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Cecilia is a junior at Heidelberg University studying Environmental Science and English Writing. She served as an assistant editor for The Rock Creek Review last year, and was honored to be asked to serve as managing editor. Cecilia is also a prose editor for Heidelberg's Morpheus Literary Magazine as well as an oboe player for the Heidelberg Symphonic Band. Beyond the bounds of literary academia, Cecilia enjoys sandbox gaming, handsewing, and spying on the two geese that live outside her window.

Maddisen Mikkelsen:

Maddisen Mikkelsen is an aspiring book editor and author studying at Heidelberg University, where she is building a strong foundation in literature, writing, and editorial practice while earning recognition for her creative work. She is actively involved in campus life through CRU, the Stunt and Cheer teams, and frequent writing sessions at the Heidelbean coffee shop, all while contributing to The Rock Creek Review as an editor. Beyond the page, Maddisen is known for her drive, her eye for detail, and her genuine love of connecting readers with stories that matter. Readers can connect with her on Instagram at @maddisengrace2024.

Dr. Barry Devine:

Barry has been an editor since he was fourteen-years-old. He started as an editor on his high-school literary magazine, then worked on his college literary magazine staff as well. In grad school he shifted to freelance academic editing and served as Managing Editor for *The James Joyce Literary Supplement*. He later became the James Joyce content editor of the *Irish Literary Supplement.* He has co-edited two books, *Teaching James Joyce in the Twenty-First Century* (UP Florida, 2025) and *Sally Rooney: Perspectives and Approaches* (Bucknell UP, 2026). Barry launched *The Rock Creek Review* in order to give his undergraduate students more opportunities for real-world editing and publishing experience.

Dear Reader,

I can honestly say I never expected to be in this position. Beyond the ever-present imposter syndrome, I also began college majoring in environmental science. Running a literary magazine was so out of the picture for me that it wasn't even at the bottom of my list - it failed to be included in the first place.

But after a literature class my freshman year revived my love for literary criticism, I added a second major in English. And through the support (read: loving shoves) of my friends, family, and professors, I found myself in charge of this year's issue of *The Rock Creek Review*.

It took me a while to pick a suitable theme. I started out wanting something related to nature, something to give a life and voice to the ecosystems present in literature. But I couldn't find the right words. So I took the idea - uplifting unheard voices - and expanded beyond the typical notion of "nature".

It's often overlooked that humans are animals themselves. I remember sitting in a biology lecture, listening to a professor talk about the characteristics of primates. Opposable thumbs, of course, and forward-facing eyes. The last two were what caught my attention: complex social behavior and large brains. Often humanity's intelligence is used to separate us from the "base" animals. But our interpersonal relationships aren't unique.

Perhaps more than anyone, the late Jane Goodall understood how similar humans are to our primate relatives. Having spent years among chimpanzees, she was one of the first to realize their social complexities and human-like emotions. So if these chimpanzees - with their friendships, rivalries, mates, and children - are "nature", then we as humans must be, too.

And so I came to the theme of "untold stories". Something broader and all-encompassing, but still true to my original intent. In this issue you'll find interesting and insightful dissections of everything from young adult fiction explored by Gabrielle Lee to the works of nineteenth-century Higuchi dissected by Coleman Numbers. Despite their

differences, each essay is united on one front: each delves into their works in a way previously untold.

I doubt anyone takes a position like this and ends up saying it was easy. No one ever feels properly prepared or responsible enough. It seems every introduction serves as a plea: "I don't know how I ended up here, so have mercy!" So I'll make this quick and succinct.

By some miracle I ended up being the managing editor of a literary magazine, and I got to work my magic. Enjoy!

Cecilia Groth

Managing Editor of *The Rock Creek Review,* 2026

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Julia Koncurat is a junior at Brigham Young University double-majoring in English and Portuguese studies. She is originally from Bel Air, Maryland, and is passionate about music, nature, and writing. She has previously published criticism in "Criterion: A Journal of Literary Analysis" and poetry in "Three Panels Press".

Playing Man: Domination and Literary Queerness in *Emma*

Julia Koncurat

Emma is a book about marriage. While it certainly touches on other themes, such as class distinctions and women's roles in society, the novel both starts and ends with a wedding, the only Austen novel to depict the wedding between the two main characters. It's interesting, then, that *Emma* has also widely been read as the queerest of Austen's novels. Like other Austen novels, Emma begins with an array of bachelors and bachelorettes who will experiment with different relationships before finding their partner, but if differs from other Austen novels in the way that gender and societal inappropriately do not seem to hinder potential relationships: Mr. Elton audaciously proposes to Emma, a woman way above his social class, Emma flirts with and displays attraction towards Harriet Smith; and rich Frank Churchill flouts a secret engagement with penniless Jane Fairfax. All this unorthodoxy seemingly ends with Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley, an uncontroversially appropriate relationship. As such, this marriage has long been read as a return to normalcy, and, more significantly, heteronormativity: a term used to describe the societal expectations, pressure, and behaviors, caused by institutions of heterosexuality. However, queerness can come in many forms, and Emma can still challenge heteronormativity within a heteronormative marriage. In this essay, I propose that Emma's queerness comes not less from her sexuality (her relationships with women) and more in her gender presentation (her acting as a man within those relationships), a power dynamic which Emma maintains even in her marriage. Thus, Emma and Knightley's marriage does not signal a return to heteronormativity but a perpetuation of Emma's queerness.

It is important firstly to establish our definition of "queer." In a literary sense, Austen's works have long been considered "queer." In the realm of queer and LGBT theory, characters can be identified as queer even without using a specific label. This is because critics of queer Jane Austen and queer theorists alike feel it would be inaccurate to impose twenty-first-century labels onto nineteenth-century characters (Greenfield 344). In her landmark essay, "Queer and Now" Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines "queer" as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender or sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (8). Queer, in the literary sense, thus transcends modern labels like gay and lesbian to include anything in opposition to heteronormativity. In this sense, contemporary critics of Jane Austen point to her work's lack of passion as strange, or queer, qualities, although that word wasn't yet attributed with sexuality (Johnson, "The Divine Miss Jane" 149). Some scholars have pushed against this, asserting that modern-day labels have a unique ability to resonate with queer readers. Claudia Johnson, for example, states, "I cast my lot with queer Austen and believe that the question of Austen's reception and readership merits substantial consideration" (5). As an outcome of this discourse, the use of modern labels in Austen queer theory is common, but not strictly necessary. In critical queer theory, queerness can be applied to any character or relationship that divulges from heteronormativity.

The word queer also comprises gender presentation as well as sexuality. Afterall, another common name for critical queer theory is critical LGBT theory, highlighting how aspects of queerness are found in both sexuality and gender. This connection is established most famously by Judith Butler, whose work on gender theory emphasized how gender queerness can challenge the heteronormative order just as much as sexual queerness. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", Judith Butler establishes that systems of society are contingent upon the marriage of a dominant man and a submissive woman (524). This concept is also addressed in, *Gender Troubles* where Butler highlights how the submissive role of women is critical in the relationship between

families formed through the exchange of women in marriage, a dynamic which is central to Austen novels. Sexuality and gender are traditionally studied separately in the world of literary analysis, but they often overlap. Thus, studying a character's gender presentation can be just as important as studying their sexuality when it comes to establishing their queerness.

No Jane Austen character has been identified as queer so much as Emma Woodhouse. It's difficult to trace the exact origins of the argument, but many point to Edmund Wilson as the first to raise the point in his 1944 essay, "A Long Talk About Jane Austen". Wilson asserts that Emma is "relatively indifferent to men" and, as such is doomed to an unhappy marriage (39). References to Emma's queerness appeared in feminist criticism as early as 1988, but it was never the focus on these arguments (Johnson; Mooneyham). Independent of its origin, it's clear that queer Emma fully entered the scholarly conversation in the late 1990s. "Why *shouldn't* Emma be a lesbian?" Susan M. Korba states in 1997. Her paper describes how Emma holds a sexually dominant male position in her relationships with Mrs. Weston and Harriet, and highlights the frustration that Emma feels in her inability to dominate Jane Fairfax. Korba's work sparked both praise and controversy, with many critics rushing to defend Austen from queer theory and its supposed "over-sexualization" over her characters (Quinn 57). Thus, while Korba's paper is certainly not the first to recognize Emma as queer, it is undoubtedly the most famous, and it is rare to find a queer Emma paper, or even any paper on Austen and queer theory, that doesn't reference her work.

In Korba's wake, many critics choose to attribute the label of lesbian to Emma's character (Fulk; Korba; Miller; Moore; Potter). In these arguments, Emma's queerness is primarily established through her attraction to three women in the text: Mrs. Weston, Jane Fairfax, and Harriet Smith. For example, Mark K. Fulk describes how Emma dresses in black the day that Mrs. Weston is married, drawing imagery to the mourning of a spouse, and asserts that her relationship with Harriet is "charged with the language of courtship" (252; 253); Lisa Moore echoes these arguments and adds Emma's fascination with

Harriet's appearance, as well as Knightley's statement that Mrs. Weston's relationship with Emma as prepares Mrs. Weston for marriage as evidence of Emma's lesbianism (120; 126). Recently, other queer theorists have chosen to explore Emma's queerness using other labels. In 2024, Leigh-Michil George and Lillian Lu labeled Emma as asexual, rather than lesbian, focusing on Emma's difficulty of understanding her own relationship with Frank Churchill (157). These sources highlight the established conversation surrounding queer Emma, with most scholars establishing Emma's queerness through her relationship with women.

Another aspect of Emma's queerness is her gender presentation: her taking on the male role in her relationships with women. As a rich unmarried woman, Emma plays a particularly male role in her society: she enjoys a great deal of independence and is mistress of her own house (Austen 67). However, Emma is not content in this role. Rather than simply be mistress of Hartfield, Emma would expand upon her role by acting as mistress of all of Highbury, especially the women. Emma contrives relationships for Mrs. Weston and Harriet as a father plays matchmaker. This dynamic has been recognized by queer and feminist critics alike. Claudia Johnson, for example, states that Emma "plays man" in the way she performs a dominant, masculine role, acting almost as a monarch over Highbury (*Women, Politics and the Novel* 123). Susan M. Korba dubs Emma's control as "erotic domination," describing how Emma's relationships with women mimics those of the married couples in the book (143). Korba states that Emma's sexual attraction towards women causes her to dominate the women she loves, effectively acting as a man in those relationships (148). Although Emma's masculinity is central to these arguments, neither critic argues that Emma's masculinity makes her queer. To Johnson, Emma is a feminist in her masculinity, and, to Korba, Emma's masculinity is simply a manifestation of her sexual attraction towards women. However, Emma's masculinity challenges heteronormativity even outside of her relationships with women, as heteronormative order is contingent upon women's submissiveness. Thus, I argue that Emma's queerness can be established in her dominance, in her acting as a man, rather than solely in her attraction to women.

This is important because Emma's marrying Knightley is commonly identified by critics as a return to heteronormativity. "Heterosexual order is reaffirmed", Susan Korba states (21). Tiffany F. Potter even goes as far to say that Emma is a "victim" of heteronormativity, now trapped in a marriage with a man for whom she feels no attraction (196). This supposed return to heteronormativity is crucial, as many critics interpret this as Austen presenting queerness as a negative trait, necessarily overcome in Emma's character progression. For example, Lisa Moore argues that Emma's sexual attraction towards women exists primarily to reinforce the heterosexual order: Emma's "unnatural" relationships with women are contrasted by her "correct" eventual marriage to Knightley (142). By placing Emma's marriage as a return to heteronormativity, *Emma* then becomes a heteronormative narrative. Indeed, when using such narrow labels as lesbian or asexual, it's hard to argue for Emma's marriage as anything other than an end of queerness. However, considering larger concepts of literary queerness, Emma's marriage can still be non-heteronormative even if it doesn't neatly fit these specific labels. As I propose that Emma's queerness is established primarily through her masculinity, it can be maintained even in her relationships with men. Thus, if Emma continues to defy heteronormativity in her relationship with Knightley, then there is no end to Emma's queerness. The narrative could then be read not as being anti-queer, but as in support of queer dynamics.

Throughout the novel, Emma seems to desire the same sort of masculine control in her relationship with Mr. Knightley that she does with Harriet Smith, or the other women of Highbury, but this desire is often overlooked due to Knightley's being a man. He is thus reduced to the mentor archetype, eliminating the possibility of queerness. While it is true that Knightley repeatedly asserts his influence over Emma in the novel, she equally tries to assert her influence over him, although she is admittedly unsuccessful in the beginning of the novel. "Knightley and Emma stand on equal footing", Claudia Johnson states, referring to the fact that Emma and Knightley are equally reproachful each other in their conversation throughout the novel, "this necessarily modifies the dynamic…Emma dishes out almost as much as she gets" (*Women, Politics and the Novel* 141). Indeed, Knightley's

attempts at domination are met with constant resistance: Emma defends her matchmaking early in the novel when Knightley questions it, and she fights back when he scolds her for influencing Harriet to deny Robert Martin's proposal (10; 48). Emma also shows instances of playing the male role in her relationship with Knightley. For example, she asks Knightley to dance during the Westons' ball, and she maintains a distinct awareness of his schedule and his habits (254; 348). Additionally, as their relationship progresses, Knightley seems to move away from his mentor role, giving Emma leeway in her domination.

