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Eerie Ecologies: Rethinking Agency in Daphne du Maurier's Nature Short Stories

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Author: Zuzanna Sarlej

Supervised by: David Owen

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

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Abstract

This dissertation conducts an ecocritical analysis of three short stories by Daphne du Maurier: “The Birds”, “Monte Verità” and “The Apple Tree”. The chief focus is on the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies, which are concluded to be dependent on epistemological foundations and entangled both conceptually and physically. Through the analysis of the primary texts, this research rejects the assumption that human actions are inherently more dominant, instead suggesting that the relationship should be reimagined. The theoretical departure from the concept of “eerie” highlights the unsettling aspect of the displacement of nonhuman agency and ignites speculative processes. This is further enhanced by incorporating a posthumanist lens. Together, this theoretical framework makes it possible to discern ideas from the stories which serve as spaces for imagination. These include identifying the attitude of eco-humility as desirable in reinventing the human-nonhuman relationship, attunement with physicality and embracing the nonhuman as an integral part of the human. This research contributes to expanding the ecocritical framework and vindicates Daphne du Maurier’s short fiction as valuable to the field.

Keywords: Daphne du Maurier, ecocriticism, posthumanism, the eerie, agency

Introduction

The reputation of Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989), primarily as a popular woman writer, has historically constrained the critical examination of her literary works, until approximately two decades ago, when Virago began reprinting numerous, often neglected texts. Predominantly known as a novelist, she published highly popular works, including *Rebecca* (1938), *Jamaica Inn* (1936) and *My Cousin Rachel* (1951), which continue to enjoy widespread readership. These most celebrated texts have not only monopolized scholarly attention but also led to the author being pigeonholed as a ‘romantic’ or a ‘Gothic romance’ writer (Munford and Taylor 1), overlooking the diversity and depth of her literary contributions. Beyond these seminal narratives, du Maurier created numerous other texts—plays, biographies, and, notably, short stories—that arguably more accurately showcase the unconventional and enduring aspects of her creative vision and are yet to be properly researched in this new wave of critical reassessment.

It is precisely the shorter narratives that form the primary focus of this research; consequently, I will concentrate on their critical reception, rather than reviewing the (less relevant) criticism of du Maurier’s entire artistic output. Among the shorter narratives, “Don’t Look Now” (1971) and “The Birds” (1952) have gained significant attention due to their adaptation into widely viewed films.¹ The critical lenses often associated with the author are those of feminism and psychoanalysis,² as succinctly represented by Slavoj Žižek’s rejected foreword to the short story collection, including “The Birds”, in which he identifies ‘feminine masochism’ as a running theme throughout all the stories in his psychoanalytical reading.³

¹ *The Birds* directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1963; *Don’t Look Now* directed by Nicolas Roeg in 1973.

² A trend that began in the 1980s as a response to the first patronizing critical accounts like that of Richard Kelly (1987). Feminist critics gave du Maurier greater credit for repurposing the Gothic genre and reinventing women’s literature (e.g., Auerbach 2002).

³ In the end, the introduction to the volume was written by David Thompson. According to Žižek, his own text was rejected by the publisher for being overly theoretical and offensive to the author, but it can still be accessed online at: <https://www.lacan.com/zizdaphmaur.htm>. I appreciate the value of Žižek’s insights, especially his short comment on *Rebecca*, I find pertinent. As he is a specialist on Lacan, I found his interpretation and terminology useful in better understanding Fisher’s theories on the weird and the eerie, as he is heavily influenced by the French philosopher. Žižek’s psychoanalytic and gender interpretation of the stories is plausible, though personally, I do not find it the most compelling aspect. Regardless, I understand the publisher’s concern about including this rather scandalous essay as the foreword, especially since more than half of it revolves around Žižek’s seemingly unrelated and theory-heavy—though compelling and entertaining—reflections.

Christine Reynier points out that his conclusions are simplified and incomplete (2), and forwards a thesis that the topic which binds the collection together is ‘outrage’, understood both as an outburst of anger and a reaction to an act of injustice (3); she made her claim based on the example of what she considered the most-overlooked story, “Monte Verità”. Setara Pracha investigates the theme of corporeality in short stories,⁴ an outlook I will expand in this research to encompass the nonhuman. Few scholars have employed an ecocritical approach to the short stories.

