main characters, Jane Eyre and Tess Durbeyfield, but also within the liminal abilities of the authors themselves. Both Charlotte Brontë and Thomas Hardy

were writers who were either personally affected by the hypocritical and othering societal constructs of the Victorian era or were at least consciously aware of and actively fighting against those confining ideals. They saw how the cultural values of their time alienated any people who did not fit the mold society deemed appropriate, and they chose to bring those voices to the forefront of their novels. Just like their protagonists, Brontë and Hardy balanced between many different social classes, circles, and norms. They each paved their own identities outside of what was culturally dictated for them, and their ambiguity allowed them to see through the deceptive societal dichotomies cultivated by the male, hetero-sexual, Christian, white perception. Both Jane and Tess are similarly ambiguous and even blur the lines between human and non-human. They redefine and demonstrate the fluidity of the human, or our ability to shift and reconfigure our own identities and sense of self. While only one character truly finds a way to reconceptualize her own identity into one that harmoniously coexists between both worlds, both stories serve as examples of how liminality can subvert the binary oppositions that bind us to the current cultural constructs and shatter our ignorance of the decentered other.

Gilead describes Victorian novels such as Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as "liminal in a double sense: first, the central character's relation to society and to a seemingly vitiated cultural heritage is restored by means of crises of…alienation, and self-confrontation…; second, the novels themselves are designed as a culture-regenerating force in a bereft, conflicted society, a society that in itself is at a critical juncture, a risky threshold of change" (303). The Victorians came face to face with this "critical juncture" Gilead speaks of with the Industrial Revolution, and our current American society has come to it now with our hyperreality. These liminal characteristics have the power to incite a cultural shift that will lead to a more balanced and compassionate society. Additionally, Linda Hutcheon specifies that the

female perspective has always been stifled in the male-dominated world. When discussing binary oppositions of the 19th and 20th centuries and their effects on the decentered other, Hutcheon argues that "[t]he polarized right and left of both centuries are shown to share misogyny and sexism. Women must create and assert their own community, based on their own values" (63). Both Brontë's and Hardy's novels bring to life a female central character who proclaims her own sense of self and identity outside of the norm in the face of seemingly immovable and unforgiving cultural constructs. Because neither protagonist truly belongs to the community she was born into, both have to rely on their abilities to waver between worlds for survival, and only one learns to successfully construct a new existence for herself. This lack of community both Jane and Tess share in Brontë's and Hardy's novels is something critic Nina Auerbach contends is key to what lends these novels the most power to influence and invoke cultural change. Specifically, Auerbach does argue the symbolic representation of the orphan, in the literal sense with Jane and the metaphorical sense with Tess, is extremely influential to readers. She states that "[i]n a sense, the orphan can be thought of as a metaphor for the novel itself: a faintly disreputable…offspring of uncertain parentage, always threatening to lose focus and definition, but, with the resilience of the natural victim, always managing to survive; a particular product of the modern world" (395). Gilead would add that "[t]he orphan is…[the] importer of precisely those values or experiences that the society and culture lack," which is why our current society can benefit from narratives that center on voices outside of normalized civilizations, belonging to nowhere, human or non-human (303). They face "crises of negation, alienation, and self-confrontation," which all "resemble the ordeals of traditional" life and allow for modern readers to develop a sense of compassion and empathy for the characters and their journeys.

Jane Eyre encompasses all of the traits Auerbach, Gilead, and Hutcheon might suggest could rewrite the codes of human thought and behavior. Charlotte Brontë gives a voice to a character who represents one of the absolute lowest parts of humanity in the eyes of Victorian society: a female, orphan, child, with no money to her name. Jane is a decentered voice, and instead of allowing societal constructs to define her and dictate her path in life, she chooses to fight against the status quo. She does not succumb to the human world and its values nor does she do the same with the natural world; instead, she blends the two opposing worlds together to form her own unique set of values. Jane's values are those of compassion and empathy, both of which establish the scaffolding needed to reeducate Westernized society and recreate it as one filled with understanding and harmony instead of hate and power. Her liminality lends her agency and allows her to transcend the boundaries established by the homogeneous monolith of the time.

In the case of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess begins as a naive, lower class, teenage girl, who is then manipulated, raped, and ultimately impregnated by a man of high social standing, Alec D'Urberville. After the shame of her assault, she is abandoned by her already non-existent parents and forced to endure the death of her newborn child utterly alone. When she finally seems to recover from these horrific experiences of sexual assault and loss, Tess meets Angel Clare, whom she whole-heartedly believes loves and accepts her fully. Unfortunately, after learning of her past, Angel also rejects Tess because she does not meet the religious standards he deems necessary. While readers watch Tess fight for her own rights and identity and continuously challenge the unjust Victorian societal constructs that suppress her, in the end, she is unable to break out of the narrative that was pre-written for her. Unlike Jane Eyre, Tess falls victim to the corrupt human ideals of her society and can't manage to ever find the

balance necessary to coexist harmoniously with both the human and natural worlds. Despite her ultimate downfall, Tess's story opens the doors for readers of both the Victorian era and now to witness her failures and learn to disrupt the hypocritical societal values and binary oppositions that exist all around us. Ultimately, stories such as Brontë's and Hardy's provide audiences with decentered situations that challenge the hyperreal as well as patriarchal systems of thought. They have the power to evoke a shift in the age-old, Westernized cultural narrative, one towards a newfound consciousness of and compassion for the decentered other in all forms.

Throughout the entirety of Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, the main character, Jane, is on a personal journey of self-discovery. From childhood to adulthood, Jane is faced with many instances of hypocrisy thrust upon her by Victorian culture from which she must find a way to escape. These hypocritical moments serve as stepping stones for Jane on her pilgrimage toward the reclamation of her own agency. She must fight against the rigidity of the class hierarchy system, religious beliefs, enforced gender roles, and marital expectations. As she experiences the fraudulent social and political constructs that defined Victorian society, she comes to the realization that they attempt to rob her of her ability to develop her own identity. In turn, she is forced to look elsewhere for her voice, and the natural world aids her in that discovery. While nature supplies her with the freedom and independence she so desires, it also teaches her how to find worthy human companionship that sustains her soul. She learns how to balance between her desire for the wildness of nature and her own social needs and desires, and in the end, she takes control of her own destiny. Jane is known throughout the novel as a "thing"— neither human nor animal because she continuously straddles the threshold between the two. Antonia Losano, in her article "Thing Jane: Objects and Animals in *Jane Eyre,*" says that "'[t]hing' is by far the most common appellation for Jane" throughout the novel, which "increases the sense of Jane as

unknowable, unnamable, perhaps even not-quite-human" (52). Jane's undefinable nature is what allows her to fight against the seemingly impervious cultural standards of her time. Ultimately, she becomes a harmonious embodiment of both the natural and human worlds, existing freely outside of the boundaries of both in her own realm, with her own voice. Losano agrees that Brontë's novel "insists readers understand that her heroine is mutable, difficult to pin down, unnamable and…certainly not an individual to be pigeon-holed and contained" by any human-generated construct (54). Ultimately, Jane epitomizes the liminal, decentered other, and her story is one that not only exposes how human culture has continuously fragmented our relationships with each other and the natural world. It is also a story that unsettles humankind's very understanding and definition of who and what we are.

The novel opens with Jane as a child living at Gateshead with her aunt and cousins. Within the first few lines, readers become aware of Jane's imprisonment inside the Gateshead walls. While she may dislike taking "long walks…on chilly afternoons," she still exhibits a desire to connect with some want of nature when she describes the window panes she sits in front of as "protecting, but not separating [her] from the drear November day" (Brontë 9–10). In this first glimpse into Jane's inner life, she expresses to readers that she is "study[ing] the winter afternoon," and she remarks on the natural world with phrases such as "pale blank," "wet," "storm-beat," "ceaseless," and "long and lamentable" (10). All of these descriptors convey a very cold and indifferent tone in regards to the outdoors, immediately revealing nature for what it really is, rather than sugar-coating its essence with romantic descriptors. Jane seems to already have an awareness of her separateness from the natural world, yet she has no compelling ties to the human world either. Even though she may not understand nor find much comfort in the "blank," "ceaseless," "lamentable" aspects of the world outside her window, Jane still possesses

an innate desire to find a connection with nature, which is why she situates herself as close to it as possible, with only "clear panes of glass" to shield her human body from the elements (10).