The climatic Box Hill scene serves as a pivotal moment not just for Emma's character, but Knightley's. While Knightley's thoughts are largely concealed under Emma's inner dialogue, his development can be seen in his actions. Before his reproach of Emma, Knightley "[looks] around, as if to see that no one were near", and he turns away immediately after speaking, as if feeling shame in his own actions (287; 289). Knightley's guilt is manifested more in his next appearance, through his softening of his reproach towards Emma, the uncharacteristic affection seeming to overcompensate for his earlier cruelty (296). In fact, by the time they are engaged, Knightley confesses that he regrets all his reproaches of Emma, not just those at Box Hill: "My interference was quite as likely to do harm as good. It was very natural for you to say, what right has he to lecture me?...I do not believe I did you any good" (355). Thus, while Knightley begins the novel as a mentor character, his role slowly becomes more submissive until he finally denounces his right to domination.

This change in Knightley has already been acknowledged in the world of feminist criticism. Mary Waldron analyzes Knightley's development in depth, arguing that Austen conceals Knightley's development under the archetype of the mentor figure in Emma's life and shows his character not to be as perfect or authoritative as Emma might sometimes believe him to be. Other feminist critics, even while largely focusing on Emma, nod to Knightley's decreasing mentorship throughout the novel. Claudia Johnson, for example, touches on how Knightley seems to dominate Emma less as the novel progresses, and

Laura G. Mooneyham asserts that both Emma and Knightley must learn to submit to each other in their journey towards marriage ("*Emma*" 143; 145). However, Knightley's development has been largely ignored by queer theorists, even though his submission and Emma's behavior towards him provides crucial insights towards the end of the novel and supposed "return" to heteronormativity.

A display of Emma's dominance is found throughout the novel in the way she talks about Knightley when he isn't around. When talking with others, Emma seems to want to be considered an expert on all things Knightley and gets offended when others even imply a knowledge of his character or his motivations. When Mrs. Weston suggests that Mr. Knightley might be interested in Jane Fairfax, Emma responds negatively, stating "I cannot at all consent to Mr. Knightley's marrying; and I am sure it is not at all likely" (172). The word "consent" is key in this statement, as it echoes the language used when fathers give their daughters permission to marry. The idea that Emma would have any right to consent or deny any attempt at Knightley to marry is ridiculous, yet she uses the word so casually, as if the authority should naturally be hers. Interesting too, in this idea of consent, is that Emma exercises the same degree of authority when she subtly disapproves of the match between Harriet and Robert Martin.

Another similar instance of Emma's dominance is found when Harriet believes Mr. Knightley has feelings for her. In pondering the potential relationship between Harriet and Mr. Knightley, Emma's thoughts display her possessiveness: "Till now that she was threatened with its loss, Emma had never known how much of her happiness depended on being *first* with Mr. Knightley, first in interest and affection" (319). While this possessiveness could be dismissed as mere romantic jealousy, it seems that Emma is more preoccupied about winning than love. She wants to be the most important relation to Knightley and hold the most amount of power over his decisions and affections. It's interesting to note that Emma again behaves the same way when Harriet gets engaged to Robert Martin, stating, "I only want to keep Harriet to myself" (52). Emma, then, seems to think she holds, or at least should hold, the same level of dominance over Knightley as she

does over Harriet Smith. She acts, or presumes to act, as a man in both relationships. In her argument, Korba asserts that this behavior towards Harriet is what makes the relationship queer. It is interesting, then, that Emma's queer behavior persists even in a "heteronormative" relationship. The queerness in these relationships comes not, then, from the gender of Emma's romantic partner, but from Emma herself, and her non-heteronormative behavior.

Emma also takes offense when Mrs. Elton insinuates an intimacy with Knightley, as it threatens her dominance. When Mrs. Elton refers to him as "Knightley" instead of "Mr. Knightley," a presumption that implies close friendship, she establishes herself as a rival to Emma's dominance. Mrs. Elton, of course, is in no way a romantic rival to Emma, as she's already married. Emma's disdain is formed not then from romantic jealousy, but from a threat to her power over Knightley. The tension between Emma and Mrs. Elton comes to a head in a scene at the end of the novel, after Emma and Mr. Knightley are already engaged. In the scene in question, Emma has visited the Bateses house at same time as Mrs. Elton and the two are subsequently forced into conversation. The conversation turns to Mr. Knightley when Mrs. Elton mentions her husband had gone to see him. Emma and Mrs. Elton then dispute over Knightley's schedule, Mrs. Elton asserting that Knightley has a meeting with Mr. Elton that very day, with Emma maintaining that the meeting was scheduled for the next day. At that moment, Mr. Elton appears and supports Emma's side of the story, unconsciously supporting her authority. Even more, on not finding Knightley at home, where he had gone to visit him, Mr. Elton turns to Emma, stating, "Miss Woodhouse, this is not like our friend Knightley?—Can you explain it?" (352). In doing so, Mr. Elton, even before knowing that Emma and Knightley are engaged, has established her as an expert on his behavior. Emma has won her battle for Knightley, to the point where even others see her as dominant over him.

Interestingly, this last portion of the novel, after Emma's engagement with Knightley, is largely ignored by queer theorists, as it comes after the "return to heteronormativity". However, some of Emma's greatest triumphs come after her

engagement, the greatest of them being Knightley's removal to Hartfield after the marriage. In "Making Room: Queer Domesticity in Jane Austen's *Emma* and the Anne Lister Diaries", Margaret A. Miller talks about the importance of the home as a fictional character's "architecture of self" (226). Hartfield is essentially Emma's domain. She is the mistress of the house and holds most power in her life when she is at home. In fact, Miller asserts that the naming of the manor is no mistake: "for who will be the next tenant of Emma's beloved *Hart*field?" (227). Who will next inhabit Emma's heart? Both Mrs. Weston and Harriet spend time living at Hartfield, highlighting the queerness of Emma's domestic relationships. It is only fitting then that Mr. Knightley should come to live at Hartfield after his marriage to Emma. Not only is he playing a traditional female role in quitting his home in the marriage, but he is putting himself further in Emma's power by coming to live in her space. Moving into Hartfield also reflects a further diminution of Knightley's power and independence, the very same things that allow Emma to act as a man. Knightley's removal to Hartfield reflects Emma's further domination of him, and her masculinity in the relationship.

Thus, while Knightley begins the novel as a mentor figure to Emma, the power dynamic in their relationship shifts as the novel progresses, allowing Emma to gain dominance over him. This dominant role mirrors the role that Emma plays in her romantic relationships with women and is non-heteronormative in the way that it challenges heterosexual power dynamics in Emma's society. One impact of this argument is that it pushes the validity of using a literary definition of queerness rather than implementing specific labels, as characters can be queer even if their queerness doesn't match 21st-century labels or they're not currently participating in a queer relationship. Additionally, arguments such as this could be used to bridge the gap between critical queer theory and critical gender theory, as homosexuality and gender-queerness are often inextricable identities. Finally, the assertion of Emma's continued queerness, even in marriage, is important because it means the end of *Emma* doesn't reflect a return to heteronormativity, but a continuation of queerness. *Emma* is still a book about marriage,

but it isn't about heteronormativity and, while Emma does have character flaws to overcome in her journey towards matrimony, her queerness is not one of them. Instead, *Emma* continues to challenge heterosexual power structures, with a queer heroine and a marriage that perpetuates her power.

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Coleman Numbers is a senior undergraduate at Brigham Young University. After graduation, he plans to pursue graduate studies in twentieth and twenty-first century American literature. His research interests include science fiction and the Anthropocene, the intersection of Japanese and American literature, and AI use in the writing process and in university writing centers. He is an avid amateur drummer and tries to write space opera in his spare time.

'A Lotus Flower in the Mud': Woman as Dialectical Image in 19th-century Japan and America

Coleman Numbers

In the late 19th century, women experienced the effects of accelerating modernity in conflicting ways. By the 1890s, flourishing popular print culture had created new kinds of female readers and writers in the United States and Britain, and the emergence of the city generated new forms of employment, education, and social capital. At the same time, industrial capitalism turbocharged the conspicuous consumption that forced many women in the middle and upper classes into the role of social ornament. Meanwhile, women in the urban working class, alienated from the old support structures of family, church, and community, lived in the shadow of exploitation and prostitution.

Literature from this period often reflects on this vulnerability, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* to Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Making of a Marchioness.* Narratives about women protagonists who struggle to transcend class and gender boundaries, with varying degrees of success, were common—though these, and the contemporary social movements growing out of and influencing them, have been criticized for narrowly focusing on white women of the middle and upper classes. Ida B. Wells, for example, confronted white suffragists for failing to condemn and work against the practice of lynching. In our own time, thinkers like bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have called for a more global approach to feminism. In the wake of a Western model of fin-de-siecle feminism and women's studies, then, re-evaluating women's literature of the late 19th-century in global terms remains an urgent task.

Two women writers of the time, Edith Wharton and Ichiyō Higuchi, may offer some insight on this task. In the United States, Wharton's *The House of Mirth* traces New York socialite Lily Bart's fall from high society. While Wharton's novel focuses on the American upper class, Lily Bart's failure to scale a hierarchy of self-commodification reveals how accelerating American capital preyed upon women as a vulnerable group. In Japan, Higuchi's short story "Nigorie" ("Muddy Waters") follows O-Riki, a Meiji era prostitute whose fate is determined by various men who exploit her, sexually or otherwise. Like *The House of Mirth*, "Nigorie" considers the effects of rapid modernization on women's fortunes.

That two writers of the same period, incisive critics of their respective worlds, both consider women's material circumstances in the face of modernity shouldn't surprise us. What is perhaps more surprising, and certainly worthy of more investigation, is how both stories parallel one another in plot, characterization, and theme. Specifically, both writers center their stories on certain character tropes: the despairing, ill-fated female protagonist; a foppish suitor; a disapproving traditional woman; and a disgruntled former lover. In this essay, I argue that these parallel character types reflect an expanding, accelerating global system of capital that constrains women in similar ways regardless of nation, culture, or even of class. Each story is a distinct but comparable instantiation of what Wai Chee Dimock calls "debasing exchange," a system in which "use and abuse are the same thing" (783-85). Taken together these similarities reflect how debasing exchange emerged in different literatures of the period because of the expansion of global capital. Additionally, I will show how both Lily Bart and O-Riki, as characters who experience the friction between industry and nature, embody and reconfigure Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image." Overall, this paper functions as a case study in how to productively put Higuchi and Wharton into conversation.

Higuchi Ichiyō and Edith Wharton

If Edith Wharton's life traces a long rise through the ranks of literary acclaim and relative wealth, Higuchi Ichiyō's life offers the mirror image: a sharp descent into poverty consequent to emerging capital. Higuchi, born Higuchi Natsuko in 1872, entered a family with tentatively promising economic prospects. In 1867, Higuchi's father Noriyoshi attained samurai status, and the relative wealth afforded by his government post enabled her to pursue literary interests. When she was fourteen, Higuchi was sent by her encouraging father to study classical poetry with *waka* and *tanka* master Utako Nakajima.

The fortunes of Higuchi, her younger sister, and her mother reversed in 1889, however, when Noriyoshi died of an illness. Noriyoshi's death saddled the three women with enormous business debt, and the family would move into successively poorer areas of Edo (now Tokyo), eventually landing in a neighborhood only five minutes walking from the city's red-light district. Here, Higuchi met women who informed the tales of lower-class Japanese women that would quickly win her literary fame. "No walls or moats separated [Higuchi and her family] from the second-class courtesans of Maruyama-Fukuyama," writes Higuchi biographerRobert Lyons Danly. "The beauties came to Ichiyō when they needed a love letter drafted, and [Ichiyō] became an expert on the inner workings of the demimonde" (141). Higuchi died of tuberculosis on November 23, 1896, at the age of twenty-four. Like many of the women in her stories, Higuchi's fate might be read as a direct consequence of the emerging capital system that created volatile socioeconomic possibilities—a system that cared little for a young woman with no ties to husband or father.

Wharton and Higuchi never made contact, and there is no evidence that either read any of the other's work. Yet each writer's familiarity with different sides of the class structure enables them to critique the same oppression produced by 19th century modernization. Reading these two writers together through Dimock's debasing exchange reveals how Meiji Japan and Gilded Age New York share at least one thing—embeddedness within a system of global capital that produces oppressive circumstances for women.

Debasing Exchange in "Nigorie" and The House of Mirth

In her essay on *The House of Mirth,* Wai Chee Dimock describes debasing exchange, which alchemizes human interaction into commodity, as a form of "doublethink": one's willingness to set terms for a social transaction that demand payment from someone else while neglecting payment in kind (787). Throughout the novel, Lily repeatedly makes these types of payments, either to apathetic and foppish suitors, disapproving female relatives, or to a married man who lends her money while silently expecting sexual attention. Over the course of the novel, then, Lily finds herself disregarded, ostracized, and degraded—all while refusing to play by the same fiendish rules (Dimock 788). This attempt to transcend the system of debasing exchange pushes her towards poverty and eventual death by overdose.

Dimock notes one limitation in Wharton's novel: a "curiously unexamined, curiously unsubstantiated" romantic view of the working class as safe, somehow, from debasing exchange (790). In view of this gap, reading Higuchi Ichiyō alongside Wharton reveals more about debasing exchange as a global, cross-class phenomenon. "Nigorie," centered on the low-class prostitute O-Riki, is even more unflinching in its contemplation of the exchange system. Like Lily Bart, O-Riki aspires for a life both materially and spiritually richer. "How long do I have to be confined to this awful state of mine?" O-Riki wonders. "My life is utterly dull, worthless, stale, wretched, mournful, and hopeless! But is this my life? Is my life worth just this? Ah, how nauseating, terribly nauseating" (Higuchi 192). Unlike Lily Bart, though, for whom "the squalid compromises of poverty" mean the "cheap conveniences and hideous wallpapers" of her economically independent friend Gerty (Wharton 25), O-Riki faces genuine poverty: she lives and works in a dingy brothel in the poor part of the city's pleasure zone. In this way, "Nigorie" examines debasing exchange from the other side of both class and ocean. Despite dramatically differing in social, cultural, and class context, however, both stories revolve around a similar set of core relationships—the unserious young suitor, the disapproving woman, and the bitter former

lover. Correlating similarities between these two stories will help us observe how a global system of exchange places similar pressures on women in different contexts.