This lack of attention (probably owing to the fact that the resurgence of attention to both the writer and this critical approach is only recent) is surprising given the impact of geographical and natural context on du Maurier’s life and creative works. Closely attached to the Cornish shore, she created a chronicle—*Enchanted Cornwall: Her Pictorial Memoir* (1990)⁵—summarizing her legacy in relation to the region. Published around a year after her death, it does not leave any room for doubt that the natural setting of her narratives is meaningful and deliberate. That is not to say that du Maurier considered herself an ecocritical author in the current understanding of the word. Around the time the stories were written, the environmental movement was slowly emerging, Rachel Carson will write her consequential volume *The Silent Spring* around ten years later, in 1962. However, there is not enough evidence to assume that du Maurier was following a particular environmental agenda, above simply being a nature-loving person, deeply connected with the physical environment of the Cornish region.⁶ Hence, this research does not aim to reinvent du

⁴ Notably in the recently published *The Pathology of Desire in Daphne Du Maurier’s Short Stories*. Lexington Books, 2023.

⁵ Daphne du Maurier’s works other than the short story collection (the primary text) are discussed only in the Introduction. Starting with Chapter One, all of the (du Maurier) references will refer to the collection and will not bear any additional markers (date, title etc.), for the sake of clarity.

⁶ In her article for *The Guardian*, Kate Kellaway recalls the words of Sarah Dunant who said this of du Maurier: “She is very good on English landscape. You may think of her as an urbane socialite coming out of Edwardian England, but she went to the land”. This point, so often overlooked by scholars, is evident even on the first page of her most celebrated work, *Rebecca*: “Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers” (5). This novel and majority of the other ones are full of similar rich fragments which, though not at the center of the story, make an indispensable addition to the plot. Following Timothy Morton’s assertion that “Scholars must reimagine ecological literary criticism based on nonessentialism and intimate entanglement of all life-forms [...]” (“The Mesh” 28), du Maurier’s texts and many others lend themselves to ecocritical analysis despite not being strictly environmental or nature works.

Maurier as a visionary ecocritical author, but rather vindicate her short fiction and nature themes it contains as a useful contribution to the ecocritical field.

Existing attempts to acknowledge this ecocritical importance have predominantly revolved around tropes of animal and plant retaliation (e.g., Lachazette 2021) and predation (e.g., Bellanca 2021); though insightful, particularly in anthropological terms, these studies have failed to examine the nonhuman agency, focusing strictly on the consequences that violence had on humans. Michael Kane notices posthuman tendencies in “The Birds”, identifying it as an early example of “clifi” (climate fiction), which represents one of the two post-apocalyptic visions forwarded in the 1950s⁷—a literally ‘post’ human world where humans have become obsolete (44). A few stories (particularly “The Apple Tree”) have attracted ecofeminist attention (e.g. Pracha 2016); however, the focus on gender overshadows many ecocritical considerations, emphasizing the patriarchal structure over the role of the nonhuman.

The short stories that are the focus of my research are the well-known “The Birds” and “The Apple Tree”, alongside the lengthier “Monte Verità”.⁸ These texts were published as a part of the same collection in 1952,⁹ and, as noted by the author’s biographer Margaret Forster, they marked a significant improvement on du Maurier’s previous short works, both in terms of the quality of writing as well as the maturity of the content, especially the depiction of gender (260). The brutality, or even cruelty the stories displayed, along with the macabre elements, were qualities not typically associated with the supposedly romantic author of *Rebecca*, which frames the collection as a milestone in du Maurier’s artistic development (260). Forster observes that du Maurier’s short stories provide a more succinct insight into the terrifying originality of her style compared to her novels (256). This collection, in particular, exemplifies this observation, even though

⁷ The other, postnatural vision, is exemplified by Samuel Beckett’s play *Endgame* (1957), in which nature (rather than humans) ceased to exist (Kane 44). Posthumanists focus on the category of a human, whilst postnaturalists on that of nature, but these categories clearly overlap, as Bruno Latour said: “we are postnatural” (qtd. in Kane 40). I further address this distinction in Chapter One.