Alongside of her hidden vantage point overlooking the grounds outside of Gateshead, Jane finds solace, away from her oppressive aunt and cousins, in the books she reads, which also happen to be about the natural world. "As Jane cannot explore the frozen landscapes of Gateshead, she instead casts herself as a 'heroic discoverer,'" and indulges in stories of birds and the wild Arctic wilderness (Fuller 153). These stories allow her to escape her imprisonment in the only way that her child self can. Because Jane is forced to take shelter from the onslaught of abuses and hypocrisies thrown at her by her surrogate family, she learns to isolate herself within the only pastime that allows her to escape her current reality: the infinite landscapes of the literary imagination. After beginning the novel by gazing out the window, Jane's attention then switches to the book in her hands, titled *Bewick's: 'History of British Birds'* (Brontë 10). The fact that the book happens to be about birds is no coincidence because Jane, herself, is described as a bird, or with bird-like features throughout the rest of the novel. Just like Jane, birds hover between worlds, belonging to neither sky nor earth, liminal in nature. Because Jane is the epitome of the decentered subject, she, even at such an early age, can see the value in texts that bring nature to the forefront because just like her, nature is outside of the hypocritical constructs of her society. She gravitates toward natural voices and experiences because, unlike the human realm where she is forced to endure judgment and pinned down by a lack of status, in the natural world she can just be, just exist. Each of the vignettes Jane describes in the opening pages of the novel paint nature in a state of isolation and indifference, like "the rock standing up alone in a sea" or "the cold and ghastly moon glancing" (10–11). The juxtaposition of "the broken boat" against "the desolate coast" seems to embody the idea that humankind's creations have no match

against the natural world, and amplifies the immense strength nature possesses, as well as the puniness of man. The natural world always seems to take center stage within Jane's books while humankind is nowhere to be found, which she prefers to "passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and older ballads" (11). Additionally, the theme of being alone or separated from humanity seems to be quite evident in the vignettes that Jane finds "mysterious…yet profoundly interesting" (11). She finds interest in objects that exist in isolation and realms that haven't been tainted by humankind within the books she reads because she has never felt a sense of comfort nor connection with her own kind out in the real world. Jane even comments that with books like "Bewick on [her] knee, [she] was happy…[and] feared nothing but interruption" from her human relatives (11). Ultimately, she feels a sense of camaraderie akin to the solidarity and utter alone-ness these "mysterious" objects and non-human realms emanate. Because we as readers feel for Jane's decentered plight—her fight against societal hierarchy and status—and witness the consistent injustices she's forced to endure, we can't help but find the same stillness and sense of connectedness within the images Jane describes in the vignettes. It is as if Brontë is attempting to encourage or educate readers on the power and value of liminal literature: that is to say, literature that situates the reader in moments of awe and wonder, outside of the current cultural constructs of the time, which expose the flaws in humankind's false portrayal of total control. Jane's lack of experience with both human and non-human alike at this particular moment in the text renders her incapable of comprehending all of the lessons the stories she's so fascinated by seem to be attempting to teach her. However, her exposure to these perspectives and voices shape her identity throughout the remainder of the novel and guide her towards a balanced life, one actively and evenly rooted in both the human and non-human worlds.

Theorist Jane Bennett might suggest that Jane Eyre is a narrator with an ecological sensibility, one who contemplates the interworking relationships between human and non-human beings. This interconnectedness with the natural world is what gives Jane the hidden strength she needs throughout the novel to build a life of choice and independence outside of Victorian societal constructs, like marriage and status. Even in these opening pages, readers bear witness to the initial stages of Jane's fight for some kind of individual power as she battles over her book and privacy with her greedy and verbally abusive cousin, John Reed, who threatens to strip her of both. She savors the sense of isolation and silent sense of power the natural realms "only inhabited" by "the haunts of sea-fowl," "frost and snow," and "fields of ice" because there she could avoid her human counterparts and just exist (10). Witnessing and contemplating the seemingly boundless and deeply mysterious strengths of the natural world allows Jane to redefine the human and non-human relationship, as well as initiate a rewriting of the decentered other within the cultural narrative.

One of the most important and influential scenes in the entire novel occurs when Jane flees from Thornfield and rejects her true love, Rochester after he fails to tell her about his mentally ill wife, Bertha, who has been locked away in his attic. In this moment, Jane again feels completely disconnected from humanity because even the person she thought knew her and respected her wholeheartedly was deceiving her. She confesses to readers how "from man [she] could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult" (372). With no human companion to trust or seek comfort from, Jane turns to the only entity that has never actively nor maliciously caused her harm, pain, or embarrassment: Nature. When Jane leaves Thornfield and enters the moors, she is completely vulnerable to the elements, yet her connection with the natural world has never proven stronger. She even admits to the reader that she has "no relative but the universal mother,

Nature," and it is in her that Jane will confide (372). Throughout this section of the text Jane grapples with two sides of her being. It is clear that she is human and finds comfort in human companionship; however, Jane, from the very start of the novel, has relied on the natural world's calm and still indifference to keep her sane and whole. In her time of most need when she has no friends to lean on and no shelter from the elements, it is the latter that comes to her rescue and continues to supply her with the strength she needs to push on. Readers even witness Jane begin to invert the common descriptors of the natural world with that of the human. When in the moors, reflecting on the faults of humanity, Jane comments on only ever receiving "cold charity" and "reluctant sympathy" from her human counterparts, whereas nature is described as "warm," "pure," and with "softness" (372). She later reiterates a second time that nature is her "mother": "Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was…To-night, at least, I would be her guest, as I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price" (372). Jane seems to identify with nature's impartiality towards her, and that is what she associates with a mother figure. She may have never truly had a human mother, but she still understands that on an ecocentric level, nature is her only real mother. She finds solace and contentment in the "deep silence" of the non-human world because it gives her "the faculty of reflection" while making her feel "safe" and "still" (372–73). Nature exists, and she can find a peaceful existence within it, one without judgment and where she is shielded from the hypocritical, degrading, and discordant patriarchal ideology. Sarah Gilead describes this moment in the novel as the one where Jane "finally discovers her true origin, family, and identity"; it was Jane's "journey to the edge of death,...out of human culture itself and into nature" which "ultimately reasserts the joy and worth of both society and culture" for her (189). She not only becomes fully liminal, a human in a non-human world, but she becomes what Bennett would call

"reenchanted" with her world. While nature is depicted as quite harsh at many points throughout the novel, it seems that, especially in this particular scene, that despite the harshness, Jane finds the goodness, truth, and enchantment buried underneath or invisible to the human eye.

Ultimately, though, it is evident that in the end of this scene, nature won't be able to sustain Jane physically when she realizes that she "is a human being, and ha[s] human being's wants" (Brontë 374). She sets out to find human connection again, lurking on the boundaries of the town and later of the Rivers' threshold. Physically, she needs a human equal to help her bridge the gap that exists within her. In her article, "Seeking Wild Eyre: Victorian Attitudes Towards Landscape and the Environment in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,*" Jennifer Fuller claims, "Jane seeks a connection to the mythic 'wildness' of England, [and] she must balance this desire with the human need for protective boundaries and must learn to find harmony between liberty and safety" (151). This symmetry in her soul is what will give Jane the independence she has been looking for her entire life; it is what will make her whole. She then comes to the realization that "[l]ife…was yet in [her] possession," and she was now ready to carry the burdens necessary to find lifelong harmony in her world (Brontë 374). In this moment, readers witness Jane's unification with the natural world, and instead of being just the background for human drama, nature is finally recognized as an active, living participant in the foreground of the novel. While many critics argue that Jane's return to Rochester in the end of the novel is a step away from the agency she's spent the whole novel seeking, I would disagree. What I and political theorist John G. Peters agree on is that Rochester from the very beginning of the novel "does not fit the stereotypical mold of the nineteenth century male…because of his mutilation, his reclusive behavior, and the non-human labels used on him." In the end, Rochester joins Jane as an "other" in the eyes of Victorian society, and their marriage is one "based on

mutual respect and spiritual equality" very much unknown and unnatural to the expectations of this time period (65). Ultimately, Jane chooses this path for herself; no other human being, entity, or power construct chooses it for her, which is what makes her journey so unique and so important for readers to engage with.