It might be easy, of course, to chalk these similarities up to power differences between men and women that predate industry, agriculture, and language. But we can show that global modernization specifically, and not merely power dynamics generally, accounts for the features of "Nigorie" that so closely resemble those of *The House of Mirth*. In arguing the importance of physical spaces in the story, Mayumi Manabe points out that the establishment at which O-Riki works, and where much of the story takes place, is almost certainly a *meishuya*, or liquor house, which fronted as a restaurant and offered the services of unlicensed prostitutes (30). These spaces were new developments, workarounds to an 1872 law that created a three-tier system of high-class geishas, licensed courtesans, and illegal prostitutes. The law was an attempt to regulate Japan's sex industry, to make it conform with Western norms—but the law instead made sex work more dangerous for poor women (Manabe 31). Additionally, new feminine norms prescribed by the Meiji government, summarized in the phrase "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai-kenbo*), constrained educational possibilities for sex workers. "By the turn of the century," historian Amy Stanley writes, "education had been reconceived as a wedge that divided women destined to work in the sex trade from those who would not" (556). It's clear, then, that O-Riki names the tidal motions of the age as well as personal resignation when she concludes to her lover: "I am only a slut…even though we try to be decent in what we say, if any of us girls stayed away from evil, like a lotus flower in the mud, there would be no one coming to see us" (Higuchi 195). O-Riki and other illegal prostitutes are cast in the mud by definition. No matter the elegant words or arts that these young women might master, economic and social circumstances preclude advancement or basic dignity.

Pressures besides the strictly gender-ideological underlie the plight of women in "Nigorie." One Japanese literary critic observed that *meishuya* in Yanagi-cho, a hypothesized setting of "Nigorie," multiplied in response to the surge of workers who had come to the nearby firearm factory that supplied the effort in the Sino-Japanese war

(Koishi qtd. in Manabe 32). It goes without saying, perhaps, that Japan's imperial ambitions in the late 19th-century were intensified by the previously closed nation's encounter with Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy, which itself was motivated by an American urge to gain a stronger trade and shipping foothold in the Pacific (Beasley 87-88). In this way, Meiji Japan's movement towards a modern ideal of gender, as well as its accelerating attempts to resemble Western imperial powers, emerged from an expanding system of global trade and industrialization—all of which narrowed options for low-class women and set the stage for narratives like Higuchi's "Nigorie."

Despite the different set dressing, Higuchi's story resembles Wharton's novel in striking ways. Like Lily Bart, O-Riki arrives at lucidity regarding her predicament in large part through conversations with a suave but ultimately disinterested suitor—an upper-class young man named Yuki Tomonosuke. Though their conversations throughout the story have a romantic air, Higuchi quickly makes the transactional nature explicit: "as an immediate reward for her [O-Riki's] beauty, she succeeded in soliciting the man" (177). For his part, Tomonosuke wastes no time in attempting to consume her as an aesthetic experience. As soon as they are alone, Tomonosuke "[begins] to ask her family background." He asks O-Riki if hers is a samurai family and demands "the terrific story behind [her]" (177). Like others throughout the story, he marvels at how such a vivacious young woman ended up at an unlicensed brothel. His skin-deep appraisal of her—"you don't look as if you were a maiden before you came here" (178)—evokes the Benjaminian *flaneur* so interested in physiognomy (Benjamin 436-37), and certainly mirrors Seldon's initial aesthetic musings about Lily Bart:

> [T]he qualities distinguishing her from her sex were chiefly external, as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape? (Wharton 7)

Like Seldon, Tomonosuke's engagement with O-Riki throughout the story is more about his quest to understand the mystery woman's "futile shape" rather than the material of her mind and spirit. This quest is, as with Seldon, a type of doublethink. In a culminating scene, O-Riki finally recounts her tragic past to Yuki, a past which places her inescapably in her current position. Manabe observes how a thoughtless interruption by Yuki—"You want to be successful don't you?"—makes us wonder "whether Oriki's revelation has actually led Yuki to any deeper understanding of her" (36). Yuki sees no need to reciprocate the vulnerability which O-Riki offers him. For Yuki, O-Riki is an aesthetic and sexual good to consume, not a person whose subjectivity must be honored. His requests for emotional intimacy are as disingenuous as Lawrence Seldon's jokes to Lily Bart about marriage.

Significantly, Yuki jokingly tells the girls at the liquor house that he is a government bureaucrat—though it's later revealed that he's an unemployed man of wealth (Higuchi 180). Either way, Yuki is associated with the Meiji regime by the story and its characters, suggesting a consciousness of how the rapid changes of the era drive poor Japanese women to dangerous, unregulated sex work.

O-Riki's one relationship with a female character—O-Hatsu, the frustrated wife of one of O-Riki's old customers—mirrors dynamics in *The House of Mirth*, too. Though O-Riki and O-Hatsu never interact directly, several scenes in the story focus on O-Hatsu and her husband, Genshichi, and their arguments regarding O-Riki. Genshichi, a furniture merchant who squandered his fortune on O-Riki, is still plagued by thoughts of the prostitute he loved. "Don't you know that woman is a demon?" O-Hatsu tells her young son. "She is a demon who has made a sluggard out of your father" (Higuchi 200). O-Hatsu's ire recalls the social anathema placed on prostitutes implicit in the "good wife, wise mother" ethic. Perhaps Higuchi drew on contemporary tropes when she wrote this scene; in 1874 an illustrated print in the *Tōkyō Nichinichi Shinbun* depicted an old woman lecturing a lavish geisha:

> What's so funny? I'm all black and selling coal, and you're all white and selling songs and dances. Seems like the same business to me. You're laughing at me, but I'm not laughing at your vulgar trade. . . I've got two daughters . . . but I won't let them do something so disgusting. I'm going to put them in service at an honest (*katai*) merchant's house. (Stanley 543)

The old woman reduces the geisha's life to its transactional core: "the same business" as selling coal, a mere material exchange. But this turns out to be a false equivalency, since the old woman would never let her daughters "do something so disgusting." This disapproval, edged with moral superiority, finds its Whartonian parallel in Mrs. Peniston, Lily Bart's aunt, who is mortified at the thought of Lily accruing gambling debts (Wharton 151-152). The woman's outrage is clarified earlier when Mrs. Peniston learns of the rumors surrounding Lily and Gus Trenor: "The modern fastness [of women] appeared synonymous with immorality, and the mere idea of immorality was as offensive to Mrs. Peniston as a smell of cooking in the drawing-room" (Wharton 111). Though separated by continent and class, this prurient impulse is the same one animating O-Hatsu. Women who assume even nominal control of their sexuality are perceived as throwing the domestic sphere into confusion. For O-Hatsu, this confusion very well seems to be the case; Genshichi, depressed and obsessed with O-Riki still, eventually throws O-Hatsu out of the house (Higuchi 203). Her anger is slightly misdirected, of course—it is debasing exchange, and those who perpetuate it, that dissolve domestic bonds. But this dissolution happens, Higuchi and Wharton show us, whether that household is a mansion in New York or a shack in Edo.

A third figure appears in both stories, one that crystallizes the brutality of debasing exchange: the disgruntled capitalist beau. In "Nigorie," this is Genshichi, O-Hatsu's husband. Like the story's other male character, Yuki, Genshichi is tied to emerging capital: he is a furniture merchant who has chosen to invest in the market of debasing exchange (Higuchi 184). Throughout the story, Genshichi longs for O-Riki,

tormented by their past association and its dreadful monetary cost. In despair, after O-Hatsu and his son have left him, he returns to O-Riki and—in off-page action that is only speculated about by townspeople after the fact—either murders her and kills himself or helps the equally despairing O-Riki commit suicide before doing the same (Higuchi 203). If we take the former possibility, Genshichi is an intensified, low-class version of Gus Trenor, the married man in *The House of Mirth* who, after lending Lily Bart money in hopes of securing sexual favors, traps Bart in his home and confronts her with the threat of physical and sexual violence (Wharton 128). The gentility of the upper classes in *The House of Mirth* masks this physical threat with an economic one—ultimately Lily seems more concerned by her indebtedness to Trenor than anything. But the parallel case in "Nigorie" reveals the promise of physical violence underwriting debasing exchange. This exchange system depends on "[men's] ability to set the rate and impose it on [women]" (Dimock 784), and O-Riki's fate at the hands of Genshichi, if read as murder, asserts that physical violence is the real fiat behind men's rate-setting ability.

Even if the story ends in double suicide, O-Riki's death is traceable to debasing exchange. The same ambiguity that makes us wonder whether Lily Bart deliberately or accidentally overdoses pervades the end of "Nigorie," and as in *The House of Mirth* this ambiguity leads us to consider how, in either formulation of the heroine's death, debasing exchange is to blame. Mirroring the Bart family's fall from affluence, O-Riki's descent begins two generations before her, with a grandfather who fails at becoming a man of letters and a poor craftsman father stunted by a childhood injury (Higuchi 196). This generational downward slide drives O-Riki to contemplate escape through oblivion: "I wonder how I could get to an absolutely quiet place where I would hear no voice, nor any sound, and where my mind could go completely blank and free from any sort of worries" (Higuchi 192). O-Riki seeks to empty herself of all subjectivity, to become internally the object which all of her clients, including Yuki, see her as. And there's only one sure way to accomplish this, as Yoshiko Enomoto notes: "Weary and irritated at the great gap between what she is and what she ought to be, O-Riki…invokes death for her relief and

deliverance" (258). Whether or not O-Riki *chooses* death, throughout the story she considers nonexistence a viable alternative to her current state as an object of debasing exchange. She apprehends and laments over the long process of alienation, begun even before her birth, which has sealed her fate.

From Exchange Object to Dialectical Image

A sense of fatalism in both Lily Bart and O-Riki may cement the similarities between *The House of Mirth* and "Nigorie" as an outgrowth of global economic transformations of the 19th-century. This awareness of inevitability is peculiar to the period in the sense that it anticipates and modifies the work of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*: both O-Riki and Lily Bart function as embodied, subjective "dialectical images." Benjamin's classic formulation of the dialectical image as "that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation," an "image in the now of its recognizability" (463) seems to rest on the notion of dialectical image as material non-conscious ephemera, an age's production that crystallizes, in its "recognizability," the clash of different historical material forces. Note, for example, the pronoun "it" used to describe the dialectical image as well as references in this section of the *Arcades* to "technological forms of production" (Benjamin 465). Above we have shown how both stories detail global capitalism's efficiency in turning women into just such commodified objects. Certainly, thinkers of the fin-de-siecle keyed into this reality. Thorstein Veblen speculated that "the institution of ownership [began] with the ownership of persons, primarily women," and that by the time of industrial capitalism, the ability to retain women functioned as a primary indicator of wealth for the leisure class (39). It isn't difficult, then, to understand how the 19th-century woman was viewed primarily as a commodity, one susceptible to disclosing the constellation of a historical materialist dialectic.

But I also suggest that "Nigorie" and *The House of Mirth,* read together, modify Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, locating it in the debased female subject rather than in a static object. In some sense, this modification just closes the loop on what

Benjamin elsewhere in the *Arcades* wrote about fashion: "it couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism which thus succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve" (19). As victims of debasing exchange, O-Riki and Lily Bart are at once "corpses" and "living bodies." Through these characters, Higuchi and Wharton show that "the sex appeal of the inorganic" is situated not in the material articles of the 19th-century but in women themselves, who have been forced into this position by the convolutions of global capital.

Both "Nigorie" and *The House of Mirth* pose their heroines as dialectical images by foregrounding sudden epiphany in a long past which has landed the characters in a painful now of recognizability—a Benjaminian "flash." For Lily, the flash comes after interacting with Nettie Struther and her infant. Following this "organic" familial encounter (Dimock 791), Lily realizes "it was no longer, however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking…there was something more miserable still…the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence" (Wharton 274). Lily's impression of her own alienation mirrors what happens to plants when land is cleared and churned for building or agriculture. She recognizes herself as an emblem of how the "slowly-accumulated past" of her life and generations prior, determined by striving within a capitalist system, has made her vulnerable to economic ruin and social isolation. The "what has been" of Lily's past flashes together with her grim "now" to form a terrible, painful constellation.

O-Riki experiences a similar constellating flash. In a pained soliloquy half-way through the story, O-Riki contemplates the words of a Japanese folk song: "My love is like a log bridge over the Hosotani river. I'm afraid to cross it, and yet if I don't cross…" (Higuchi 192). This naturalistic, momentary impression meets its counterpoint in the reappearance of Yuki, who runs into O-Riki and to whom O-Riki finally explains the full story of her family's past failures and her current anguished ambivalence about life. "I would hate being taken as your wife, and yet I long for you when I am not near you. In short, I must be a fickle woman. Who, do you think, has made such a fickle woman out of

me? I am the net result of three generations of failure" (Higuchi 196). The flash here is more subtle—it takes shape in an encounter between O-Riki's ruminations on an old Japanese folk song, rooted in nature, and Yuki, the modern man who represents the global capital that drives O-Riki to self-negation. Like Lily Bart, O-Riki comes to understand her life as the culmination of the clash between these forces—the "lotus flower in the mud" of a turbulent and merciless time. Both O-Riki and Lily, in this way, embody constellations of historical material impulse that determine much about women's lives in the fin-de-siecle period. In their objectification they afford the possibility of disclosing the dialectic between nature and industry; but through their subjectivity they apprehend that same dialectic, offering a spyglass with which readers can grasp an entire century through the experience of its vulnerable inhabitants.

