

**“Rooted to the Middle of the Earth”:  
Crossing the Human – Non-Human Boundary in Virginia Woolf’s Novels**

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Descriptions of nature are frequent in Virginia Woolf’s fiction and her novel *The Waves* (1931) is no exception. The interludes, essential parts of the novel, trace the rhythm of the sun and the seasons. In Woolf’s diaries as well as in her fiction the non-human plays a large part, from “Kew Gardens” to *The Years* and “Time Passes” to *Between the Acts*. These works demonstrate what Louise Westling has noted as well, namely that Woolf increasingly “sought to portray the non-human [...] world within which we are tiny and only momentary presences” (Westling 856). Woolf’s awareness of the non-human makes an ecocritical approach to her fiction very useful. In the paper that follows, I will first define ecocriticism before applying it to Woolf’s work – in particular *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves*. My focus will be on three characters from these works: Septimus Warren Smith, Louis and Susan.

Ecocriticism is described by Scott Slovic as the “scrutiny of human-nature relationships in ... [a] literary text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world” (Slovic 160). Whereas initially ecocriticism mainly appraised “the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature” (qtd. in Buell 21), I believe what Lawrence Buell calls “second-wave ecocriticism” (Buell 22) to be more useful. Contrary to earlier, “first-wave ecocriticism” (Buell 21), this does not focus solely on the natural environment but acknowledges that the human and the non-human, the cultural and the natural are entwined. In this paper I also present the view of the human and the non-human as being connected. My focus therefore

will not be only on the non-human or natural aspects of Woolf's novels, but on those characters in her work who embody connections between the human and the non-human and can thus be said to cross the boundaries between the cultural and the natural. Also, although the terms nature and non-human cannot be said to be exact synonyms, I will use them interchangeably.

As many ecocritics have pointed out, it is impossible to accurately describe the non-human – we can only understand nature by way of culture.<sup>1</sup> A possible solution to this is to perceive humans as part of the “biotic community” (qtd. in Buell 8), that is “to speak in cognizance of human beings as ecologically or environmentally embedded” (Buell 8). In Woolf's works this translates into the creation of characters who are very much in touch with both the non-human and the human.

Septimus Warren Smith is one of these characters. He appears to physically become part of the non-human when he feels that the leaves are “connected by millions of fibres with his own body [...] when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement” (*MD* 24). He even understands what the birds are singing. Septimus fulfils an intermediate position between the human and the non-human by attempting to make the messages he gets known to the people around him. The voices of nature tell him that the “supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet” (*MD* 74). Of course, Septimus' illness and subsequent suicide prevent him from making his message known. The only person to whom Septimus does reveal his knowledge is his wife Lucrezia, who neatly bundles up the papers with his revelations and puts them away.<sup>2</sup> Society's response to Septimus' messages can be perceived as a sign that people are so alienated from nature that they see communication with it as a form of madness. When keeping the importance of relationships between the human and the

non-human in Woolf's works in mind, it seems puzzling that the intermediate between these two in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a mentally unstable, shell-shocked man.

In the novel, Septimus' visionary powers are presented as the result of a cultural disturbance: the First World War. Justyna Kostkowska writes that Septimus' visions are examples of "nature reacting back to being stomped on" (Kostkowska 192). She also quotes Elizabeth Waller who explains Septimus' experiences as the result of the "unnatural Eurocentric separation of human from non-human" which is "physically and spiritually deadening" (qtd. in Kostkowska 192). Kostkowska then draws the conclusion that Septimus is suffering from the results of "society's isolation of an individual from nature" (Kostkowska 192). However, this would imply that only those who experience "various degrees of emotional or physical death" (Kostkowska 192), like Septimus, feel this deep connection to the non-human. In a later novel, *The Waves*, Woolf proves this assumption wrong. Septimus' experience of "[r]ed flowers [...] [growing] through his flesh; their stiff leaves [...] [rustling] by his head" (*MD* 74-5) is echoed in *The Waves* by Louis. While holding a stalk in his hand, he moves from perceiving the stalk to *being* the stalk: "I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake in me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs [...] my eyes are green leaves, unseeing" (*TW* 7). Louis, like Septimus, feels a deep connection with the non-human, and like him, feels part of it. However, this is not brought on by a mental illness.

While writing *The Waves* Woolf attributed signature images to her characters. The plant rooted to the earth is one that belongs to Louis. He first uses this image as a child and returns to it throughout his life. Because these experiences recur, it becomes apparent that they are neither a result of childish innocence nor madness

as in the case of Septimus. By creating Louis, Woolf acknowledges that crossing the boundary into the non-human is not as strange or extraordinary as it had seemed in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Louis, unlike Septimus, does not experience these feelings as odd. In fact, they are something that has been with him since childhood and are presented as quite normal. More importantly, Louis is not mad. He is more part of society than Septimus, and is thereby a more successful intermediate between the human and non-human. In fact, Louis appears to feel relatively comfortable in both worlds – both human and non-human.