⁸ Žizek (“Are We Allowed to Enjoy Daphne Du Maurier?”) stresses the importance of analyzing the narratives as a coherent whole, side by side, an approach infeasible for this research. Nevertheless, even though each chapter focuses on one story only, I refer to the remaining ones throughout, drawing parallels between them.

⁹ *The Apple Tree: A Short Novel and Some Stories* in the UK. In the United States, the collection was published with two additional stories under the title *Kiss Me Again, Stranger: A Collection of Eight Stories, Long and Short* (1953). The collection is more widely recognized and often referred to by its alternative title, *The Birds and Other Stories*.

much of the critical attention was given to “The Birds”. Limited academic attention, despite the writing’s obvious literary merit, prompted my decision to investigate the collection further, with the selection of particular stories guided by the presence of natural elements. What unites these three narratives is the prevalence of an environmental theme—flora, fauna, weather, landscape—for the development of the plot. Collectively, they provide a sufficient sample of du Maurier’s writing conducive to an ecocritical examination. The genre of these works escapes neat classification; they could be categorized as gothic fiction, weird or eco-horror, all of which share a common speculative thread, an element less common in traditional genres, yet indispensable to the analysis of the environment and its degradation, as well as possible reimaginations (Edwards et al. xi).¹⁰

Considering the relative scarcity of (particularly ecocritical) attention given to the short stories, and their potential for a meaningful contribution to the field, the central question I wish to address is the following: what do Daphne du Maurier’s ‘nature’ short stories suggest about the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies? The short stories showcase displacement of nonhuman agencies—or a disruption in the dynamics between the human and the nonhuman—positioning them in a space of an eerie. There appears to be an epistemological gap, and the lack of understanding acts as an equalizer, challenging human agency as inherently superior. Instead, the narratives reveal a complex entanglement between human and nonhuman agencies, which are not only equal but not completely separate. This idea is furthered by a trans-corporeal relation between the two, which implies they are not only connected on a conceptual level but physically entangled. The dynamics depicted in du Maurier’s narratives problematize the conventional understanding of human and nonhuman agencies, enriching the field of ecocriticism with a posthuman perspective that allows for an imaginative reinvention of the human category in light of its agentic interactions with the nonhuman.

¹⁰ Defining weird horror is complicated; it is a derivative of horror, but one which draws heavily from science fiction and surrealism. An important subject of weird horror is an “absolute other”, something outside of human comprehension and concerned with the nonhuman. Eco-horror obviously also deals with the nonhuman category, something I explore in more detail in Chapter Three.

This research will engage with an extensive array of theoretical concepts, and the initial inspiration to connect the more established theories of ecocriticism and posthumanism was the notion of “eerie”. Developed by Mark Fisher’s *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), alongside the idea of the “weird”, it builds upon and extends Freud’s famous notion of “unheimlich”;¹¹ it is traditionally conceptualized as dealing with the ‘inside’—the psychoanalytic focus on the ‘self’, and how the strange influences the familial (iv). Meanwhile, the new distinction (the weird and the eerie) pertains to the ‘outside’, when the subject, rather than focusing on the ‘self’, assumes the perspective of the ‘other’, completely detached from the familial and thus unsettling in a different manner (v).¹² This trope has been identified as crucial in any ecological research (VanderMeer qtd in Edwards et al. xiii), and is experiencing a resurgence (Macfarlane, online), but it was Fisher who nuanced it as a critical category and defined it against the notion of agency. It is precisely the sense of displaced agency that is the source of unsettlement, and as such it emerges as a useful theoretical starting point in the ecocritical reading of du Maurier’s short stories and broader ecocritical inquiries. Unlike the unheimlich, the eerie decenters the human and conceptually liberates the nonhuman from passivity, emphasizing its inherent eco-humility and attributing greater significance to the actions of the nonhuman.