Stories such as Brontë's *Jane Eyre* allow readers the opportunity to experience a liminal existence and help to reaffirm Bennett's "enchantment," or newfound respect for the natural world. Peters argues that because Jane is "an enigma" and a "foreign particle in the social fabric" of Victorian times, she has a massive impact both within the novel, but even more so outside of the novel. He states that "outside the novel, [Jane] has unlimited exposure. And this influence upon society is what [those in power] so feared" (72). Furthermore, he comes to the conclusion that Jane, as a character, paired with the ideas Brontë homes in on in her novel "are a significant threat to the foundations of social, political, and religious institutions of the time" (73). The impact of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* on Victorian society is what proves the novel's ability to breach the hyperreality of the modern age and shock us into a new understanding of human identity and existence. An aesthetic experience such as this one has the potential to disrupt the cultural narrative, immerse readers within the perspective of the decentered other, and mend humanity's severed relationship with the non-human.

While certainly not the happiest and triumphant of stories like Jane's, Tess Durbeyfield's story holds many valuable and powerful moral lessons that not only impacted those of the Victorian age, but can still rewrite the cultural narrative of today. In a sense, Tess's story serves more as a warning to Victorian society than Brontë's *Jane Eyre* because it not only criticizes the othering and silencing the cultural narrative of the time enforces upon both human and non-human, but to also by directly exposes readers to the downfall of a decentered other who is

impeded from embodying her liminal sense of self. Thomas Hardy's own personal connection with nature and his Darwinistic outlook on the world pervade his novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Paleontologist and critic Kevin Padian contends that because Hardy's *Tess* is one that is embedded with "evolutionary processes" such as time, "adaptation, [and] natural selection;" it is a novel that "threatened the social fabric of Victorian [society] by positing an uncaring, mechanistic universe that did not accommodate divine design,...stratification of social class, or providential separation of humans from other animals" (65). Because the story spans throughout Tess's lifetime and depicts a character with an immense natural sensibility shunned by human society, it unravels the cultural narrative of its time, directly signaling to readers the destructive impact culture has on the human experience. This is to say, it is novel that alters human understanding of who and what we are within the universe because it pushes to the forefront decentered voices and concepts outside of the status quo.

In the novel, Tess seems to be constantly straddling a variety of different thresholds while also attempting to define her own identity. Being a young, inexperienced female of a lower social class who is raped and ultimately deemed impure by the religious beliefs of her society, Tess is literally in the most lowly and inferior position one can get with very little ability to overcome the overpowering obstacles that suffocate her. She is grappling with being a girl or a mother, a Durbeyfield or a D'Urberville, and a woman fit for marriage or fit for a life of isolation. The rigid and hypocritical societal constructs that surround her push her every which way, and she can't seem to find her center. She wants to be good and kind and honest, yet society and her parents feed her mixed messages about what that actually looks like in a woman. Her mother tells her to marry and lie about her past, but when she does marry, everyone else appears to think that marriage is not for women such as her. When she ultimately chooses to be as honest as she

possibly can in the same way that her husband was honest with her, instead of forgiveness, he shuns her for such honesty and deems her a disgrace, "look[ing] upon her as a species of imposter" (Hardy 229). Her life is the epitome of a lose-lose situation. Furthermore, Tess, like Jane, is labeled as a "thing" throughout the novel and frequently referred to as an animal or plant with rather alien and ethereal qualities. Even in the very first moment readers lay eyes upon Tess, she is described as a girl with a "peony mouth and large innocent eyes," features which immediately associate her with the natural world and give her an aura of animal-like innocence (14). Critic John B. Humma calls the imagery within Hardy's novel "natural supernaturalism," a term originally coined by literary critic M. H. Abrams to analyze Romantic literature of Great Britain. Specifically, Humma invokes that in Hardy's novel nature itself takes on a "deity-as-myth structure" and serves as the omnipresent God in which Tess would represent the "divinely human Eve," who is destined to fall (65). Because she possesses a true nature that renders her neither fully human nor fully non-human, Tess is forced to assimilate within human constructs she is incapable of ever fitting into. While she exhibits the same liminal characteristics as Jane, Tess is unable to find the balance necessary to gain a foothold on her life's thresholds and finally make her whole.

In the exposition of the novel, Tess is already balancing upon her first threshold in life: the line between childhood and adulthood. Readers are immediately exposed to a decentered situation, in the context of a young, female protagonist of low social standing. We are also immersed into a state of limbo, in the context of her vacillation between childhood and adulthood as well as with her metaphorically orphan-like existence rendered by her neglectful "parents," which Auerbach argues emphasizes Tess's "dispossessed, detached sense of self" (395). Tess is described in the opening chapter as "a mere vessel of emotion untinctured by

experience….Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still" (Hardy 15). She is introduced to readers on the precipice of adulthood, but she is still without definition. Her identity is just an outline and has yet to be filled in and crystallized by life experience. Just like Jane, Tess lacks parental guidance and is pretty much orphaned at a young age, forcing her out of childhood quickly. She is more of a mother figure to her siblings than her own mother is. Tess's "parents," while physically present, are completely detached from their children's lives and focus only on their own personal needs and desires:

"All of these young souls in the Durbeyfield ship—entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield household chose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death, thither were these half-dozen little captives under hatches compelled to sail with them—six helpless creatures, who had never been asked if they wish for life on any terms, much less if they wished on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield." (24)

All of the children, but especially Tess as the eldest, lack any protective parental shield from the treacherous and duplicitous facets of both Victorian society and human nature. Hardy uses words such as "captives," "helpless," and "shiftless" to describe the state of being Tess and her siblings are forced to endure. This inescapable environment leaves them in a constant sense of fear, confusion, and ignorance. Even the imagery of the "Durbeyfield ship" points readers to the fact that the children figuratively cannot plant their feet on solid ground. Ultimately, the combination of Tess's metaphorical orphan-like state and the fact that she is also young, naïve, and poor, with little world experience is the harbinger of her downfall. As observers of Tess's plight, we also feel imbalanced and off-kilter—in a sense, decentered. We cannot do anything but

bear witness as societal and cultural constructs beat down on her and deal out injustice after injustice to Tess. The same lack of control over life and the inability to "wish for life on any terms" connects with readers, and we are left wondering how all of this could possibly happen to someone so innocent and pure. The utter unfairness of Tess's situation stirs up deliberation over the makings of our current cultural narrative and whether it has truly changed at all since the Victorian era.

Hardy further emphasizes Tess's lack of control of her own world, body, and identity when he likens her to the innocent and unaware animals in the fields during harvest season. She, like the "[r]abbits, hares, snakes, rats, mice," is oblivious and defenseless in the face of patriarchal Victorian society (87). Hardy explicitly describes Tess as "a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it" (88). Tess is clearly depicted as a being teetering on the edge of both the human and non-human species. She experiences the same "unaware[ness] of the ephemeral nature of [her] refuge, and of the doom that awaited [her] later," and she seems to share in the animals' suffering per the "shrinking" and "horrible narrowness" of their world (87). Just like them, human actions and cultural values have shattered what Tess thought her life might turn out to be. In this moment in the text, her dreams of a successful life, one with many options and pathways to explore, are minimized into a future controlled by, and ultimately destroyed by, the dominant cultural narrative. Tess's identity becomes mingled with her non-human counterparts, and in the end, she even shares in their "death by the sticks and stones," or in Tess's case, by the hypocritical and patriarchal constructs pummeled at her by her own kind (87).