Conclusion

The parallels I've observed in this paper should, in some ways, not surprise us at all. Plenty of cultural critics, theorists, and social scientists have observed the ways in which women end up as objects of exchange, as dehumanized and disempowered commodities in industrial-capitalist systems. And while O-Riki's fate, like Lily Bart's, unfolds in a fiction parameterized by expanding global capital, capitalism itself is not the root cause of the depredations these two heroines face. Debasing exchange extracts its toll from women whether the unserious suitors, disapproving women, and violent abusers are figures of the nineteenth century or of the fifteenth.

The writings of Higuchi and Wharton are notable, however, because of the ways in which they trace the expression of economic power in a time of accelerating modernity. While we could recast Lily Bart's fall from high society in a feudal or early mercantile economy and retain basic social verisimilitude, much of the drama and pathos of that fall comes because Lily, at least, senses in the modern age a volatile possibility for social and economic independence. O-Riki's degradation is painful because the "three generations of failure" (Higuchi 196) which she embodies give the lie to the ostensible meritocracy of a

new, modernizing Japan. The dynamics expressed in these two narratives are not new, and certainly not unique to the nineteenth century—but their new, especially volatile expression is. Debasing exchange prompts women writers to explore a new type of historical consciousness, in which female characters experience the endless stream of commodity fetishization directly, as dialectical image-subjects. This literary phenomenon offers a unique window into the fin-de-siecle period; through it, Higuchi and Wharton distill a global literary consciousness, one which becomes aware of the excruciating cost of social-sexual transaction in the age of high capitalism.

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Birds In *As You Were*

Jordan Crallé

Ireland historically is known for its complex interconnection of trauma and war with its land and its people. Terrible things have happened historically, like the Magdalene Laundries, where tens-of-thousands of girls and women were enslaved to the Roman Catholic Church and forced to work under unforgiving conditions while having their autonomy and reproductive autonomy stripped from them. With such complex and collective trauma in Ireland, it can be hard to conceptualize and process it all as an Irish woman. The novel *As You Were* by Elaine Feeney follows the story of a woman hospitalized in Ireland and her story of dealing with uterine cancer. Typically, when trauma is experienced young, a common coping mechanism for people who have a hard time processing it is a tactic that shoves the experiences into the back of the mind so it can be dealt with later. For Sinéad Hynes, the main character in Elaine Feeney's *As You Were*, her terminal cancer jumpstarts the re-hashing of her old trauma. Through this text, we can see how Sinéad uses symbolism to process and encrypt her trauma of the past and her loss of bodily autonomy to cancer. Feeney shows this not only through dialogue from Sinéad, but also through the symbolism of birds. Birds are often found to be a symbol of freedom. For Sinéad, this freedom is from herself; she uses birds to symbolize her traumatized self in her mind. In this, we can see how confronting trauma can be hard but necessary to move forward.

We see three main instances of birds in *As You Were*: Magpies, bird eggs, and a Pheasant. Throughout the novel, the bird symbol Sinéad is seen bringing up the most is what she calls "Magpie" (14). Magpies are black and white corvids that are often

associated with bad omens and death. Sinéad mentally references this bird to explain life after her cancer diagnosis. Magpie is the place holder for the painful catalyst of memory she connects to her life after cancer. It allows her to neatly organize her painful experiences. Just like how magpies ae black and white, the symbol Sinéad uses allows her to compartmentalize her traumas into a more manageable frame. Because she is blaming Magpie she doesn't have to see her reality in its raw form. Her use of encryption and repression also seeps into her emotional state of course. Sinéad has a hard time letting her walls down. We see this in how she interacts with her husband. At the beginning of the novel, before her husband finds out about her diagnosis, we see her thinking about how she has trouble connecting with people and being open with her own emotions. She is self actualized when she thinks, "I wasn't the type of person that could even consider writing letters to children, or baring my soul to my husband… Even looking Alex in the eye had gotten quite difficult. I can't remember when this began, this oddity I feel when I look into his eyes. But to be frank, I had begun avoiding eye contact with people for some time now, long before Magpie" (14). We see Sinéad describing her symptoms of trauma, not being able to look people in the eyes because she fears connection and her own emotions. She realizes that "Magpie" is not the cause of this, just an extension. She still has the baggage of the past to unpack with her husband. But she will have to get past her own metaphorical walls to connect through the layers of repression and pain. In this quote she is not blaming Magpie, she is using it as a frame of reference to periods of time in her life. We can further see how she uses Magpie as a stand-in for herself during awkward small-talk with her husband at the beginning of the novel. Sinéad thinks, "He laughed, nervously, grasping at anything that might disconnect us from Magpie, and from her shitty offerings" (62). It is important to note that Magpie is given a pronoun here that is the same as Sinéad's. This is because Sinéad is referencing herself here in a removed, symbolic, third person. Bird. When she says, "Magpie, and her shitty offerings" (62) Sinéad is saying how she feels like what she has to offer her husband is lacking. The lines before this also support this feeling when Sinéad fails to respond emotionally to her husband she says that she is, " useless

with kindness" (62). It is not verbally said what she does or does not do in response to her husband, the line simply skips to her husband making awkward small talk after. The novel completely blocks out her response, a gap in the narrative shows us how Sinéad deals with it. She feels that her responses, or her "offerings" are useless. So, she sits in her hospital bed while her husband redirects the halt in the conversation she makes by being "useless with kindness" (62). She then processes this by removing herself and her condition into one big symbol: Magpie. Her husband makes awkward small-talk about their children. The children that Sinéad gave birth to before her cancer, and the same children she has been removed from after her hospitalization, and cancer diagnosis by extension. The following pages lead us into our second symbol, the egg.

A chicken egg is commonly known by humans as a breakfast food. The mundanity of everyday consumption of these chicken's eggs makes them unassuming. So then, what does it mean when someone starts a yelling fight over the anatomical terms of these eggs? In Elaine Feeney's novel, *As You Were*, it means that the egg is a symbol of pain and frustration for the main character, Sinéad. While knowing the anatomy of a chicken egg can certainly make a well educated person, and parent, by extension, this argument goes deeper than the words exchanged. Typically, when humans consume chicken eggs they are infertile. Sinéad has uterine cancer, making her effectively infertile. This raises emotional response in Sinéad, as the trauma of her losing reproductive autonomy is highlighted by this symbol of the egg. But, the main point of the argument Sinéad has between her husband is what the white part of the egg is called. The albumen. The albumen acts as a physical and chemical barrier for the egg, protecting it from harm. As Sinéad is hospitalized and loses connection to her family, she is forced out of the role of a parent/guardian for her children. She yells at her husband, Alex, saying, "How can you raise children if you don't know the colour of the inside of an egg?" (65). For Sinéad this argument is a culmination of her frustration with her own shortcomings as a parent represented by the allegory of the egg. It is also a reminder of her loss of bodily autonomy,

and her yelling at her husband is her way of testing if he can take care of her through life and all of its complexity.

The Phaesant is representative of Sinéad in the way she was subjected to the menacing gaze of her brothers locking her in a room. This trauma is so deeply rooted in Sinéad that she has nightmares about being locked in the boot of a car, a close, but safely removed manifestation of this trauma. The image of the Pheasant happens in Sinéad's mind between the argument with her husband about the egg. An egg not only symbolizes the potential of life, but it also resembles a watchful eye. Sinéad flashbacks to her traumatic experience by seeing the eye of a pheasant peering at her while she is locked in the press room by her brothers while playing "hide and seek" (64). Sinéad first describes this occurrence with her brothers as a game, but as the story progresses it becomes more clear at how traumatizing this was for her, and eventually, it is implied that there was no chance of her winning at all. Alex, her husband, after hearing about this memory tells her, "So you didn't win. Sinéad, that's not winning," and she replies, "But we played it over and over. And it was always the same" (64). Sinéad would be locked in the room, frozen in fear as her brothers stared on through the slits in the door for so long that she would eventually wet herself. She then has a flashback to this later in the conversation with her husband as they are arguing about bird eggs. Her memory is as such: "My heart still pounded. The smell of paint and baling twine and a feathery bird, the eyes of it peering at me, a pheasant, it was a pheasant, little red and blue head on it. They'd locked the press door and I couldn't get out" (65). Her heart pounding is indicative of the sympathetic nerve system, or trauma response, activating. This lets us know she is experiencing severe distress. In this quote, it is implied that Sinéad is replacing the memory of her brother's peering eyes with that of a pheasant, a popular game bird that is known for its pretty feathers. However, I would argue that Sinéad is actually replacing herself with the symbol of the pheasant. Sinéad, in a previous conversation, had already imagined her brother's eyes "peer in through the slats of the press" (64). So, this new stand in is not for her brother's, but for her subconscious. If we look closely at the symbolism of the pheasant, we

can see this. A pheasant is a popular game bird, meaning it is popular for being hunted for sport. Just like how Sinéad is in a so-called "game" and being hunted and taken advantage of by her brothers. Sinéad is prey. In addition to this, pheasants are prized for their beautiful feathers, just like how women are valued in society by how fertile and attractive their bodies are. The time in which she felt like a pheasant was a time before Sinead learned of her uterine cancer. Her subconscious reflects this as she is interpreted as a colorful, sought out pheasant. After she is diagnosed with terminal uterine cancer she calls it "Magpie" (62). A bird that symbolizes death and bad omens, the opposite of fertility. And for Sinéad, it represents herself after she finds out she has cancer.

All in all, Sinéad's trauma and self image have been buried beneath her repressive tendencies until she can no longer decide to run from them. Her hospitalization and debilitative state make it impossible to run or hide. This, however, can be seen as a good thing as it allows for Sinéad to talk it out with her husband. As seen with the bird egg conversation, she is finally airing out her fears and her trauma. She does this by recounting the times she was locked in the press room by her brothers. And expressing fear and frustration through the argument of the egg. Sinéad's mind still hides herself behind the symbols of birds, but the more the novel progresses the more integrated with herself and her physical state she becomes. At the end of the novel she has trouble moving on her own, and so she asks her husband to take her out of the hospital. Alex is hesitant until finally Sinéad is expressive enough to make her will undeniable. If she hadn't told him about her past or her will to leave the hospital, Sinéad would have been stuck physically in the hospital and mentally by hiding from something she could never get away from, herself.

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Dangerous Foreign Things in *The Sign of the Four*

Owen Taylor

Elaine Freedgood, in her novel *The Ideas in Things*, paints Victorian society as enraptured with "thing culture," the overwhelming omnipresence of things, objects, and commodities, shaped by intricate systems of values. These things, quite frequently imported from overseas, are not necessarily translatable to monetary wealth, but contain other values appealing to Victorian sensibility, particularly those related to empire. This conflation of things and imperialism often take hold in contemporary writing, blending thing culture with contemporary racism to reach an image of the dangerous foreign thing, an object that doesn't come from here, that doesn't do anything but harm, and that doesn't exist beyond being a thing. This becomes most interesting when the dangerous foreign thing is a man.

This is made most clear in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*, a popular story of his beloved Sherlock Holmes character, and yet also one that principally concerns a foreign conflict. A treasure from the Andaman Islands is sought out by Englishmen, and as we read about the many foreign things in the text, one sticks out: Tonga, the Andamanese companion of Jonathan Small. Tonga is violent, often without much reason, and foreign, which is often made into an exhibition, yet he's also written like he's much less of a person than Small or any other English character. Utilizing Freedgood, as well as Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*, we can find an intersection of thing culture and Victorian racism at the heart of this novel. By bringing in H.G. Wells' "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid," we can see how this approach plays out in other fiction. Ultimately, Tonga represents this exact intersection between thing culture and racism, becoming, quite fully, a dangerous foreign thing.

For a brief sense of how the text handles character introductions, it feels fitting to take a look at Mary Morstan. Her entrance, at the beginning of chapter 2, lingers on the subtleties of her appearance for a whole paragraph. We know not just that she's a "young blonde lady," but that she had "a plainness and simplicity about her costume which bore with it a suggestion of limited means" (57). We know of her dress and turban, both a dull grey color, and her large blue eyes. From this we can gather quite a lot about Morstan as a character: firstly that she's worldly without being wealthy, but also that we trust her, or at least Watson does. When he claims her face gives a clear promise of "a refined and sensitive nature," we are made to understand her as a reliable reference in the rest of the text (57). Of course, textually, we know that this is all from the perspective of Dr. Watson, and this is retrospectively his first meeting with his future wife, so it's only fitting for him to make such a distinction for her. Still, a description of physical appearance and trustworthiness is allotted to most characters in the text, though not all.

The entrance of our first non-English character is abrupt, as we briefly encounter a man who opens the door for Sherlock and company, described as "a Hindoo servant clad in a yellow turban, white loose-fitting clothes, and a yellow sash" (66). I wouldn't assume this man is of the same importance as the woman Watson later marries, but it feels purposeful that this introduction sidesteps all elements of appearance outside race and clothes. We're given a fairly vivid description of his outfit, and its somewhat vivid colors in contrast to the dull grey of Mary Morstan's outfit. Watson remarks that there was "something strangely incongruous in this Oriental figure framed in the commonplace doorway of a third-rate suburban dwelling-house" (66). This relation both exoticizes the servant, using color and dress to explicitly contrast him from his English surroundings, while also relating him fully to his outfit. He's a "figure" of Orientalism because he, and his outfit, are relegated to the same language as the other foreign objects in the house of Thaddeus Sholto.