The concept of agency, central though elusive, possesses an inherent elegance through accounting for any mode of action. According to current understanding, there is a difference, albeit unclarified, between human and nonhuman agencies. Therefore, I aim to maintain a relatively open definition—a capacity to perform an action which arrives at a particular result—to avoid ascribing anthropocentric biases to the term. Similarly ambiguous is the category of the nonhuman, which, by logical inference, encompasses everything that is not human.¹³ Following the insights of Liebermann et al. (3), I have decided to embrace the vagueness

¹¹ The translation of ‘unheimlich’ to English as ‘uncanny’ is actually disputed by Fisher, who argues a more appropriate term would be ‘unhomely’, capturing the essence of “strange within the familiar” (iv).

¹² As Fisher points out in the book’s introduction, “There is no inside except as a folding of the outside; the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was. The shudder here is the shudder of the eerie, not of the *unheimlich*” (vii).

¹³ Throughout this dissertation, I opt for using this terminology (the human and the nonhuman) which, though grammatically more awkward, better captures the sense of category that I am trying to encapsulate. Rarely, when I refer to a particular group, I use the more personalized ‘humans’ and nonhumans’.

of the term, thereby allowing for the explanation of various connections (such as those between landscape, animals and weather), while simultaneously acknowledging the interdependence with the human and anthropocentric interpretation of literature. This theoretical approach, emphasizing the human-nonhuman interconnectedness, has been utilized with increased intensity in recent years, underlining its significance to current academic considerations across various fields (Liebermann et al. 7). Notably, due to the nature of the plots under scrutiny, the nonhuman in this research will predominantly be organic, notwithstanding the burgeoning discourse on the interrelation between the human and the inorganic, cyborg-like nonhuman.¹⁴

While the term “nonhuman” holds a fairly well-established position in ecocriticism, the notion of agency appears relatively underdeveloped given its conceptual importance. The field of ecocriticism is at the basis of this dissertation, dealing with the broadly understood natural environment; however, its rather recent emergence has left certain theoretical gaps. Material ecocriticism, a subfield most closely aligned with the concept of agency, seeks to expand its scope and distribution while highlighting the cooperation or interdependence between (nonhuman) matter and people (Serenella and Oppermann 3). Although the importance of this interrelation is acknowledged, this research aims to investigate the characteristics of the dynamics between the two, following an interdisciplinary approach inherently suitable for an ecocritical reading—after all, terms such as ‘agency’ or ‘nonhuman’ are by no means exclusive to this field.

The theoretical departure from the eerie and a connection through agency to material ecocriticism naturally suggests the need for an additional investigation of the texts through a posthuman lens. The idea of a “posthuman subject” is a functional tool for thinking about and presenting possible changes to the human category when influenced by the agentic dynamics. Searching to redefine the category of the human, as well as to advance humanism, this critical approach reaches out to the nonhuman in search of answers that would satisfy the need for development (Clarke and Rossini xiv). Distinguished from transhumanism, which rather than appreciating this interconnectedness tends to fetishize technology and

¹⁴ Nevertheless, certain ideas on trans-corporeality developed in the field will be applied when analyzing the organic context of “The Apple Tree”.

seeks to advance the human form (Edwards et al. xviii), posthumanism shares ecocriticism's humility—an attitude also discernible in the pilots of the short stories this dissertation will analyze.

Following this theoretical approach, three main insights emerge that characterize the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies in the selected stories. First, I will examine the existence of an epistemological gap between the two, wherein this lack of understanding breeds uneasiness, resulting in less deliberate human actions. At its core, the eerie is rooted in the unknown (Fisher 59)—why are the birds collaborating to kill people? The unsolved mysteries in du Maurier's narratives dislodge humans from their epistemological pedestal, rendering their actions uncertain and less dominant. Such a shift towards eco-humility necessitates an acceptance of the constant shifts in epistemological systems, which includes an attempt to understand the nonhuman.