It is in this moment that readers witness the beginning of Tess's gradual exodus from the human world. Towards the end of the novel, Tess's sense of self has seesawed so drastically

toward the non-human that her identity no longer possesses any roots in humanity. Instead, she becomes fully consumed by the connections she shares with the natural world, which she has grown to associate with the state of death. So, just like her non-human kin have been forced to endure, in the end, she is put to death by the society she fought endlessly to connect with. Additionally, it seems that this scene is also meant to juxtapose natural imagery with the mechanistic, pastoral human custom of harvesting wheat. Hardy thoroughly describes the actions of field workers in conjunction with the "reaping-machine," accentuating humanity, particularly men, in a cold, unfeeling light with regard to nature. Kevin Padian notes in his article, "'A Daughter of the Soil': Themes of Deep Time and Evolution in Thomas Hardy's 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles,'" that "Hardy saw this uncaring, mechanistic Universe not in the vicissitudes of Nature, but in the mechanisms of society," which helps to express the lack of empathy and compassion for the other within Victorian culture (70). Interweaving Tess's identity so deeply with the natural world in this scene suggests that Hardy wanted to construct Tess around the concepts society is lacking in order to reinstate those emotions and attachments into his audience. In a sense, it seems an effort to re-enchant readers with the decentered other. Instead of seeing from the perspective of the human character within the story, readers see a reflection of humanity in a truly violent, malevolent and mechanized manner.

The pinnacle of Tess's shared pain, death, and life experiences with the non-human world occurs towards the end of the text when she encounters a flock of injured pheasants who were desecrated by local hunters. At this stage in the novel Tess has already had to overcome rape, the death of a child, and numerous betrayals from humankind, so she is figuratively at the lowest of low in the hierarchical power structure. Similar to Jane when she flees from Thornfield into the safety provided by her "universal mother, Nature," Tess no longer feels tethered to the human

world, and she associates only shame and guilt with any memory of her human past (Brontë 372). She retreats into the natural world and almost identically to *Jane Eyre* when Jane "lay[s] down" in "the heath" and uses "a low, mossy swell [as her] pillow," "[Tess] scraped together the dead leaves…making a sort of nest" and slept in the comforting yet indifferent arms of her true mother, Nature (Brontë 373, Hardy 277). Consequently, when Tess awakens, she discovers a group of pheasants that had been attacked by hunters; she is disgusted by the actions of these men, and she empathizes with the birds at this moment, coming to the conclusion that her human problems have no comparison to the problems that exist within nature. When Robert C. Schweik discusses this scene in his article "Moral Perspective in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,*" he calls attention to the fact that "the obvious reality of [the pheasants'] physical pain reminds [Tess] that the social code" she has been so regimented by her entire life "has no corresponding basis in reality," or in the true order of all living beings (16). Tess's epiphanic moment presents "a viewpoint which takes in the "all creation" in order to minimize…the social code which condemns [her]," and brings human finitude and insignificance in the face of the natural world to the foreground of the novel (18). Furthermore, Tess begins to condemn humanity and disassociate with it entirely. She describes the hunters as "so unmannerly and so unchivalrous towards their weaker fellows in Nature's teeming family" (Hardy 279), associating the human species with the same savagery that humans typically use to characterize any being outside of society's cultural norms. The hunters are described as "peering through bushes" with a "bloodthirsty light in their eyes" who "made it their purpose to destroy life" (279). The idea that this violence is solely for sport and entertainment rather than survival and necessity decenters readers' perspectives and forces us to reflect on the ways in which we treat the non-human. It also reveals just how disturbing it is that we as a species have the ability to shift between good

and evil so seamlessly, making up excuses for the hypocritical behaviors we have embedded into our cultural narrative. Tess even describes the way her fellow humans justify the murder of these natural creatures as if these birds were "brought into being by artificial means solely to gratify [man's] propensities" (279). In this moment, Tess is utterly appalled by not only the cultural traditions of her society, but also her human cohorts, and she officially disassociates with her human self and sides with that of her natural self. Humma goes so far as to state "[t]his scene says effectively that Tess is equal to Nature" (68). After all of the injustice Tess has been dealt personally at this point, readers also feel the same disappointment and abhorrence towards human society. We can also feel the empathetic pull towards the decentered situation, and we cannot help but share in the same pain and sorrow for these dying birds as Tess does.

All her life Tess has been on the run, hiding from her supposed sins. Her spirit was fatally wounded with her rape and subsequent death of her child, and her sense of self and identity have been gradually fading and dying ever since, just like the pheasants who "maintained their position till they grew weaker with loss of blood" (278). Even though she expresses that "[s]he was ashamed of herself" because she believes she has only suffered "condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature," Tess's willingness to step outside of her human form and into the bodies of nature is what helps guide readers towards a more liminal outlook on the world around us (279). She even releases the birds from their misery "tenderly," amplifying the need for compassion within the natural order of all things. Humma argues that Tess's "killing of the birds is wishfully, symbolically self-murder" (68). While some part of her wish to die is influenced her by her shame and inability to adhere to societal constructs, the more important and poignant reflection readers should take from this moment is the immense empathy she exhibits for the non-human. Hardy states in the novel that Tess possessed "the impulse of a

soul who could feel for kindred sufferers as much as for herself," and this same impulse is what needs to be reinjected into modern humanity (279). In the end, despite the comfort and indifference that nature provides Tess, she, just like all humans, also requires the same sense of security and connection from society and humankind. "Nature can never entirely satisfy the human need to find value and moral meaning in existence," suggests Charlotte Bonica of Hardy's universe in "Nature and Paganism in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urberville*s" (858). As much as Tess feels akin to the non-human world, she is still pulled toward human connection and companionship and spends her life searching for a sense of balance, that liminality within her universe. She seeks security in Alec and comfort in Angel, but unfortunately for Tess, neither male suitor is her appropriate match. Alec's ability to manipulate and rob her of her innocence clearly exposed him as the wrong match for Tess. However, even though Angel had real love for Tess, he succumbed to his religious customs, which overshadowed that love. Neither man could balance Tess. Without the human kinship she so desperately needs to survive, Tess remains off-kilter and unfinished, metaphorically bleeding out just like her pheasant relatives, forever stuck and continuously searching for what she will never find.

From the very beginning of the novel, it appears that Tess is fated to fall, and she battles between what she knows is the fate society has molded for her and her own free will to be happy and find her truth. Ultimately, she is just a ghost floating between various thresholds, unable to find a place where she belongs. In the end, Tess is destroyed by the society she was born into and becomes just like the innocent rabbits and pheasants, hunted, used, and forgotten; however, while Tess, the character, may not have been able to find a foothold in her world as Jane does in Brontë's novel, her story is still able to educate those of modern society. Critic Elliot B. Gose Jr. indicates that Thomas Hardy developed a protagonist who is able to connect with all readers

throughout time because he “makes Tess appealing not only as a victim of society but as a human being caught in the ebb and flow of history, environment, and self” (272). Her story synthesizes all human and non-human into one sense of being, reinventing and reshaping the narrative of humankind’s existence on an anthropocentric scale and making way for a more compassionate and harmonious reality for all.