Sholto himself, of course, is described quite evocatively, noting the "bristle of red hair" around his bald head, alongside his quick, jerky movements (67). We understand him,

as a person in motion, immediately, and can place him as more of a shifty figure in contrast to Miss Morstan. He is of the same status as her, he's also a person to view and judge, even if those judgements are far harsher. Extensive detail is also thrown to his collection of foreign décor, with the tone and descriptions aligning somewhat closer to Sholto's servants. We're told of "two great Tiger-skins," a "huge hookah," "the richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries," and "a lamp in the fashion of a silver dove" (67). The tiger-skins in particular were noted as giving a suggestion of Eastern luxury, certainly further emphasizing Sholto's wealth (or at least his wealth abroad), as does everything else in this room, including his servants.

The problem we now face is that, if we see a thing-ness present in Sholto's servants being placed alongside his trinkets and decorations, we have to understand why we are reading so much about Sholto's decorations. Why are we spending so much time looking at his things? Elaine Freedgood, writing in the introduction of *The Ideas in Things*, notes that while there is no objective method to prove that the Victorian novel includes more things than the eighteenth-century novel before it, there's an arguable qualitative change towards "more description of things as the nineteenth century gets going, and minute description becomes more respectable" (4). She relates this to Victorian "thing culture," a precedence to our modern "commodity culture," in which "systems of value were not quarantined from one another and ideas of interest and meaning were perhaps far less restricted than they are for us" (8). These systems are far broader than abstract monetary value or "the alienation of things from their human and geographical origins," the only systems we can appreciate from the perspective of commodity culture, but instead place focus on the thing in all of its thing-ness (8).

It comes off as a bit gaudy and extravagant to modern tastes, possibly decadent, as Freedgood posits the modern equivalents to thing culture as flea markets and romantic comedies, but this still doesn't capture the full depth of thing culture. To avoid any vagueness, think of it as a fully-encompassing analysis of the qualities of a thing. Take Freedgood's reading of Holmes and Watson as an example:

> "In the typical scene between Watson and Holmes, an ordinary object seems pregnant with no mystery. Holmes hands Watson a battered felt hat; Watson can make nothing of it—it has no meaning beyond its mute materiality. Holmes 'reads' it… The enjoyment of the Holmes story seems to come in the experience of such 'revelations,'…Commodification is undone in such interpretations: a mass-produced object becomes entirely individual; its exchange value is reversed and replaced by the 'use value' of the clue." (151)

As a reading of Sherlock this appears self-evidently true. During Sherlock's investigation into Bartholomew's death, ample time is spent examining the thorn used to kill him. This thing, a natural thing, is thoroughly described as "long, sharp, and black," covered in a dried gummy substance, where "blunt end had been trimmed and rounded off with a knife" (86). We're focusing on the thorn as not just a murder weapon, but as a created weapon; a trimmed point. The creation of the thorn is included in its visualization, both individualizing it, and treating the object with the same revelatory gaze common to Doyle's works.

Yet, importantly, when Watson asks if the thorn is English, Holmes replies "No, it certainly is not" (86). There is some humor in that certainty, like the idea of this thorn being homegrown is ridiculous, or at least a certainty that the thorn is so clearly foreign that Englishness is entirely off the table. This is a foreign thing, like many of Sholto's, but unlike tapestries and curtains, it's dangerous. It came from the Andaman Islands and it is to be feared; while a person did misuse it as a weapon, the "gummy substance" it's coated in (presumably a natural sap of some sort) is incredibly lethal on its own.

The thorn is also alive, or it used to be, and when talking about a dangerous plant we have to look at H.G. Wells' "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid." Wells also imagines a killer plant from the Andaman Islands, also brought to England, also having killed an Englishman. Batten, the original collector and first (English) victim of the orchid, was already "unwell for some days with some kind of native fever" prior to his death (3). While

we understand later on that the orchid must have ultimately killed him, as it tries to kill Winter Wedderburn, the land itself is inhospitable. "Jungle-leeches" are his presumed killer, but they're secondary to his larger life of adventure, with a lifetime of dual marriages, cases of malaria, and the murder of a Malaysian man (tossed in so matter-of-factly that you may miss how insane that is). Wedderburn, described as an ineffectual man, is as safe when avoiding adventure as he is in danger when seeking it.

Scholars have noted an opposition between nature and civilization in the short story, written metonymically through Wedderburn and the orchid. John Huntington, a professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, presents this as Wells's "Two Worlds" structure, contrasting between nature and civilization while using the orchid as "both an image of a decadent and listless civilization and a creature of predatory and dangerous nature" (247). This contrast, while explicitly between a man and a plant, can't help but be read as largely evocative of the relationship between England and the Andaman Islands. Listless and decadent, does that not sound like thing culture? Is the orchid not another thing to be fawned over, died for, studied and displaced? It is, and this is exactly where we find thing culture crossing into imperialism.

Like the thorn that killed Bartholomew Sholto, Wells's orchid is a dangerous, foreign thing. Its "predatory and dangerous nature," as described by Huntington, is the nature of the Andaman Islands. We are made to contrast England and the Andaman Islands specifically along this node, exoticizing the islands and making violence core to the British understanding of them. When we see a foreign thorn pricking the neck of an Englishman, we understand its foreignness, its dangerousness, and its Andaman-ness all as part of its thing-ness.

However, as we recall, Sholto's servants are also written about as if they're things. They're more of a thing than Mary Morstan, who is frankly also a bit of a thing, with some keen highlighting of the foreign things she's wearing, though she herself is not a foreign thing. Regardless, the servants aren't incongruous with the decorations in Sholto's estate

(despite not fitting in with the architecture outside), and their status as pseudo-objects of possession further emphasize their dehumanization in the text.

The servants aren't violent, though. They're exoticized and used to make Thaddeus look shiftier and more foreign himself, but they're written with no explicit or implicit violence. Of course, we know quite little about them; they are so deeply entrenched in set dressing that we aren't even sure if they're Andaman. The only character we're certain is from the Andaman Islands is Tonga, who just so happens to be the most wildly violent character in the text.

Once we learn of Bartholomew Sholto's death at the hands of Small's companion, before we even know much about this companion, Sherlock pins the murder as the result of Tonga's "savage instincts" (98). We finally meet him, though only at a distance, as he tries to aid in Small's escape, Watson referring to him as "the unhallowed dwarf with his hideous face, and his strong yellow teeth gnashing at us in the light of our lantern" (125). Once Small is captured, he too pins the murder on "that little hell-hound Tonga," and claims he "welted the little devil with the slack end of the rope for it," like Tonga is a dog who peed on the rug (127). He's quite consistently referred to with daggered, inhuman terms, like "a little blood-thirsty imp" who is "as proud as a peacock" (154). "Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty" (125).

Racist language being used to refer to Tonga is not particularly unexpected, we could find similar language towards Robert Louis Stevenson's Mr. Hyde, but is there a thing-ness to Tonga? His possessions are written about similarly to others, with Small pointing out that he traveled with "a long bamboo spear, and some Andaman cocoa-nut matting," certainly portraying him as foreign and violent (particularly in the spear) but not necessarily rendering him as an object too (153). Where Tonga appears most thing-like is when he's written about less like a companion and more like a possession, namely that "we earned a living at this time by my exhibiting poor Tonga at fairs and other such places as the black cannibal" (154). Not only is Tonga foreign and dangerous in a way that can seek comparison to any racist caricature, in this instance the "black cannibal," but he's

presented via "my exhibiting," with Small in control. Paired with the animalistic language of "hell-hound," "imp" and "unhallowed dwarf," Tonga appears as less of a human character capable of thought and introspection than he is an object bent on destruction for the sake of destruction. A thing, a dangerous foreign thing.

In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock writes on the presence of such foreign things by christening them the "fundamental form of a new cultural system for representing social value" in Victorian society, and while her definition of "commodity" isn't as restrictive as Freedgood's, she even notes that "Victorian novelists bore witness to the strange spawning of commodities that seemed to have lives of their own" (208). This extends to what she deems "commodity racism," differing from scientific racism through its mass appeal through consumer markets, particularly noting that "imperial kitsch as consumer spectacle, by contrast, could package, market and distribute evolutionary racism on a hitherto unimagined scale" (209). The Victorian novel, as popular fiction written for widespread consumption, can distribute evolutionary racism at that very scale. As Shafquat Towheed considers *The Sign of the Four* to be "an unashamedly contemporary novel, written rapidly and designed to be consumed quickly by a new… popular readership," it feels fair to suggest that the novel contains this exact form of commodity racism (157).

McClintock is equally useful for understanding how thoroughly emasculated Tonga can be. His height is a major focus of mockery, quite notably in that "unhallowed dwarf" line. Her focus draws on the portrayal of Black men in Victorian advertising, but a lot of it appears shared by Tonga (who is even directly compared to the "black cannibal"), particularly the idea that "African men are figured only as 'mimic men,'…destined simply to ape the epic white march of progress to self-knowledge" (223). This aligns with both his characterization and his arc throughout the novel, both as something less than a man (in physical size most of all), as well as an obstacle in Sherlock's "march of progress" towards knowledge.

With Tonga dead before we have a chance to speak with him, left as non-verbal as Thaddeus Sholto's servants, any applicable personification is made null, and Tonga is left as a dangerous, foreign, and dead thing. Unlike the thorn, unlike the tapestries, unlike the servants even, we can see Victorian thing culture and commodity racism intersect perfectly through his character, rendering him a fully human thing, even more foreign and dangerous than any object before him. Unlike most things, however, he can die, which he does quite pathetically. Always shorter and more "savage" than the Englishmen in the text, he is both "mimic man," from McClintock's idea of the emasculated foreigner, and a "a creature of predatory and dangerous nature," to return to Huntington. Most of all, though, he is a foreign thing to be used for violence.

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'From Which Shall Blossom Dark Flowers:' Alien Ecologies and the Posthuman in Peter Watts's *Starfish* and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*

Roman Colangelo

Anthropocentric narratives in environmental fiction relegate the environment to an othered state while maintaining an explicitly human perspective. Therefore, critiquing human identity requires its displacement from its position of eminence, an action that frequently assumes the form of posthumanism. Posthuman deconstruction in science fiction occupies both the physical and intangible realms, characters concomitantly reforming their bodies and identities in the face of environmental pressures. Physical posthumanism "radically decenters the human body, the sacred icon of the essential self" as a means of examining the connection between mind and body, particularly in instances where the latter adopts what is usually some technological alteration (Sponsler 33). Adaptations of body and identity mimic the biological principle of natural selection, wherein the individuals most inadequately suited to a specific environment fail to survive. *Annihilation*, the first novel in weird fiction author Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* series, using the anomalous biome of "Area X" to question the importance of human identity in a space where life seems to endlessly refract into new species. Peter Watts, a hard science fiction author and former marine biologist, similarly critiques the importance of humanity in his debut novel *Starfish*. The two works present the reader with an environment in which both the human body and mind are maladaptive, demanding that the initially human protagonists undergo shifts in form, expression, and identity. The use of the environment as a

posthuman critique of anthropocentrism in both novels encourages perception of the environment from beyond the human perspective. Humans' conceptualization of the environment is usually done as something relative to them, as an entirely separate entity on which they can act. By divorcing ourselves from anthropocentrism, we can appraise our relationship with the environment without the distortion of viewing from the perspective of an othered self.

Peter Watts, the Posthuman, and the Posttraumatic

Peter Watts uses the exploration of posthuman identity as both an adaptive improvement for his protagonist and an assertion of agency that was not found in her humanity. The story of *Starfish* is situated in Beebe station, a geothermal energy plant at the bottom of the Juan de Fuca ridge. Lenie Clarke is one member of a group known as rifters, mechanically altered humans who have undergone the deconstruction and reassembling of their internal organs to better suit themselves to the crushing pressure and darkness of the rift. The overseeing agency of the rifters program intentionally selects disturbed and traumatized individuals as candidates, as Watts explains:

> Take a dozen children, any children. Beat and mix thoroughly until some lumps remain. Simmer for two to three decades; bring to a slow, rolling boil. Skim off the full-blown psychotics, the schizoaffectives, the multiple personalities, and discard. (There were doubts about Fischer, actually; but then, who *doesn't* have an imaginary friend at some point?)
>
> Let cool. Serve with dopamine garnish.
>
> What do you get? Something bent, not broken. Something that fits into cracks too twisted for the rest of us (Watts 171, emphasis in original).

Even before the introduction of humans to the rift, there is a preference given to traits that would typically be classified as negative or even afflictions. Lenie has suffered a lifetime of physical and sexual abuse, trauma that has inculcated an aloofness and passivity in her disposition. Most of the other rifters suffer from some form of mental condition; Gerry Fischer is a pedophile who mentally carries the sexual abuser of his childhood as an imaginary friend; Ken Lubin is a sociopath who neglects to share any information with the crew; Brander is a violent and angry man with a history of ideated and attempted suicides. The rifters who first descend to Beebe station have cause to distance themselves from a humanity that has brought them copious amounts of pain.