Second, nonhuman agency is characterized by entanglement within (the cooperation of animate and inanimate entities), yet the stories present human agency as also inherently entangled with the surrounding ecosystem, not as its binary opposite. The encompassing term “nonhuman” allows for the recognition of intra-cooperation between entities such as the moon, the clouds, and the mountain. However, drawing on posthuman theories of agency such as Timothy Morton's “mesh” (22) reveals that human actions, often unintentionally, are equally intertwined with those of nonhumans, underscoring the idea that the two are engaged in a constant renegotiation, and cannot be viewed as binary opposites of nature versus culture. A way to embrace this mode of thinking is through the eerie, which is capable of instilling eco-humility in the posthuman subject, given the right circumstances.

Last, the stories emphasize the material aspects of both human and nonhuman agencies, engaged not only on a conceptual but also a corporeal level; the physical dimension appears to enhance nonhuman agency. For instance, Midge, the unhappy wife, was able to carry out her presumably desired action of hurting her husband only after assuming the body of the apple tree. This is only one example of what scholars refer to as trans-corporeality—a notion prevalent in ecocriticism, new materialism and posthumanism (Alaimo 187 qtd in Oppermann 274). Embeddedness in matter emerges as a key characteristic of the posthuman subject.

The importance of conducting ecocritical research is painfully obvious—there is a dire need for new narratives that can help conceptualize better-balanced frameworks for approaching the nonhuman, and that are capable of drawing attention to the need to halt the process of environmental degradation. While of course I do not claim that this current research alone can achieve such a lofty goal, I believe that it can contribute to the understanding of agency-based relationships between people and other entities, whether animate or inanimate, as well as fostering new imaginative avenues for their reinvention. Considering that du Maurier has not traditionally been thought of as a nature writer and that her short stories have received limited ecocritical attention, this research aims to investigate their potential contribution to the field, particularly in the light of their novel approach to the issue of agency and the disruption of the binaries between human and nonhuman. Using an interdisciplinary approach can hopefully enrich and reinforce the message contained in the texts and inspire new ecocritical considerations.

1. An Epistemological Gap

“[T]he sea birds raced and ran upon the beaches. [...] Make haste, make speed, hurry and begone: yet where, and to what purpose?”

du Maurier 2

Hierarchies help classify the world, both physical and abstract. Natural entities are sorted based on innumerable criteria, such as physiognomy or chemical composition, with complexity often being proportional to perceived importance. Organisms are grouped into kingdoms, orders, or species, which helps classifiers to better understand and control the surrounding environment. These groupings reflect aspects like the type of cells bodies are comprised of and their preferred modes of nutrition. This fairly objective approach humbly places humans in the Animal Kingdom alongside cows and fruitflies. A less precise, though arguably more widespread, method of casual classification considers levels of intelligence—the capacity to gather knowledge about the physical world and other species. The crude hierarchy of the food chain¹⁵ can be interpreted as visualizing intelligence in anthropocentric terms: species with more knowledge about others’ behaviors use it to their advantage, often coming out on top, or rather near the top. The species possessing the most widespread knowledge—the one that classifies, describes, and taxonomizes—necessarily occupies the highest position in the hierarchy.

If knowledge means power, then its absence instills fear of lost advantages and impending hardships. Daphne du Maurier’s stories are abundant in enigmas—the epistemological gaps and unease they create form the core of the plots. The initial inspiration for this chapter came from an article on “The Birds” by Mary Ellen Bellanca, where she points out that the narrative “regresses humans into an epistemologically primitive state in which they cannot understand the fate that befalls them [...]” (38). The story begins shortly after the Second World War, when all kinds of birds begin a systematic, coordinated attack on humans and their dwellings, starting on the Cornish shore and spreading indeterminably far. The

¹⁵ The inaccuracy of this classification system has been noted by many environmental thinkers, including Josh Weinstein, who suggests that “food chain” should progressively be replaced with “food web” (771).

plot follows Nat Hocken and his family as they grapple with the danger, fueled by the central enigma: “Something has happened to the birds” (du Maurier 11).¹⁶

In the following analysis I will investigate the epistemological influence on the agentic dynamics between human and nonhuman entities. By identifying the eerie aspects of not knowing and the speculative power of the plot, I will explore how current hierarchies and knowledge structures are altered, and attitudes these changes evoke in the characters. This will help discern the most appropriate responses, guided by eco-humility and deconstructive perspectives, serving as an inspiration to imagine a posthuman subject. The chapter will underline the changes that epistemological shifts bring to respective agencies, rendering the nonhuman more powerful, and the human more uncertain.