Chapter 3: Modern Society and Its Non-Human Decentered Voices

Alongside immersing ourselves deeply within the human decentered voices of our past, we as species need to deeply reflect on our own concepts of personal identity in the present. Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* addresses what he calls "non-identity," and argues that humans are bewitched by the uncomfortable feeling that we are unaware of something or that something is missing. It makes us wonder who we are, what we are, and what our existence actually means. This feeling causes us fear and anxiety, and we do everything in our power to hide from it. The same feeling that Adorno introduces is one that Ernest Becker breaks down in his book *The Denial of Death*. Becker calls this feeling "Death Anxiety" and explains that we allow culture and society to help us repress our awareness of our own mortality instead of just coming to terms with it. This repression is quite similar to Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal. Just as Baudrillard claims that humanity has created a non-reality for ourselves, Becker claims that "[m]odern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness[;]…society contrives to help him forget" (284). Becker believes that our construction of culture exists to reduce or distract us from our anxiety because it creates this kind of promise of immortality. Theodor Adorno would say that we see our existence as "timeless," and argues this is "the goal which the bourgeois mind may be pursuing in order to compensate for its own mortality" (54). However, this is just a "delusion" we are suffering from because the inability to wrap our minds around our own existence is absolutely terrifying. Adorno tells us that there is a way to combat these terrifying feelings other than hiding from them in fake personal identities and fabricated realities, and that is to face the fact that an understanding of our own existence or purpose will always be out of our reach. He advocates that we need to hold this fact in the forefront of our memories. Val Plumwood agrees with Adorno and argues that "[a]ny adequate attempt to rework the

Western tradition's account of human identity and its relations to nature must confront the anti-life themes implicit in its major traditions of death" (102). If we as a society and species begin to accept the inevitably of death and our insignificance in the face of nature, we may have the chance to live compassionate and moral lives and stop fighting against one another and the world around us. Additionally, Jane Bennett, in her analysis of Adorno's concept of "non-identity," explains that "Adorno founds his ethics on an intellectual and aesthetic attentiveness," and "believes that critical reflection" and "exercis[ing] one's utopian imagination" might allow us to combat against our fears ("Vibrant Matter…" 2446–47). This reiterates the theoretical position that literature, like the examples addressed in this thesis, has the power to change our perception of ourselves and our world.

From the moment we realized that our imagination and mental capacities for logic and reason are seemingly limitless, humanity has been under the impression that we somehow have the ability to manipulate and rule over the natural world. Nature itself is humanity's original decentered situation, the first entity outside of ourselves that we needed to master but could never truly grasp hold of. Whether it is because we are scared to admit that we can't truly comprehend the meaning of our existence and individual purpose, or because humanity is just susceptible to greed, power, and control, this desire to reach the sublime and ethereal is clearly evident throughout Western civilization, but it has become even more evident in today's society. As Amitav Ghosh discusses in his novel *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, "this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of Great Derangement" (11). Modern society continues to ignore the signs our planet constantly gives us in regards to the damage we as a species have caused. Our mainstream literature and entertainment create fantasy worlds that allow us to live outside of reality. As

Baudrillard would say, “To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t” (“The Precession of Simulacra” 1484). We have created a culture that helps us to ignore the world right in front of our eyes. We have also become consumed by the same materialism Friedrich Von Schiller touches on in his essay “On the Aesthetic Education of Man”, and just like Schiller asserts, this materialism is what keeps us from expanding “the frontiers of art” (495). Any literature that addresses humanity’s true relations with the natural world poses a threat to those in control of the cultural narrative because it means that humans are not fully in control of our planet. Specifically, literature that addresses climate change develops “peculiar forms of resistance…to what is now regarded as serious fiction” (Ghosh 9). The novel, Ghosh says, has a limited scope because it is produced by the politics of power. It was created with the middle class in mind and fails to imagine a broader world, one that actually represents reality and the real power the natural world holds. While the novel has always been a form of entertainment filled with moral lessons, it must now become a guide for humankind: it must challenge what has always been seen as normal and valued in our culture and completely shift people’s mindsets towards what should actually be of importance to us: empathy, compassion, and a harmonious coexistence.

We need literature that brings what Ghosh deems “the uncanny,” or the recognition when something is too unsettling for the psyche, to center stage because it begins to shatter mankind’s illusion of a passive and controllable natural world. His description of “the uncanny” is the same as Sigmund Freud’s in the sense that “[i]t is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror…[and] excites fear in general” (799). We need literature that reminds us of our finite lives and forces us to face our fears of the unknown. Natural phenomena, disasters, and inexplicable occurrences that expose a colossal and emotionless power humanity is barely able to comprehend let alone control are topics that our society should be reading about.

In a way, T. S. Eliot was correct when he claimed that poetry is "an escape from emotion" (Eliot 890). This is not to say that emotion is not a necessary component of literature because it truly is, but only when the purpose of said literature is to educate mankind on morality. When it comes to educating man on the natural world, a purging of emotions, or even what Schiller calls the "*cold* heart" (Schiller 499), mimics nature's complete disinterest in our species. In many cases, in order to truly comprehend how we as a species should exist side by side with the natural world, we must eliminate ourselves from the literature we write; in a sense we must succumb to the non-identity Adorno advocates for. Accepting our insignificance and allowing our human egos to assimilate into nature's objectivity will allow us to break through our illusions. In order for a novel to breach the anthropocene, as Ghosh would say, it must tell the audience the truth. It must expand its scope to the non-human and bring it to the forefront of the narrative, encouraging humanity to take on what Plumwood calls "[a]n ecological identity," which is one that "aims to resolve the legacy of alienation from the earth" and "seek[s] a ground of continuity not in *separation* from nature but in *connection* with it" (Plumwood 102). Instead of the characters or narrators finding meaning within one's self, they need to find meaning within the natural world. This diversity of voices in our literature allows readers to take up an actual interest in the non-human world. Finally, the novel must focus on creating a sense of urgency for humanity as a collective because something like climate change is not a problem that we as individuals can fix. With the literature Ghosh advocates for, society can begin to develop into the "world citizens" philosopher Martha Nussbaum advocates for—those with the ability to see beyond the societal constructs and definitions we separate ourselves with and who view humanity as a collective entity bound to one another's celebrations and faults. Nussbaum even contends that "literature…makes an especially rich contribution" to humanity's capability in developing "a

capacity for sympathetic imagination" and "seeing [those different from us] not as forbiddingly alien or other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us" (2142). These texts possess the power to unite humanity and encourage an empathetic appreciation of and deeper connection to the natural world.

One of the genres that has gained popularity in the last few years in modern society due to an increased awareness of the climate crisis is environmental literature or climate fiction. According to Jane Bennett, the sub-genre under this environmental umbrella that is the key to developing a better understanding and connection to the natural world is that of ecospirituality. She argues that "[e]cospirtuality links environmental pollution to moral decline, or the de-souling of ourselves, and seeks to recover a sense of the sacred," and that "[i]t's goal is to reenchant nature" (*The Enchantment of*... 91). While the two texts I will discuss in this chapter, Annie Dillard's "Total Eclipse" and Kathleen Jamie's "Aurora," aren't representative of the typical "novel" Ghosh describes, their creative non-fiction is a type of writing that sparks a new understanding of human existence. Their stories provide readers with moments in which the human encounters the sublime and becomes minimized in the face of the mysterious and unexplainable natural world. Both Dillard and Jamie's works embody the "enchantment" Bennett believes we need in modern society and create moments that possess the "affective force…[required] to propel ethical generosity" toward all human and non-human beings (*The Enchantment of*... 3). Moreover, Ghosh adds that "highly improbable occurrences" such as Dillard's experience with the eclipse or Jamie's Arctic awakening "are overwhelming, urgently, and astoundingly real," and these are the kind of events that need to exist within our literature (Ghosh 27). Ghosh also cautions humanity against treating our planet's natural phenomena "magical or metaphorical" because it "would be to rob them of precisely the quality that makes

them so urgently compelling—which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time" (27). Dillard's and Jamie's accounts are as real as they could possibly be and bluntly convey to readers the immeasurable, uncontrollable power that nature possesses. They force us to see the natural world in its most authentic form, instead of allowing us to hide behind our fantasies of it. While these stories may not as obviously challenge the patriarchal systems of thought that define Western culture like Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, they retain the ability to unsettle humanity at its core, compelling us to reassess our entire existence and concept of identity.