As with those of the physical world, the alien environment created by Watts leads to favorable or adverse outcomes depending on the fitness of the individual with regards to that particular environment. In her article "Here Be Monsters: Posthuman Adaptation and Subjectivity in Peter Watts' *Starfish,"* Clare Wall describes the evolution of the rifters as a series of potentialities ranging from the reclamation of agency to "atavistic regression" (67). Lenie Clarke is the only rifter who is confirmed to be alive at the end of the novel, swimming off to shore after the destruction of Beebe station. She emerges with a newfound mental clarity and resolves to strike back against those who have victimized her:

> Something ignites in Lenie Clarke. Everyone who's ever hit her, or raped her, or patted her on the head and said *don't worry, everything will be fine* comes to her in that moment. Everyone who ever pretended to be her friend. Everyone who pretended to be her lover. Everyone who ever used her, and stood on her back, and told each other they were so much better than she was. Everyone, feeding off her every time they so much as turned on the fucking lights.
>
> They're all waiting, back on shore. They're just *asking* for it. (Watts 312)

Clarke's time in the rift, which pushes her further into the physical mode of the posthuman, eventually allows her to sever what weak connection she had had with humanity when those same people inadvertently kill several of her crewmates by intentionally destroying Beebe station, an action which is based entirely on the calculations of a biotechnological computer known as a "brain cheese." She and other rifters even begin to refer to surface-dwelling humans with disparaging verbiage, labeling them "drybacks" (Watts 37). The alienness of the rift is conducive to Clarke's survival and awakening to her own agency, ending the novel by swimming off "toward her own resurrection" (Watts 312).

The posthuman form is not strictly beneficial for every rifter. Gerry Fischer, having suffered multiple beatings at the hands of Brander, abandons Beebe station to live out on the rift. He disappears from the narrative for some time, briefly appearing during a confrontation with a visiting doctor from the surface before emerging at the novel's conclusion as something far from human:

> It has forgotten what it was.
>
> Not that that matters, down here. What good is a name when there's nothing around to use it? This one doesn't remember where it comes from. It doesn't remember the ones that drove it out so long ago. It doesn't remember the overlord that once sat atop its spinal cord, that gelatinous veneer of language and culture and denied origins. It doesn't even remember the slow deterioration of that oppressor, its final dissolution into dozens of autonomous, squabbling subroutines. Now even those have fallen silent (Watts 287).

Fischer's self completely degrades following his departure from Beebe station, which Wall argues is "in no way a preferable or ideal state to exist in" (74). I contest the preferability of this state by examining the previous self that inhabited Fischer's mind, a broken place haunted by the voice of his childhood molester, a voice he calls Shadow. He

justifies his sexual abuse of children under an altruistic pretext, the expression "this is what you do when you really love someone" (Watts 55), which frequently recurs throughout the novel. Fischer's targeting of children leads to him being sent to Beebe station as an alternative to mind-altering surgery or implants. Fischer is implied to have a history of run-ins with law enforcement due to his illness and is presented in the novel as a man with no prospects. He is unable to escape the influence of Shadow inside Beebe station, directly causing his beating from Brander. It is only after Fischer's degradation that he reawakens enough of his mind to perform a true act of altruism, transporting Lenie to an escape vessel. Instead of justifying a selfish act with his recurring phrase, he first performs a good work before the line returns to his mind, only to be cut off by the destruction of Beebe station: "—*This is what you do when you really*—" (Watts 296, emphasis in original). Watts subverts the original motif of false altruism to convey that, like everything that enters the rift, its function and structure have changed. What remains of Fischer has become a force for good. The reformation of Fischer's trauma into a warped agent of good demonstrates that strictly assessing evolution as adverse or beneficial is perfunctory when applying such an assessment to the realm of identity. *Starfish* represents Peter Watts's skepticism of anthropocentrism by adopting the traumatized outcasts of the world into his narrative to reshape them into posthuman figures who reject the world that scarred them and embrace the potential for change held within the rift. While posthuman adaptation does not guarantee anything that could be seen as an improvement from the anthropocentric perspective, it provides the rifters a reassurance and sense of fitness that they never felt on dry land.

The selective pressures present in ecosystems are two-pronged; they both encourage and discourage certain traits. *Starfish* dedicates small portions of its narrative to portraying the maladaptive characteristics of anthropocentrism in their alien environments. Peter Watts's 1994 short story "A Niche" is incorporated into one of the earlier chapters of *Starfish* and describes Lenie Clarke's brief time with Jeanette Ballard, the other rifter with whom she was sent down to Beebe station. Unlike the other rifters,

Ballard presents as someone who would be considered well-adjusted by societal standards. Her time with Clarke quickly devolves into an actively hostile relationship, with Ballard fearing and Clarke embracing the alterity of the rift. Their time together ends with Clarke striking Ballard, leading to the latter's return to the surface. Clarke's epiphany elucidates the shifting between the characters themselves and the rift:

> Clarke watches Ballard leave the lounge. *You're lying*, she realizes. *You're scared to death, and it's not just because I'm changing*.
>
> *It's because you are* (Watts 37, emphasis in original).

Ballard fails to last on the rift because of her apprehension towards posthuman adaptation. Clarke's traumatic history makes her more amenable to both remaining at the bottom of the Juan de Fuca ridge and transitioning into a posthuman state. The world of *Starfish* actively punishes anthropocentric stubbornness and embraces the posthuman.

Annihilation and the Transitional Self

There is, by necessity, a state of transition that exists between human and posthuman states. Jeff VanderMeer explores the transition of the self in terms of body and identity in his 2014 novel *Annihilation*. The novel features a crew of explorers sent by a government agency known as the Southern Reach into a mutated part of the country known as Area X. The narrative assumes the form of a journal written by the crew's biologist. The biologist is specialized in transitional ecosystems, an interest that she describes as having spawned from observing the ecological succession that took place in "the overgrown swimming pool in the backyard of the rented house where I grew up" (VanderMeer 43-44). She enters Area X pre-distanced from humanity, a bare canvas to be remade by the alien land.

The biologist's posthuman transition begins with the inhalation of spores from some of the words written on the walls of the Tower. She develops a resistance to the

hypnotic suggestions of the crew's psychologist, who abandons the crew and flees to the lighthouse out of fear of the biologist. The biologist becomes attuned to Area X and emits a strange glow as time passes within it. She kills the surveyor in self-defense after the former recognizes her as something other than human. Beyond her failures to communicate, the biologist now fails to even be perceived as human, leading her to further embrace Area X. Her encounter with the Crawler leaves her alive but further changed, a posthuman subject who is finally somewhere where she understands and is understood. She curtly ends her journal: "I am not returning home" (VanderMeer 195). The biologist ends the novel by venturing into the northern region of Area X to search for her husband. The evolution of the biologist is defined by a transition to a posthuman state that accompanies her journey of understanding.

An ecology that pressures human interlopers toward the posthuman must itself be inextricably alien. In "Surrendering the Self: The Posthuman World in VanderMeer's *Annihilation*," Sam Allen describes *Annihilation* as a work that illustrates a setting where "no one species is an individual, but instead an intermingling amalgamation of plants, animals, and other-worldly creatures" (1). Area X refracts life within it to the extent where demarcating different species becomes perfunctory. Every organism intersects with each other on a cellular level, a fact that the biologist comes to discover near the novel's conclusion:

> Then I examined the samples from the village: moss from the 'forehead' of the one of the eruptions, splinters of wood, a dead fox, a rat. The wood was indeed wood. The rat was indeed a rat. The moss and the fox… were composed of modified human cells. (VanderMeer 159)

Anthropocentric narratives demand that humanity occupies an acting position that is separate from the environment, which is an entity that humans either act on or against. By physically intertwining humanity with what would otherwise be considered lower

creatures, VanderMeer makes it impossible to situate the natural world below mankind. The biologist is the sole member of the expedition who comes to realize this and subsequently is the only member to survive the expedition. Embracing oneself as just one of many living beings in a vast and webbing ecology is not only auspicious for those who enter Area X but also necessary for survival.

Annihilation's ecology strongly selects against anthropocentrism. The throughline of each death in the novel is the fear of Area X's ever-changing nature; the psychologist jumps from the lighthouse in a fit of "overwhelming fear" that something was in the building with her (VanderMeer 126); the surveyor is gunned down after attempting to kill the biologist on the justification that she has become something inhuman; the anthropologist is killed by the Crawler after being hypnotized by the psychologist, who was herself too afraid of the creature to personally take a sample. The only members to survive the novel are the biologist and the linguist, with the latter abandoning the crew before it begins. The biologist herself becomes a transitional piece of the ecosystem, a mediator between human and posthuman. Her encounter with the Crawler returns her to the tidal pools of her days as a researcher, encountering a peculiar starfish whose discovery left the biologist "completely adrift, and dislocated" (VanderMeer 175). She is not entirely human nor an entity of Area X; rather, she occupies an uncanny median. Her decision to stay within Area X not only stems from her desire to find her husband, but also the sense of being present that she has felt nowhere else. The need to abandon the individualist nature of anthropocentrism to survive within Area X is VanderMeer's implicit critique of the human-centric narrative.

VanderMeer's *Annihilation* critiques anthropocentrism through the instantiation of a protagonist who maintains a merely peripheral association with humanity, observing but never fully opening herself to others. It is only through her venture into Area X and posthuman transition that she achieves a degree of actualization and a sense of belonging.

Posthuman Communication in Alien Ecologies

As humans have their unique models of communication, there must be a concomitant shift in the modes of communication during the transition to a posthuman state. When examining the posthuman figures of *Annihilation* and *Starfish*, it is evident that their respective adaptations include new communicative forms to accompany their altered biologies. These changes integrate their posthuman figures into their ecologies by forsaking the atomized mode of sender-receiver communication that structures human interaction.

The life of the biologist is marked by an inability to communicate, often distancing herself from other people, even her husband. She fails to ingratiate herself with the other crew members and more often finds herself fascinated by the odd ecology of Area X. She forsakes the conversational for the observational, earning the nickname "Ghost Bird" from her husband for the quiet distance she maintains from others (VanderMeer 109). The imagery of Ghost Bird evokes something flying high overhead, invisible to others but looking down on the world. The distance between her and the earthbound is composed of silence, the same soundlessness with which she watched the ecological succession that took place in the pool of her childhood home. The verticality of her isolation is embodied by the Tower, an unmapped structure that descends deep into the earth. The tower is mostly dark, save for luminating verses written in writhing bits of lichen and microorganisms on its walls. Beneath the earth lie words never spoken, forever condemned to an eternity of no one's company save the Crawler, an incomprehensible beast implied to contain a lighthouse keeper somewhere within its gelatinous mass. The biologist's encounter with the Crawler can best be described as translational, the creature breaking her down and reconstructing her in a painful and psychedelic sequence:

> I smelled a burning inside my own head and there came a moment when I screamed, my skull crushed to dust and reassembled mote by mote.

> *There shall be a fire that knows your name, and in the presence of the strangling fruit, its dark flame shall acquire every part of you* (VanderMeer 181, emphasis in original).

This "translation" is the final stage of a transitional process from human to posthuman. The biologist emerges from this experience as an integrated facet of Area X's ecology, a factor which influences her eventual decision to not return home at the novel's end. In *Rethinking Communication in the Posthuman Era*, Irem Atasoy argues that "the distinction between sender and receiver becomes indeterminate" in posthuman modes of communication (11). When thinking of writing or speaking semiotically, the words are not alive; they are carriers of meaning. Conversely, the words of the Crawler are themselves alive, living entities produced for an uncertain receiver. Parsing explanations for the living words of the Tower from a purely humane perspective would fail to yield a cromulent explanation because they were not written with an explicit receiver, rather being "one type of agent within a broader communicative ecology" (Itasoy 11). The crew's linguist, who has spent a lifetime within anthropocentric linear transmission, abandons the crew before they enter the depths of Area X. Linguists structure static words into comprehensible languages, so a cromulent explanation is that the dynamism and incomprehensibility of Area X drove the linguist away. The biologist not only survives within the zone but thrives. Ghost Bird's silence is a symptom of her inability to communicate, to conform to the human model of sender-receiver. Her initiation into the ecology of Area X permits her to understand the life around her by turning her into something beyond human, beyond the mere child staring at a pool full of moss.

Peter Watts's conception of the rift encourages a communicative synchronicity between the posthuman and the ecology of the world beyond Beebe station. Tania LaFontaine describes the rift as a "postnature" world that "brings the reader into unfamiliar territory, allows for the description of strange environments and phenomena, and thus participate[s] in the creation of estrangement" (63). Given the estrangement that the rifters experienced in their human lives, the rift presents itself as an alternative world

in which there are no malefactors to further estrange them. The rifters are thus free to change and adapt to the alien world of the rift. While this does manifest in the crew's general acclimation to each other, the most dramatic adaptation of the rifters is their development of psionic communication. By reducing the inhibitors of their implanted machinery, the rifters acquire the capacity to communicate without speech. Clarke, hesitant to reduce her inhibitors, gives the reader an outsider's view of the process:

> They moved around her without speaking, one connecting smoothly with another to lend a hand or a piece of equipment. When she needed something from one of them, it was there before she could speak (Watts 165).

For a group of beings largely discarded by society due to trauma-induced disorders, the chance to bond socially and telepathically is an intimate connection that was never afforded to them on the shore. The telepathy presented in *Starfish* is mechanistically unique; Clarke does not directly project her thoughts onto another rifter. Rather, the thoughts of the rifters are free-floating, available for any rifter to access. Returning to Itasoy's writing, this mode of communication exists "in recursive, non-linear loops rather than in linear transmission models" (11). Given the marginal lives led by the rifters prior to their descent, it becomes clear that their lives on the shore, entirely defined by Itasoy's linear transmission model, were isolating due to their precluding mental disorders and trauma. Down in the Juan de Fuca ridge, their naked thoughts were laid bare for those with similar adaptations, forming a new communicative ecology. The communicative evolution encouraged by the rift provides comfort for the outcasts of his world while demonstrating the adaptive benefits of posthumanism.