Nevertheless, the social insecurity that Louis experiences makes it appear odd that he describes himself as being rooted. In the novel he often feels the opposite – a colonial, an outsider, without a home to turn to. Describing himself in natural terms, indeed making himself part of nature, is a way for Louis to ground himself. As I mentioned earlier, the plant rooted in the earth is one of his signature images. Another image links him to ancient Egypt. He says he has “seen women carrying red pitchers to the banks of the Nile” (*TW* 71). This combination of images demonstrates that Louis attempts to make himself part of both nature and history. Precisely because he fulfils an intermediate position he is aware of the fleetingness of human life compared to nature. As Madeline Moore has written, “nature’s impersonal rhythms of life and rebirth point to the continuation of the world, [whereas] individuals live in a time-bound and imperfect way” (Moore 223). By using these images, Louis links himself to the eternal rather than to the ephemeral.

Louis appears to be the perfect intermediate between the human and non-human. Seemingly effortlessly he moves back and forth from holding a stalk in his hand, to being the stalk, from living in the human world to experiencing the natural world. Indeed, crossing the boundary between the human and the non-human occurs

frequently in *The Waves*. Moore describes a natural cycle in the novel in which “individuals are momentarily united with nature, experience both its exaltation and its nothingness, and, in order to preserve their autonomy, reemerge into the present of human effort” (Moore 219). Actually, the characters have no choice but to return to the human as that is where they belong. In the end the most they can do is to be parts of the biotic community – which Susan is as well.

Like Louis, Susan also describes herself as being rooted. However, whereas Louis is rooted to the earth in general, she is rooted to one particular place – the farm. In that sense the two characters are opposites. Throughout the novel – throughout his life – Louis is looking for a place to call home, a place where he belongs. Susan, on the other hand, knows where she belongs. Indeed, she feels so connected to the farm that as a young woman she specifically describes herself in terms of it, and in terms of the non-human: “I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees” (*TW* 72). Susan takes her connection with nature a step further than Louis and is nature personified when she describes the birds, the hare, the heron and the cow as hers: “all are mine” (*TW* 72). This identification with the land of the farm makes her stay at school particularly painful. On her way home she even describes the school and everything that is connected to it – including the fields and the cows – as unreal. As she says on the train, “these are not school fields; these are not school hedges; the men in these fields are doing real things; they fill carts with real hay; and those are real cows, not school cows” (*TW* 45).

Both Septimus and Louis describe themselves as part of the non-human and as taking on natural aspects. Susan also does this but her connection with the natural runs deeper. So deep in fact that the non-human takes on her emotions. As a child, Susan runs into the forest after she has seen Jinny kiss Louis. Once in the

forest, “the branches heave up and down. There is agitation and trouble here. There is gloom. The light is fitful. There is anguish here [...] Susan has spread her anguish out” (*TW* 9). Because of Susan’s strong bond with nature she can be said to get closest to actually being part of the non-human. Of the three characters that I focus on in this paper – Septimus, Louis and Susan – she is the most successful intermediate.

Susan’s identification with the non-human can also be explained from an ecofeminist point of view. She fulfils traditional patterns by identifying with nature as a woman, yet becomes even more traditional as her children are born. When Susan’s children are born, her connection with nature weakens. They separate her from the non-human – so much so, that she no longer identifies with nature as she did before. Earlier, she had described herself as “a field bearing crops in rotation” (*TW* 99) and said that she was “not a woman”, but “the seasons” (*TW* 73). Yet once her children are born her ties with nature are severed. She moves from a natural to a domestic environment and no longer knows whether it is summer or winter “by the moor grass, and the heath flower” but “only by the steam on the window-pane, or the frost on the window-pane” (*TW* 131). The window in this quote is an apt example of the confinement that Susan experiences once she is a mother. She is no longer outside, free to walk through the fields and feel one with nature, but inside, behind glass, taking care of her children.<sup>3</sup>

However, pregnancy, childbirth and raising children can also be seen as something that brings a woman closer to nature. In that sense, Susan’s connection to nature and natural rhythms has deepened. After the birth of her children she is no longer merely connected to the rhythm of the seasons, or the fields and the barn, but to a more elemental rhythm: the rhythm of life.

In previous years, most ecocritics have ignored Woolf's works. The reason for this may be that Woolf is not a typical nature writer. For example, her characters are neither solitary beings meditating on the power of nature, nor does Woolf deal solely with the non-human in her works. In this paper I hope to have demonstrated that recent developments in the field of ecocriticism, in which the focus has shifted from merely the natural to the relationships humans have with the non-human, make an ecocritical approach to Woolf's works useful. Septimus, Louis and Susan are intermediates between the human and the non-human and demonstrate a close connection to nature in their speech and feelings, yet are also part of society. Therefore, I believe that ecocriticism will shed new light on Woolf's works and create a fertile ground that will bring new insights to both fields.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion of this topic see Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* and Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Mrs. Dalloway* 162.

<sup>3</sup> A similar image is used in the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse*, in which the glass clearly separates the nonhuman (outside) from the human (inside): "for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterly" (*TTL* 106).

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