Essentially, Annie Dillard's non-fiction, short story "Total Eclipse" simply tells the tale of when she and her husband witnessed one of nature's most awe-inspiring anomalies: a total eclipse. This eclipse completely rattles Dillard's view of the world, and in turn, reveals to her humankind's vulnerability and the self-inflicted blindness of just how little power we possess. Through her subtle stabs at humanity's forgetfulness, inability to change, and unwillingness to break from routine, Dillard evokes the idea that human ignorance and desire for comfort has led us to feel terrifyingly disconnected from the natural world. Dillard seems to suggest that if we face the natural world in all its glory directly, we might just find answers to all of the burning questions that plague our existence, but if we choose to hide in the comfort of our "latitudes of home," we will remain as nothing but utter fools (Dillard 28). Jack Shindler, in his essay, "Seeing through the Trees: Annie Dillard as a Writer-Activist", contends that in essays such as "Total Eclipse," "Dillard is…exploring her essential dilemma" of "how do we humans come to grips with the eternal *sublimity* of the natural world and the limited *absurdity* of our place within it?" (179). He further contends that Dillard advocates for readers to "face this dilemma head on" because she is "engaged in a never-ending process of forming a compromise between the

sublime word-less world beyond and above the circus tent and the real world of human 'facts' and language" (179). It appears as though Dillard situates herself in a constant state of liminality, actively trying to show the meaning of the natural world through language while at the same time accepting the fact that the non-human is one beyond both meaning and words. As an author, she possesses Adorno's non-identity and serves as a witness to the undefinable sublime, simply existing in the presence of it.

The opening lines of Dillard's "Total Eclipse" juxtaposes the anticipation of experiencing a natural phenomenon with death itself. It seems as if in order for Dillard to rationalize the exhilaration caused by her proximity with a natural wonder, such as the eclipse, she must compare it to something else she's never experienced before: dying. Both are incomprehensible, terrifying, and filled with "dread" because they represent the uncanny—something we, as humans, will always fail to grasp and have no control over. The fact that she has this experience even before she actually witnesses the total eclipse is what really resonates with readers and emphasizes just how powerful, even symbolically, the natural world can be. The lack of control humans possess in the face of something as awe-inspiring as an eclipse is clearly evident when Dillard describes it "like slipping into fever, or falling down that hole in sleep from which you wake yourself whimpering" (9). Both "fever" and "sleep" are states of being in which the human conscious mind takes a backseat to the subconscious and loses all sense of awareness and agency. These are also states of being that make us feel vulnerable and place us outside of our bodies, into realms outside of reality, liminal spaces. Even the concept of driving in a car, daydreaming while gazing out the window, which is what Dillard is literally doing in this opening scene, is one where the consciousness is blurred. Fever, sleep, daydreaming—these are all familiar experiences for most humans, which allows readers to immediately immerse

themselves within the natural world Dillard is emphasizing and generate a feeling of connection and empathy towards it.

Tarn Wilson's essay, "The Space Between Contradictions: An Examination of Meaning and Knowledge in Life Writing", argues that Dillard chooses to open her work with this death-like episode in order to "prepar[e] the reader for moving into the 'deep,' sub-physical, the terrifying unknown" of the total eclipse she was about to attempt to describe. Wilson further contends that the next major image Dillard introduces her audience to, a disturbing clown painting in her hotel room, is yet another hint to the reader that "this will be no ordinary account" and "to warn us that we will soon move even farther beyond the bounds of ordinary reason" (144). Dillard's vivid narrative of the clown painting juxtaposes the human world with the non-human. Because of the fear that this eerie painting instilled in her on first glance, Dillard will never be able to forget it; it will forever haunt her. The clown is composed of a combination of human parts and vegetable parts. Dillard repeats the word "skull" (10) in her description of the human parts of the painting, which many could associate with death. This aspect of the painting seems to be why she can't erase it from her memory: it is a reminder of the inevitability of death. Ernest Becker would argue that this is an example of "the universality of the fear of death," meaning that the thought of death and innate fear of it haunts our every day, but it is especially terrifying "when we look it full in the face" (15). We as humans avoid our finitude and instead pretend that we will live forever. However, Dillard could also be hinting at how a clown symbolizes the absurdity of humanity's dependence on technology and materialistic obsessions rather than on the natural world that sustains us. The clown is nothing more than a human being hiding behind humor and colorful makeup, and the fact that Dillard seems to fixate on that image directly before witnessing a total eclipse alludes to humanity's ignorance and insignificance in

the face of nature. We hide behind materialism just like the clown, "framed in gilt and glassed" (10), in an attempt to make our lives seem grander and more exciting than they really are, just like Baudrillard's hyperreality.

Later, as she witnesses the total eclipse, Dillard reflects on memory again. She describes it as "the last sane moment" she remembers (16). This natural phenomenon changes Dillard and her perception of the world because it is an event that evokes Ghosh's and Freud's "uncanny." It is as if everything that she had previously known or thought she knew about the world has been transformed into the unfamiliar. She evokes the idea of "wrongness": "The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were platinum…. This color has never been seen on earth" (16). Even though nothing about the landscape around her has actually physically changed in the ways she's describing, the utter shock at the speed and overpowering nature of this eclipse transforms the landscape around her into something she's never truly known before—or has failed to ever remember knowing. Its wrongness exemplifies how small humankind appears among the natural world; she seems unable to understand the true power of nature, so in turn, this eclipse's power seems "wrong" to her. Dillard even comments on how the eclipse rendered her "forgetful of almost everything," which further reiterates how interactions with the uncanny have the power to initiate a new perspective and spark a reorientation of the human and the environment (18).

Our stubbornness in the face of change is rooted in our fear of what we can't control. Because of this fear, we attempt to create routines in our daily lives to develop a false sense of control, which then allows us to bury that fear. We see this desire to return to the familiar even in those that actually witness the total eclipse in Dillard's reflection. Dillard remembers, almost to her own surprise, how all of the viewers, including herself, scurry back to the normalcy of their

lives after the main event is over: "[T]he sun was still partially eclipsed—a sight rare enough, and one which, in itself, we would have driven five hours to see. But enough is enough" (28). Even though there was still so much of nature's magnificence to see, the people couldn't handle any more of it because it was too overwhelming. The immense power of the eclipse had given viewers a glimpse at how much mystery exists in the depths of the natural world and reminded them of just how feeble humans are in the face of it. As the eclipse is occurring, Dillard states, "There was no sound…. There was no world. We were the world's dead people rotating and orbiting around and around, embedded in the planet's crust, while the earth rolled down" (18). The eclipse's intensity causes Dillard's imagination to take her beyond this world and its contents, forcing her to consider humanity's place within the cosmos. She comes to understand just how small and powerless the human species is compared to the galaxies beyond. This phenomenon renders human existence as basically meaningless, and this new awareness terrifies not only Dillard but all of the spectators. They are awakened from the slumber of their mundane and ordinary lives, but this wakefulness and transparency is too much for their human minds to handle. After only a few minutes of allowing their imaginations to wander into the unknown, escaping from the emotion that Eliot and Schiller state we need to stop hiding behind, Dillard and the rest of the people scatter back into the safety of normal, everyday life and blissful ignorance where it feels safe and familiar.

In the end, Dillard admits that phenomena such as the eclipse are "Life Savers" because they help humankind to understand and connect to the natural world. Attempting to comprehend things of this immensity will at least give us a chance at surviving in an environment that could snuff us out in a heartbeat with utter indifference to our destruction. By portraying humankind as she does in "Total Eclipse," Dillard indicates how ludicrous and silly our technology and

routines are and attempts to inspire us to change. Instead of finding shelter in what is comfortable, we need to break through the fear of our fragile lives and face the natural power that we constantly choose to ignore. Once we do this, we will be liberated from our foolish fears; we can finally discover the truth about ourselves, our purpose, and how we are truly meant to coexist with the non-human world. Literary critic Dana Wilde maintains that Dillard's "Total Eclipse" is an example of "spiritual work" or a work in search of answers and rapture in the natural world. He states that "[h]er way or path to enlightenment…is to learn from nature; her observing journey is like alchemical work, involving a search for gold which may mean some considerable peril in the depths of the mine." In order for one to find the "gold" Wilde refers to, or what I would contend is the same as Bennett's "enchantment," one must also face the terror and awe of the sublime. Enchantment comes at a cost, and that cost is the shattering of our hyperreality and the facade that's been established by the current cultural narrative, pushing past the fear of the unknown and our inevitable finitude, and finally just existing in spite of it all.