Natural selection is determined by the fitness of an organism to its environment. Surviving within a specific ecology demands developing adaptations to improve fitness. The posthuman adaptations presented in *Annihilation* and *Starfish* partner the adaptation

of communicative forms with those of the physical body to elucidate the ill-suitedness of traditional human communication in the context of a vast, interweaving ecological web.

Conclusion

Shifting the narrative of environmental fiction away from anthropocentrism requires the integration of human identity into nature instead of placing it as an opposing force. Science fiction presents the opportunity to construct alien environments in which anthropocentric narratives falter and posthuman adaptations become conducive to survival. Posthumanism serves to present a humanity that rejects anthropocentric eminence and views itself as a facet of a broader ecosystem. Peter Watts's *Starfish* and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* both present alien ecosystems that selectively pressure their characters toward posthuman adaptation. These transitions concern both identity and body, guiding each novel's respective protagonist to a newfound self-assurance partnered with dramatic physical alterations. These adaptations include the introduction of new communicative forms that integrate the posthuman figures into their new ecologies. Rejection of the posthuman in ecosystems of alterity condemns anthropocentricism to either languishing in stagnation or death. As climate change further strangles the living space available to the biosphere, a shift concomitant with the expansion of urban areas further into wilderness, it becomes an issue of pressing importance to appraise our relationship with nature from a perspective beyond that of the human.

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The Code of the Virgin: The Characteristics and Identity of the Adolescent Female Virgin in Jenny Han's *Always and Forever, Lara Jean*

Gabrielle Lee

For me, reading was a formative and didactic part of growing up. The novels I consumed acted as a sort of guidebook on how I was expected to live my life, particularly regarding physical intimacy as a teenage girl. Relatable narratives about adolescent virginity are at the crux of Jenny Han's 2017 Young Adult (YA) novel *Always and Forever, Lara Jean*. The final installment of Han's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* trilogy centers on Lara Jean Song Covey as she navigates her senior year of high school whilst in a relationship with her boyfriend, Peter Kavinsky. *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* functions to delineate virginhood as a code of conduct that hinges on idealism and age for the sake of morality. To successfully embody the virginal identity, characters must follow a set of implicit rules, behave in a stipulated manner, and maintain certain beliefs about sex. Most notably, this text postulates that adherence to this code requires the teenage female protagonist to embody a quartet of crucial characteristics: moral superiority that is acquired through sexual abstinence, sexual desire for only one special boy, psychosocial turmoil, and the conception of coming of age as an erotic act. The successful combination of these traits grants the protagonist a vital state of being which ratifies her virginal status.

Well-known contemporary YA works such as Han's *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* centre on a sexually inexperienced virgin who must deal with the tribulations of erotic

desire and the threat it poses to her identity. YA texts frequently perpetuate cultural ideologies that "readily associate virginity with moral integrity" so readers know exactly "who is 'good' and who is 'bad'" (Seifert 12) upon the presentation of either virginal or sexually active characters. Virgins like Han's Lara Jean are portrayed as personifications of purity due to their bodily state, unwillingness to act freely on their sexuality, and reliable exhibition of principled behaviour. The tendency of YA texts to emphasize the purity of female protagonists valorizes virginity and underscores the relevance of heterosexual sex in defining a character's morality. Indeed, the sociocultural significance and irrevocability of this identity is repeatedly emphasized in these works; if female characters participate in intercourse and extinguish their purity, they will "never again return to [the] lauded identity" they possessed as virgins (Seifert 11). To promote virginhood, YA works are commonly built upon narratives that "fetishiz[e]…virginity" (Seifert 10). These narratives, which are fittingly referred to as "abstinence porn" (Seifert 10), diminish female characters to "objects whose sexual acts, or lack thereof, are the sole expression of their identities" (Seifert 10). Though cultural fetishization is experienced by nearly all female characters, virginity is most frequently paired with the characteristics of heterosexuality, conventional beauty, youth, and whiteness, creating a specific image of virginity that is embodied by only a certain type of girl (McAlister 56). Even more, YA texts portray obsession, rumination, and conflict over sexual behavior—rather than the act of sex itself—to be "the most titillating aspect of a sexual relationship" (Seifert 12). The virginal protagonist is placed in situations in which she is "tempted and tempting" (Seifert 11), exhibiting both her ability to arouse others and the presence of her own, sometimes profuse, sexual desire. The conflict that arises as the protagonist agonizes over whether to lose her virginity only makes her more "arousing, sensual, and taboo" (Seifert 11). In *Always and Forever, Lara Jean,* readers feel relieved and vindicated when they see Lara Jean reach the novel's conclusion with her virginity, and thereby her principles, still intact. Due to the far-reaching implications of virginity in YA texts, the genre presents virginhood as a "code of conduct" (Seifert 16). *Always*

and Forever, Lara Jean demonstrates how virginity is not simply a physical or emotional state, but a "behavior and essential moral quality" (Seifert 16) that is contingent on the character acting in a "particular and prescribed way" (Seifert 16). In Han's novel, the virginity of the female protagonist is shown to be tied to arousal solely in the company of "one special man" (Seifert 16). The desire of female characters is legitimized and morally permissible only when it is directed toward a single boy, one whom the protagonist has a deep-seated emotional connection with. This characteristic contributes to YA literature's trend of "maintain[ing] a rhetoric of the permanence of first love" which posits that one's first romance "will—and should—last forever" (Day 285). Though a female protagonist may explore her sexuality in limited ways, her virtue is retained because almost all sexual behaviour is reserved for a partner she weds or intends on marrying. A protagonist's commitment offers up a sort of loophole by "allow[ing] [the couple] to operate in a sort of marital state" and thus remain "pseudovirgins forever" (Seifert 32). Though a female character may be unwed at the time of sexual activity, her eventual marriage and emotional promise absolves her of the immorality or risk that accompanies almost all adolescent sexual behaviour. In essence, the character can reconcile her intimate choices with her ethical principles because she only ever participates in sexual activity with the man who becomes her husband.

Portrayals of virginity in YA literature are significant because they work to socialize a young female audience. YA novels like *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* contain "ideological content and consequences" (Johnson 55) and are "among the most popular and powerful cultural representations of teenage relationships" (Day 90). Though sexuality is frequently portrayed as a source of both power and delight for teenagers in YA literature, the act is accompanied by "displeasure [rather] than pleasure" (Trites 116). These works feature repressive, conservative, and regulatory narratives so that readers moralize their behaviour and thereby fail to become aware of or overly involved in the power of their sexuality (Trites 101). They depict teenage girls as characters who chase love and emotional fulfillment rather than physical satisfaction, with sex existing as an unwanted

payment they must make to sustain their romantic relationships (McAlister 274). These narratives suggest that girls do not pursue sex for its physical or bodily pleasures, but instead, seek the act purely because of its sentimental component. Indeed, even this chaste-like approach which is singularly motivated by the act's emotional intimacy is repeatedly depicted as a highly risky behaviour. By presenting a precise model of virginity that is rooted in reminding teenagers of sex's immorality and emotional and physical dangers, abstinence is endorsed and eternized (Day 88). Though YA works may note some of the pleasures of sexual exploration, they repeatedly highlight failed emotional connection, anguish, and remorse over physical intimacy (Day 88). The supposedly progressive texts that do affirm sexual topics frequently depict teenage characters who are sexually active as "sexy sinners or delinquent deviants" (Kokkola 214). With minimal positive representation of the ways in which girls can positively explore their sexuality, readers are left uneducated and confused, forced to wonder whether they are abnormal for experiencing feelings of desire. In this way, they communicate to readers that the loss of virginity is far from a "harmless detached [encounter]" (Smith 390) and that intercourse is a consequential act that can bring about social isolation, regret, fear, or emotional turmoil. To explore the tendency of YA literature to regulate and define the virginal condition, this paper will analyze the romance plotline in Han work. It will examine the highly specific and often contradictory beliefs and behaviours a girl must subscribe to and exhibit to sufficiently embody the identity of the virgin. Consequently, it explores virginity's powerful, and life-altering function.

The code of the virgin is defined by the protagonist of *Always and Forever, Lara Jean*. Lara Jean illustrates that one of the distinctive features of a girl's virginal identity is an innocence and moral superiority that is obtained through sexual abstinence. Throughout the novel, Lara Jean's moral state is determined by her chastity; she is characterized as virtuous largely because she is still a virgin. Lara Jean is described as a "Goody Two-shoes" (Han 3) and "Virgin Mary girlfriend" (79). Perceived as "shy and kind of babyish" (276), she exhibits such innocent and modest behaviour that her friends

think of her as "Grandma Lara Jean" (80). Indeed, her virginity is the fundamental basis of her identity as a girl who is unmistakably good. Though the text illustrates that she has consistent opportunities to take part in behaviours such as drug and alcohol experimentation, rule-breaking, or sexual exploration, Lara Jean remains notably uninterested in these common, yet potentially risky, teenage activities. This universally dutiful approach creates a powerful image of a girl who embodies the virginal identity in totality, on levels that are physical, ethical, and behavioural. Though Lara Jean's purity is many-sided, her abstinence stands as the most cogent evidence of her morality. She retains her virginity despite being in a year-long relationship with a boy she "love[s]" (33) and "trust[s]" (78), reminding readers that female protagonists are desirable and valuable precisely because of their purity. Though she possesses a deep affection for Peter, she avoids debasing herself and thereby preserves a crucial aspect of her personal virtue. Lara Jean remaining a virgin, in both the bodily sense and the social, is what marks her as meritorious and worthy of the desire that she inspires, the esteem of her peers and family, and the loving romance she experiences.

Indeed, as Lara Jean ruminates on losing her virginity, the mere presence of sexual desire threatens her righteous, virginal identity. She is unable to imagine "[intercourse] happening now…when [she is] Lara Jean the sister and the daughter" (113). In fact, when the topic arises, she admits she "hadn't been thinking about [having sex]" (262) and feels "strange" (262) about the idea of the behaviour becoming "commonplace" (262). Lara Jean is unable to conceptualize a version of herself that is mentally and physically open to exploring her sexuality, largely because that framework is incongruous with her staunch self-identification as a moral individual. By granting herself permission to consider her sexual wants or fantasies, she forfeits her identity as a naïve and family-oriented girl and accepts a sort of self-inflicted descent into deviance. Sex, to Lara Jean, is so grave of an act that the mere contemplation of it is dangerous; to her, temptation and consideration alone is already a troubling form of erotic behaviour. Though a natural and expected emotion, Lara Jean's sexual desire is momentous as it signifies the possibility of an

essential and eternal change. In this way, sexual urges alone endanger Lara Jean's self-perception, relationships, and understanding of her place in her world.

Despite sex and desire existing as a sort of threat, Lara Jean acts on and accepts her sexuality, seemingly offering a sort of challenge to the narrative that ties virtue to virginity. Lara Jean speaks of having sex with Peter in the future (262) and later initiates the act, "really, truly [sure]" (279) that she "want[s]" (281) and is "ready" (279) to consummate her relationship. Lara Jean's approach can be read as a divergence from virginity-fetishization narratives; her independent consideration of what sex means to her suggests that sexual activity is a choice with consequence, but not the sole behaviour that defines her character. Adding to this is her portrayal as a generally multidimensional girl with positive emotional, social, and intellectual traits such as kindness, confidence, and a passion for baking, fashion, and reading. Her social context recognizes and commends these qualities, suggesting that virginity is not her sole value or identifier. Despite this, this challenge is mild, and Lara Jean's fate ultimately acts to exemplify abstinence porn. Her narrative arc reinforces the idea that self-denial is sensual, and that virginity is synonymous with one's moral identity. Her and Peter do not follow through with intercourse and then break up. Though they quickly reunite, neither mentions sex again, and it resumes its place in their relationship as a far-off maybe. In the end, Lara Jean's fixation on her virginity functions to eroticize her self-restraint; though she believes that she is ready for intercourse, her goodness means that she is capable of refraining. In fact, Lara Jean's ability to arouse men hinges on her persistent infatuation with, yet self-denial of, sex; though she ultimately says no, readers are led to believe that she may eventually say yes. It is this obsession, paired with her ongoing sexual tension with Peter, that is glorified and presented as a satisfying and fulfilling experience in its own capacity. It is unnecessary for Lara Jena to partake in sex when the mere deliberation of the act serves as a suitable erotic alternative, one that allows her to continue to embody her identity as an untouched, righteous virgin. The novel thereby illustrates that the code of the virgin comprises a moral superiority that is acquired and sustained through chastity.

The code of virginity is also closely dependent on a sexual awakening of the virginal female protagonist. In YA texts, the protagonist experiences sexual desire, but only because this desire is both aroused and safeguarded by a particular boy whom she commits to eternally. Lara Jean, for instance, exclusively contemplates sexual activity with Peter, her long-term, serious boyfriend. As they kiss, Lara Jean "can't even finish a thought, much less a sentence" (173), exhibiting the strength of her attraction. Naturally, Peter is the only person Lara Jean has ever "*kissed* kissed" (44) and is her "'[f]irst kiss, first boyfriend, first everything!'" (44). Throughout the novel, Lara Jean does not experience the urge, nor the comfortability, to sexually explore with anyone but Peter. Through him, she accesses love, security, and a close attachment, emotions which are vital in the awakening of her latent sexual capacity. This emotional connection is so defined that Lara Jean regards Peter as her only appropriate sexual partner and is troubled by the idea of losing her virginity to "some boy [she] meet[s] in college [as] [t]hat boy is a stranger to [her]" (302). Because Peter is the supposedly right man, he inadvertently acts as the regulator of her sexual feelings. Her sexual capacity is evoked not because she wishes to experiment or experience intercourse's pleasures, but directly because of her emotional connection with her boyfriend.