Knowledge increases the capacity to perform actions that achieve particular results, thereby directly influencing agency. By occupying the topmost space in self-created charts of intelligence, it follows that in the hierarchy of agencies, the human is superior — more successful at achieving meaningful and deliberate results. The direct link between agency and knowledge has also been noted by Mark Fisher; the eerie, evoked by a displacement of agency, necessitates speculation: “when knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears” (Fisher 59). The unknown has a particularly strong effect when it pertains to something completely outside of the established semiotic system; the “unknown unknowns”¹⁷ are the most unsettling.

In the case of “The Birds”, not knowing poses a physical danger, one that humans thought they had evolved past. On the first night, unsuspecting Nat investigates the source of the noise by the window, which turns out to be a dozen birds launching an attack the moment he looks out from the window sill. Soon he hears the cries of the next victims, his children, and begins a night-long fight with the birds. Over the next

¹⁶ The plot is centered around birds and so is the textual analysis. However, I will treat them as representatives of the nonhuman in the broader theoretical analysis, and consequently use these terms interchangeably.

¹⁷ This concept has been used in scientific inquiry for a considerable time, but it was popularized by Donald Rumsfeld, former US Secretary of State for Defense, in a 2002 speech. Other than “known knowns” and “known unknowns”, “unknown unknowns” are things about which we are not even aware that we are not aware. Although convoluted, I occasionally use this term to express aspects beyond the comprehension of the characters or the established epistemological system.

few days, he develops certain suspicions regarding what motivates the birds, but is ultimately as confused as everyone else, a state encapsulated in this comment:

Nat listened to the tearing sound of splintering wood, and wondered how many million years of memory were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines. (38)

The protagonist reflects in this way while hiding with his family in a barricaded house, isolated from other people and any source of information, at the mercy of these creatures. Their perceived goal, ‘to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines’, instills familiar fears. Equating birds to machines is a meaningful metaphor, one that inspired popular interpretations of the story given the time of its publication (1952), only a few years after the Second World War. That war had deeply traumatized the British population, and also deeply affected du Maurier (Forster 183), possibly inspiring her to write more fear-driven, gothic-inspired stories. “The Birds”, with its military language and echoes of air-raid shelters, is believed to have appealed to post-war trauma (Lachazette 5). For instance, there are numerous references to “the suicide birds, the death-and-glory boys” (du Maurier 30), which clearly denotes Japanese kamikaze fighters, who sacrificed themselves in battle. Nat’s family cheered at every thud of a suicide diver (30), finding peculiar solace in those actions that are absolutely neither habitual nor instinctive: in other words, eerie. Though the military interpretation is entirely plausible, the story offers much more than a simple war allegory, as explored by Bellanca and Lachazette, among other researchers. Their ecocritical readings of the story emphasize conventional eco-horror motifs, such as retribution and retaliation. While also concerned with the nonhuman, this research focuses on the agentic dynamics between humans and birds beyond the aspect of vengeance, distinguishing itself from the existing academic sources.

Another assertion to be made based on the excerpt is that as a consequence of a lack of knowledge, humans are dislodged from their epistemological pedestal. The birds, now an opponent to be reckoned with, are esteemed for their intellectual capacities, knowledge gathered in the long course of evolution, ‘many million years of memory were stored in those little brains’. After the first attack, Nat assumes the most believable explanation, in accordance with common knowledge of animal behavior. He suggests the birds

might have been driven down by the weather or that fright ignited aggression once they were in the children's dark bedroom. However, these seemingly reasonable justifications soon give way to the unsettling truth—the motives of the birds are illegible, and they are “not merely hostile but well organized” (Bellanca 39). Their epistemological superiority in the short story signals the disruption of conventional hierarchies, all of which position the human on top. Such considerations exemplify the important function of literature, which is able to highlight the gaps in human meaning-making and propagate the idea that “nonhuman agency may exist beyond human understanding” (Liebermann et al. 6).