Ultimately, Dillard's "Total Eclipse" not only challenges the current cultural narrative with regard to human-centered systems of thought, but it also triggers a call to action in its readers. Reading Dillard's work, according to Shindler, is "a performative act" and "an act of seeing," which he says is "the first step in developing any…concern about the world of nature" (170). She creates "a metaphorical gallery" of scenes from the sublime, natural world meant to "awaken our senses and sharpen our focus" on that which we have previously seen ourselves as separate from (170). The non-human awareness she awakens in her readers is what both Shindler and I would argue is able to "[inspire] concerned environmental action" and help reshape our understanding and coexistence with nature. In turn, this type of literature has the capability of

inspiring both internal and external change, both in the human heart and on the planet we all call home.

Another text, quite similar to Dillard's, is Kathleen Jamie's "Aurora." It is also a non-fiction reflection, specifically of Jamie's experience traveling through the Arctic. Because Jamie is known as a travel writer, many assume that her writing is merely observation, but Anna Dziok-Łazarecka suggests in her article, "The Strategies of Seeing Differently in Kathleen Jamie's Travel Writing: *Findings* and *Sightlines*," Jamie possesses a unique "hybridity" as an author, frequently intermingling the "factual" with "fictional techniques." Specifically, she contends that Jamie presents readers with the ability of "seeing differently" and "proposes techniques which give us the intensity of looking with a "looser mind" at our interrelation with the environment" (9). Jamie's approach to writing about the natural world, then, can surely be described as a liminal one because not only can she transcend the limits of genre, but she can breach the boundaries humanity has placed around the non-human. "She is the one who crosses the border, who loses the world and re-discovers it again" all the while "ask[ing] fundamental questions about the nature of being" (11). In "Aurora," Jamie enters the narrative in search of meaning in a landscape that few humans have ever encountered, and she finishes it with a more ethically and ecologically engaged sense of purpose as well as a more whole sense of self.

As with Dillard, Jamie comments on the inadequacy of human language in the face of the natural world. Her account debunks the human language's ability to truly describe the natural world, implying our inability to have any real control over nature. In the opening pages of the text as she and the rest of her group take their first steps onto the Arctic shore, Jamie attempts to describe the "view" in front of her, but soon realizes that "'view' is too benign a word for the vast, unnerving scale of this land, its clarity of light" (2). The beauty and allure of this natural

setting seems to render humankind's language useless and leaves spectators swirling in conflicting emotions of awe and dread. Jamie inserts readers into what Bennett calls "a state of wonder…and temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement" or in other words, enchantment (Bennett, *The Enchantment of...* 5). This "state of wonder" and "temporary suspension" eliminates Jamie's ability to define or use language as a way to control her experience. She states that she "want[s] to try to come to terms with…[this] whole new world", but the natural world and its phenomena are not something to "come to terms" with (2). The human language that we rely so heavily on to survive and comprehend our existence will never be able to fully and truly define or explain the immensity and complexity of the non-human. This immediate inability to understand what it is she has come into contact with throws Jamie's readers off balance; we begin in a decentered position, one that takes us outside of our comfort zones and places us within a realm where humans lack any real control. Instead of an environment solely built on and manipulated by the human species, readers are immersed into a world untouched by humankind, yet possessing power and influence all its own. She uses words such as "glowing," "white and dazzling," "crisp," and "crystalline" that emit an almost ethereal and sharp essence, one that is clearly not of the human world (2). She describes the icebergs as "glowing" and having "escaped the confines of the fjords [to] float free[ly]," which presents them with their own sense of agency and freewill (2). Even the wind blowing through the landscape, which Jamie explicitly refers to as "insouciant" or indifferent, "carries a sense of enormous strength withheld" (3). The idea of something non-human possessing "enormous strength" is scary and uncomfortable for humankind to grasp. Even though human language falls flat in its ability to regenerate the natural world's awe and "uncanny," the language Jamie does

use to describe the Arctic landscape to readers sheds light on the non-human perspective and focuses solely on the decentered experience.

This feeling Jamie describes in her first few moments in the presence of the foreign and untouched Arctic landscape is what Edmund Burke would describe as the "sublime." Just like the boundless Arctic that Jamie is describing, Burke characterizes "sublime objects as vast in their dimensions" (473). The vastness of sublime objects is both intriguing and terrifying to humanity because while beautiful to observe, the immensity of the sublime also makes us feel miniscule and useless in comparison. Jamie starts off this journey utterly amazed with the natural world, but in the end, she "feel[s] a sudden strong urge to be away from here, to head south…[and] go back inside to the warm" (Jamie 18). After Dillard's experience with the eclipse, she also describes how spectators "hurried away" from the event and ends the piece commenting on how "[o]ne turns at last even from glory itself with a sigh of relief" (Dillard 27-28). In regards to these scenes, Burke would argue that "at certain distances, and with certain modifications," these experiences "are delightful," but "[w]hen danger…press[es] too nearly," these moments can "be simply terrible" and horrifying for us (472). In his analysis of Ernest Becker's book, *The Denial of Death,* social psychologist Sheldon Solomon would say that this shift from beauty to terror that both Jamie and Dillard depict is humanity's moment of self-awareness, a moment when we are overcome with the thought of our own finiteness. Solomon suggests that moments like these will result in us surrendering to our "Death Anxiety," but I want to contend that Jamie provides us with an alternative response, one that may provide humanity with the ability to quell that anxiety and find contentment with our existence. Again, just like Dillard's description of her experience with the uncanny as if she were "slipping into fever" or "falling down that hole in sleep," Jamie describes her first experience with her glacial landscape as if it were "like some

slow delirium, a fantasy that you can't shake, but with an undertow of menace" (Dillard 9, Jamie 7). The moment she interacts with the sublime or uncanny, her consciousness enters a liminal state. That "undertow of menace" is the human fear of what we don't know. This unknown is attractive to us, but also oozes an ominous quality. At first glance, the icebergs are "white and dazzling" (2); however, when night falls and darkness engulfs her surroundings, Jamie thinks that "[t]he icebergs are much more sinister now" because the darkness accentuates the indifference of the natural world towards humankind and reminds us of our absence of knowledge in regards to it (18). This is a place that Jamie describes as "white nihilism" that lacks any human influence, so of course, we are drawn to its shocking and mystifying starkness. Ultimately though, its uncivilized, unfamiliar, and uncontrolled essence horrifies us and makes us question who we are in relation to it. Scottish eco-critic Louisa Gairn, contends that Jamie immerses herself and readers in these uncomfortable and alien "liminal zones[,]… signalling our own ambivalent status as embodied beings often struggling against 'nature' in the form of mortality, or simply inhospitable terrain" (135). In order for us to realize our innate connection with the non-human, we must come to terms with our own triviality and smallness in juxtaposition with it. Both Gairn and Jamie would indicate that this transformative process takes active effort and consciousness, and we must fight against our human bodies and minds to gain that needed shared sense of belonging with nature.