Even further emphasizing this is Peter's role as the protector of Lara Jean's virginity. He ensures that her arousal is expressed only within the bounds of their relationship, and even then, in a limited fashion that allows her virginity to remain untouched. On the night Lara Jean initiates intercourse, he assures her that "[they] don't have to do anything" (280) and then makes the final decision to abstain from sex entirely (282). Though Lara Jean expresses her desire to have sex, the novel frames her as a modest and inexperienced teenage girl, one who may simply be too naïve to comprehend the full weight of her actions. Therefore, Peter must prevent her from making a hasty decision by acting as the unilateral controller of her virginity. Peter then, is not simply the person who unlocks her sexuality; he is also an "[agent] of [Lara Jean's] passive body" (Seifert 15), the one who guards her chastity and assists her in preserving it. Lara Jean is allowed

to desire Peter not simply because she loves him, but also because he is her guardian, the very man who, even in the haze of passion, stops her from acting on her own flawed judgement.

Further heightening this narrative is Lara Jean's belief that sexual intercourse will be sacrosanct because it will occur with Peter, an individual she possesses a deep affection for. Her love and adoration for Peter furthers her belief that he is distinctly special and therefore appropriate to sexually desire. Peter is "the most special person to [Lara Jean] in the world" (Han 319), and she believes that with him, sex would "fe[el] right" (302). Notably, Lara Jean perceives sex as an inherently intimate act and expresses that she "want[s] [it] to always be a sacred thing" (262). In her mind, her relationship with Peter is the only space in which she can access intimate and emotionally fulfilling sex; if she becomes involved with another partner, there is a significant threat of intercourse descending into an experience that is uncomfortably "ordinary" (262). Lara Jean understands their love to be different to and more valuable than the lust that other couples feel, with the reciprocity and seriousness of her feelings forging an emotional intimacy so powerful that she marks Peter as an exceptional individual. Because of this, it is permissible for her to channel all her sexual desire towards him.

Finally, Lara Jean's eternal commitment to Peter allows the couple to operate in a sort of marital state (Day, "Reimagining Forever" 292) that retains Lara Jean's moral virtue. Peter readily agrees to the proposition of marrying and having a child with Lara Jean (Han 140) and states that he will "love [her] with all his heart, always" (321). Lara Jean holds similar beliefs; she considers herself lucky to have grown up with "the person [she's] going to spend the rest of [her] life with" (324) and desperately wishes that she'll always "feel for Peter the way [she] do[es] right now" (184). Cleary, Peter and Lara Jean mutually regard their relationship as a serious engagement that will inevitably cultivate with marriage. In fact, the novel concludes with Lara Jean continuing to date Peter despite matters of youth, distance, and personal conflict that could render them incompatible. Indeed, the couple's implied permanence functions to circumvent the normative

circumstances in which most girls lose their virginity. Unlike her peers, Lara Jean does not partake in sex with inconsequential or unfamiliar partners, nor is she ever touched by anyone but the sole boy who arouses desire within her. In having a physical relationship with only her forever lover, Lara Jean succeeds in preserving a peculiar yet indisputable iteration of untaintedness—one which allocates her the status of honorary virgin.

The psychosocial distress that Lara Jean experiences as a direct result of her identity exhibits an additional dimension of this code of virginity. YA texts portray virgins as distinct individuals who are markedly different from their peers—this leads to a powerful tension as female protagonists attempt to navigate the disparate consequences of their identity. Though Han's text ultimately posits virginity as highly valuable, it also offers a realistic portrayal of contemporary girlhood by demonstrating Lara Jean's fear of stigmatization. She states that "[she'd] rather do anything than answer a sex question" (51) in front of her classmates and is aware that Peter would "[not] want the whole senior class to know that he and his girlfriend…have never had sex" (52) Indeed, the dominant social script in Lara Jean's environment condones girls partaking in intercourse under certain conditions. The text suggests that many of her classmates would feel open to sexually experimenting within the bounds of a secure, committed relationship like Lara Jean's, and yet, she herself remains markedly nonsexual. In refraining from deeply examining her wants, engaging in any in-depth sexual exploration, or discussing intercourse in any sort of real-world manner, Lara Jean evidences her singularity. Her inability to relate to her peers' relations coupled with the implicit societal message that she *should* be sexually curious engenders the idea that her emotions, identity, and relationship are abnormal. Lara Jean comes to internalize herself as different, and experiences anxiety over the idea that others, too, may spot her strangeness. Though this stigma is not enough to overpower virginity's lauded identity or to persuade Lara Jean to forfeit her own, it does lead to shame, distress, and concealment. Fearful of being perceived as prudish and desperate to avoid her femininity and sexual capability being questioned, Lara Jean consistently avoids revealing her virginal status.

This psychosocial distress is only compounded by the repression and androcentrism that shapes Lara Jean's experience of sexual desire. Though she initiates sex with Peter, her actions seem to be motivated by self-sacrifice and a lack of emotional awareness. Lara Jean regards him as a "big expert" (142) who will "teach [her] everything" (142), underscoring her inexperience and perception of her sexual role. Rather than approaching intercourse as an active participant who is informed about her expectations and pleasure, Lara Jean's impulse is rooted in a passivity which prioritizes continued suppression and the satisfaction of her male partner. In designating Peter authority over their physical relationship, she indicates that her body's primary purpose is to be acquiescent and moldable to her partner's instruction. This passivity absolves Lara Jean from taking an engaged approach to sexual exploration, thereby permitting her true feelings toward erotic desire to remain unconsidered and dormant. Indeed, when Lara Jean's reasons for wanting sex are questioned, she simply insists that she "want[s] to feel close to [Peter]" (281). Lara Jean fixates on the emotional closeness that sex can engender whilst failing to consider the act's multidimensional nature and varied effects. In refusing to acknowledge the full scope of sex—including its physical and pleasurable elements—her conceptualization of the permissibility of her attraction and her erotic desire remains both warped and underdeveloped.

Moreover, the "unexamined discourse of 'readiness'" (Ashcraft 328) in YA texts functions to breed confusion and indecision in young female protagonists. Lara Jean, for example, is offered only vague guidance on the topic of virginity loss; her older sister, Margot, simply tells her that one's first time "should be with someone who really knows you. Someone who loves you" (263). Margot's failure to elucidate on what constitutes sexual readiness or the logic that influenced her own decision to become sexually active leaves Lara Jean with only an ill-defined understanding of what genuine preparedness for virginity loss entails. Consequently, she is uneducated on what a ready state looks and feels like or what actions can be taken to move toward it. Because of this incomprehension, Lara Jean acts impulsively. Directly following an emotional conflict with

Peter, she initiates sex, expressing that she "know[s] what [she] want[s] to do" (279). The narrative that follows the statement of her decision is so succinct as to become insufficient. Throughout the novel, Lara Jean consistently expresses that virginity loss is meaningful to her; thereby, her choice to finally have sex is significant and layered. Despite this, the text excludes any in-depth explanation of the profound internal shift that must have occurred to transform the historically chaste Lara Jean into a girl ready for intercourse. Indeed, it seems as though she cannot voice, rationalize, or explain why, exactly, she is suddenly prepared to have sex. The social description of readiness remains so nebulous, in fact, that girls like Lara Jean are rendered perplexed and conflicted, unable to determine when or if they ever truly fit it.

The final element of the code of the virgin is its direct correlation to the modern-day sociocultural construction of girlhood. In YA texts, the young female protagonist's coming of age is eroticized, with virginity loss itself functioning as the gateway to adulthood and a final relinquishing of adolescence. Lara Jean, who regards sexual intercourse as an activity that is reserved exclusively for mature women, cleanly exhibits this connection. She envisions that her first time "will…be at college…as an adult" (113) and admits that it "feels weird to be romantic in the same bed [she's] slept in since [she] was a little girl" (236)." Viewing youth as fundamentally incongruous with intercourse, Lara Jean concludes that her current age and girlishness disqualify her from existing as a sexual being. This association is so strong, in fact, that the presence of childhood symbols in settings where she "make[s] out" (236) serve as discomforting reminders that she is behaving in ways that are impermissible for adolescent girls. As a result, she is only comfortable kissing Peter in more impersonal spaces, where she can forget about and separate herself from her youth. Lara Jean, it seems, is barred from participating in sexual behaviour precisely because she has yet to become a woman. The female characters who the text does note as sexually active embody a type of maturity that Lara Jean lacks, either because they are older and decidedly grown-up, or because they are promiscuous outliers. Lara Jean, conversely, sees herself as a mere girl—it is only

after aging that she will be granted womanhood, the very quality which will transform her into an adult who is allowed to indulge in her sexuality.

Forwarding this narrative is Lara Jean's urge to lose her virginity to come of age; the act functions as a means for her to align her identity with the life stage she is ineluctably transitioning into. Her initiation of intercourse at a time of potent transformation clearly typifies this. She has just graduated high school, is soon moving to North Carolina to attend college, and is "so, so excited to take [her] next step" (247). After Peter declines sex, he accuses Lara Jean of proposing it so she could "close a chapter" (302) on high school and their relationship. Though Lara Jean denies this, his words land powerfully and prompt a moment of self-examination; her behaviour and internal narrative suggest that Peter's criticism can, indeed, be read as true. Lara Jean expresses "homesick[ness]" (247), conflict, and "dread" (75) over her changing environment, and, as a result, feels an implicit pressure to adapt. Her sudden wish for sex can be understood as an attempt to renounce her girlhood and transform into a mature version of self. With a developing self-identity, the finishing of secondary school, and the completion of hallmark teenage firsts, the loss of Lara Jean's virginity looms as the final step necessary to unlock her adult identity. The progression will reconstruct her personhood and convert her into a woman who, with her life experiences, firmly belongs in and is equipped to thrive in the college world. Naturally, these concurrent beliefs establish a paradoxical ideal that leaves Lara Jean trapped and unable to act faultlessly. She is aware of her youth and thus feels obligated to partake in the behaviour which would undoubtedly expunge it: sex. Conflictingly, intercourse is structurally incongruent with girlhood, her current state of being, highlighting the paradoxical discourses which delineate virginity. Lara Jean recognizes that she must be a woman to permissibly participate in sex, but also that she will never fully transform into a woman *until* the very moment that she has sex. Consequently, if she wants to personify the role of a sensible and adult woman, she will have to conform to an ideal which can only truly be embodied through miraculous and unattainable means. It remains utterly impossible for Lara Jean to

determine the exact age that she is permitted to participate in the act when the prerequisite for intercourse is a quality that intercourse itself imbues in a female.

Adding to this confusion is virginity's presentation as a time-bound trait which cannot belong in an adult relationship. Lara Jean presumes that her and Peter will "finally [have] sex at college" (142) and that the behaviour will one day become typical, identifying a relational shift that occurs with age. Though a connection built entirely on emotion and nonsexual intimacy is portrayed as permissible and even normal for a girl, as Lara Jean begins to embody more womanly traits, her virginity transforms from a valuable quality into one that is shameful and transgressive. In this way, sex becomes the "price of admission" (McAlister 274) that girls must pay to partake in adult romantic relationships. If Lara Jean wants to continue her loving relationship into womanhood, she will simply have to participate in sex—not due to personal interest or pleasure, but because normative, fulfilling adult relationships necessitate it. This creates a passive discourse that links virginity to the elapsing of time, one that "features clichéd rhetoric such as 'it just happened'" (108). It suggests that Lara Jean understands virginity loss to be, much like aging, uncontrollable and inevitable after a certain period has elapsed. It exists not as a decision to be planned for, deliberated, or made, but as a force that all girls are at the mercy of. Lara Jean's belief is especially striking as she demonstrates consistent sexual repression and discomfort, a complex emotional framework which is unlikely to resolve with age alone. The text, thereby, suggests that maintaining a nonsexual relationship into early adulthood would be developmentally healthy and even appropriate for Lara Jean. Despite this, she resigns herself to the fact that her virginity cannot exist eternally. Part of her understands that whether she wishes for it or not, sex will soon become the very prerequisite for the love and romance that she so deeply wishes to maintain.

Han's *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* presents the code of the virgin, illustrating the prescribed set of beliefs and moral and behavioral rules that must be followed to protect a girl's glorified virginal identity. Because YA literature posits virgins as pure and good, female adolescent readers learn that they are at their most valuable when they

abstain from sex. To retain her virginal identity, Lara Jean embodies four essential attributes: a goodness and moral superiority that is obtained through chastity, a latent erotic desire that is unearthed exclusively by her eternal lover, a psychosocial tumult, and the understanding of womanhood itself as a sexual state. Lara Jean's narrative arc demonstrates that if a girl acts in accordance with this code of conduct, she is then rewarded with the purity, righteousness, and emotional fulfillment that accompanies virginhood. These YA stories, then, message to adolescents that is as clear as it is compelling; sex is a perilous threat to identity, an act that can strip away one's childhood, virtue, and specialness. Therefore, at least while one is still a girl, the safest and most moral course of action is to simply remain a virgin.

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