In the opening pages of "Aurora," just moments after their first encounter with the wild and alien arctic landscape, the group's guide makes the suggestion for everyone to engage in a few minutes of silence to "just listen" (3). Jamie and her fellow travelers are instantly shifted from an overwhelming visual encounter and taken captive by an auditory natural experience. Just as how Dillard describes how the eclipse seems to silence humanity as it occurs, throughout the

voyage, Jamie frequently comments on the silence that ensues while the travelers are in the face of this natural, untouched landscape and inexplicable phenomena. As they pass icebergs, she reflects on how "no one speaks then," and "[i]t's awhile before anyone" does because our limited, insignificant human language that we praise ourselves on is no match for the immensity of the natural world (5, 7). The landscape itself exudes this silence, and it becomes "some sort of life force" that they are "float[ing] on the surface of" (16). This silence is so powerful that Jamie believes it has the ability to "dismiss a sound, as wind would dismiss a feather" (5). The omnipresent, all-encompassing aura of the silence is just as much of an amplification of nature's utter indifference toward humankind as the "vast, unnerving" landscape she witnesses. Jamie also reflects on the difficulties humans have to overcome when immersed in something as extraordinary as this "deep silence." She remarks that "[s]ome people say you can never experience true silence, because you come to hear the high whine of your own nerves," and sooner or later "life begins to whip us on our way," back to the same comfortable, mundane, and ordinary human realm Dillard refers to (5). It's as though our human minds fight against the uncanny in moments like this, and we must taper our emotional response in order to accept our existence alongside something so foreign to our animal selves, "driven by cold and hunger" and our "[n]erves" (5). The silence exposes the same emotionlessness that exists within the natural world, echoing the coldness Eliot and Schiller think should exist within literature, and especially, I would argue, within climate fiction. We as a society need to understand how unpredictable and callous the natural world is. As Ghosh contends, we need a "renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and… the planet itself" (63). For Jamie, this setting she's experiencing seems to be alive and "carries a sense of enormous strength withheld" that we as humans can't compete with (3). However, we can

discover similarities within it that can help us to gain a newfound level of respect for nature as a whole. While Jamie is describing the aurora borealis, she states that it radiates "an intellectualism" and that "[t]here's something in the lights" she recognizes in herself: "a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with their own arrangements" (12–13). Realistically, we are beings that derived from nature, so it only makes sense that we would both possess similar characteristics, but because we have so far removed ourselves from nature, and our culture allows us to distract ourselves from this connection, we have forgotten. This type of literature has the ability to remove us from the pedestal we've placed ourselves on and force us to reconsider our relationship with the natural world and how we should exist within it. For Jamie, "[s]omething was changing" during this experience (15). This small, but pivotal change in our perspective on the world is one that can better our species as a whole.

Just as Jamie's "Aurora" gives voice to a decentered situation, expands the cultural narrative to include the non-human, and brings it to the forefront, texts such as "Aurora" and "Total Eclipse" force readers will come face to face with the difficult moral and existential truths that plague our existence. As Dziok-Łazarecka argues, "Jamie's ways of looking at the environs are a method in which our culture, Western culture, responds to the changes within nature—and a way of admitting how simplistic our understanding of it has always been" (16). Reading literature such as "Aurora" engages humanity with a deeper and revitalized viewpoint on the complexities of the human-nonhuman relationship. Furthermore, Gairn, with inspiration from critic and philosopher Timothy Morton, would stress that this sense of belonging to both the human and non-human worlds extends to democracy and should impact the way humanity functions and interacts with nature (142). This approach connects with, and even expands upon, Nussbaum's "world citizen" to one with a collective narrative filled with ecological empathy and

invoking the belief that all beings are equals. Conclusively, Kathleen Jamie's writing promotes a conscious and liminal awareness of humankind's finite existence and truthful relationship with the natural world, in turn, advocating for a harmonious acceptance for all.

Conclusion

In the young adult novel *Nothing* by Danish author Janne Teller, a group of middle school students attempts to prove to a fellow classmate that there truly is meaning in life. Many critics declare this novel the Dutch version of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* because it is also a tale in which humankind destroys itself. On the opening page of the text readers are subjected to a quote from the character Pierre Anthon. On the first day of the school year, Pierre tells his entire class that "[n]othing matters. I have known for a long time. So nothing is worth doing. I just realized that" (Teller 1). This outlook on life as being without meaning is not unique to this story, but instead a haunting thought that plagues many young and old in the modern world. In a country riddled with violence and hate in various forms from school shootings to political discourse, it is difficult to see the world in another light, and it is especially detrimental to those straddling the threshold of innocence and maturity, vacillating in the throngs of defining one's identity in relation to all others. While this problem is rooted within our culture and patriarchal systems of thought, our hyperreality has lulled us into a forgetful trance, tricking us into thinking we are unable to cure this human-created disease. As Schiller reminds us, "[I]f man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it's only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom" (495). What is so ironic is that we are the creators of war and politics as well as the devastation we have wreaked upon our planet; we are the creators of our own oppression. Schiller says that "[o]nce the increase of empirical knowledge, and more exact modes of thought, made sharper divisions between the sciences inevitable, and once the increasingly complex machinery of State necessitated a more rigorous separation of ranks…then the inner unity of human nature was

severed too" (497). And even though generations past put up a good fight, unfortunately for us, modern society is left to pick up the pieces and find our way back to this "inner unity."

Youth culture today is faced with a lack of confinement in all aspects of the world. The virtual, hyperreality modern society is living in forces adolescents, as well as adults, to lose aspects of humanity. This thesis has advocated for the agency of literature to rectify these problems, specifically literature that brings the decentered other to the forefront, but many still probably wonder whether or not this literature alone has the ability to outlast or outweigh the power of the capitalistic mainstream and patriarchal ideology that controls modern Western cultural narrative. How can we get the crucially important decentered human and non-human voices to permeate the boundaries of our fabricated society? I argue the answer exists within one of the age-old pillars of our civilization, in the vehicles capable of molding new perspectives for the masses: teachers. Louis Althusser briefly states in his article "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that teachers who are willing to break with the status quo "are a kind of hero" (1297). If all teachers begin "to turn the few weapons they can find in history and learning" and use them to "'teach' against the ideology, the system and the practices in which [we are all] trapped," we can start to take steps towards a better society overall (1297). Education is a dialogue for students to immerse themselves in, to reflect, challenge, critique, clarify, and find value in; it serves as a haven from judgment and an incubator for growth. It is meant to be an environment outside of everyday life, a liminal space. With it, we can evolve into a society that respects and peacefully coexists with each other and the world we live in.

This evolution must, however, begin with our youth. The Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in a recent Ted Talk warns us of "how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story…as children" ("The danger of a single story."). She explains "the dangers of a

single story" for our children and how damaging this single viewpoint can be. If teachers begin to take responsibility for the initiation of the world's exposure to a diversity of voices, both human and non-human, and erase the remnants of the single, capitalistic American story, we just might have a chance at avoiding the fate Sheldon Solomon thinks we may succumb to: being "the only species to ever live that will possibly cause its own extinction" ("Grave Matters: The Role of Death in Life—Sheldon Solomon, PhD."). An exposure to these different voices maintains the power, similar to Kathleen Jamie's experience in the Arctic, to cause "a mental shift in [our] perception of literature" ("The Danger of a Single Story"). This shift might appear miniscule at first, but just like the "enormous strength withheld" in nature, it has the capacity to change humankind at its core. Our youth will gain perspective of the human and non-human beings that exist outside of the extremely privileged American culture, and hopefully this perspective will lead them to explore or at least respect minority and non-human voices in the future, at best allowing them to find the liminality Jane Eyre masters and avoiding the fate Tess Durbeyfield falls victim to.

In reality, all readers can benefit from texts of this caliber. They teach us that no person is solely good or solely evil and when put in the most emotionally jarring situations, people discover who they really are. If we educate ourselves on the various voices of the world and the ugliness and darkness that exists inside humanity, we will learn how to express empathy for each other and avoid destroying one another. If we educate ourselves on the immense power of the natural world and how we, as humans, are meant to coexist within it, we will discover our own limits, and we just might find the answers to all of the burning questions that plague our existence. We can find internal freedom in literature, which, as Schiller would argue, will lead us to emotional transcendence, or as I might argue, to develop a liminal identity, an identity that

allows us to find balance within reality again rather than floating off aimlessly into hyperreality. We can also find external freedom in literature, which will allow us to break from the political and cultural shackles that bind us. If we use literature and the arts in these ways to shatter the hyperreal illusions and models we have created for ourselves, we might actually be able to evolve into a society built on respect for one another and the world we call home. Schiller declares that "[h]umanity has lost its dignity; but Art has rescued it and preserved it in significant stone" (502). This is exactly what literature and the arts are meant to do: remind us of our self-inflicted blindness and monstrous capabilities and guide us toward becoming compassionate and moral creatures rooted in reality, wholeheartedly enchanted, as Bennett would say, by all, human and non-human alike.

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