The agentive relationship redefines itself once the epistemological base that it stands on has shifted, placing humans on an equal, if not lower, standing compared to their nonhuman counterparts. Such a development has serious consequences for the nature of human agency, rendering it less dominant and more uncertain. When the behavioral patterns and circumstances of nonhumans change overnight, humans must rely on their own devices and reasoning capacities to survive. The reader is invited to follow Nat Hocken's train of thought as the attacks unfold, revealing his reasoning to be more lucid and meticulous than that of the other villagers. Conscious of his environment, Nat begins to make assumptions about the new cycles guiding the birds—the weather, the east wind, the tide.¹⁸ He observes a six-hour window at low tide during which the birds are lulled, giving him the chance to replenish resources. Despite his usually quick and deliberate decision-making process, lack of information causes uncertainty. He is unsure whether to send his daughter to school after the first attack or how to best utilize the six-hour respite, assuming his reasoning is correct. His confusion reflects the longer process of the erosion of human advantage, which coincides with the slow disintegration of the nature-culture divide. This paradoxical position of the human in general is acknowledged by Edwards et al., who say we are “having a greater impact on nature than ever before, while at the same time experiencing a profound sense of loss of agency when it comes to its continued existence” (xiv).

¹⁸ Although not explored at length in this chapter, the interconnectedness between these natural occurrences and the birds are one of the central points of the story. The question of entanglement is discussed in Chapter Two through analyzing the second short story, “Monte Verità”, though clearly “The Birds” and “The Apple Tree” share similar themes, some of which are omitted in this analysis for the sake of clarity.

The image of authorities as shown in the narrative, helpless and disorganized, is an emphatic depiction of this erosion. Nat realizes this early on: “Nobody’s prepared.” (du Maurier 21) he says, “We’ve got to depend upon ourselves.” (33). Still, he sporadically searches the sky for aircraft (37) and makes sure that the wireless stays on, holding a faint hope that “the best brains in the country” (25) will come up with solutions. Even Nat, clever and independent, finds comfort in the possibility of offloading the weight of the epistemological gap onto the “chiefs-of-staff”, even if just for a moment. It is almost as if he fantasizes about being told what to do, without needing to confront the subverted epistemological hierarchy himself—“they would merely carry out the orders of the scientists.” (25).

Nevertheless, he is aware of their inferior position as country dwellers, and being a World War II veteran, this is not the first time he has been disappointed by the authorities: “They always let us down. Muddle, muddle, from the start. No plan, no real organization.” (37). The officials, symbolizing the physical and intellectual superiority of humans, are inept at handling this situation as they cannot think past the new order and consider the unknown unknowns, at least not at a rate imposed by the nonhuman, and shut down their communication altogether. The story ends with Nat looking at the fire and turning on the silent receiver (39). The wireless emerges as a symbol of established semiotic structure, a stronghold of civilization—holding on to the radio’s static noise despite its absence of any meaningful content suggests that he is clinging on to the comfort of a lost epistemological order.¹⁹ The epistemological gap alters the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies, leading to a shift relative to the conventional hierarchies of the food chain; nonhuman actions are increasingly forceful, while human activity becomes more timid and uncertain.

Despite the inevitable confusion, sober instincts and observations set Nat apart from the authorities, as well as from his neighbors and wife. A stark difference can be observed between his attitude and that of his employer, the farm owner Mr Trigg. Rushing home with his daughter, Jill, Nat stumbles upon the farmer,

¹⁹ Mark Fisher comments that the “silence [of the receiver] means that we are definitively in the space of the eerie. There will be no explanation, for the characters or the readers” (65), highlighting that this liminal epistemological space, of knowing something is wrong but not comprehending what exactly, is quintessentially eerie.

who after hearing about the expected bird attack on the wireless, decides to have a “shooting match” (18). Mr Trigg gives Jill a ride back to her house but frowns upon Nat’s carefulness and boasts, “we’d have roast gull, baked gull, and pickle’em into the bargain” (19). Nat politely says his goodbyes but thinks the man is crazy—“What use was a gun against a sky of birds?” (18). Sure enough, the next morning he finds Mr Trigg near the farm, his body first pecked away by the birds, then trampled on by cows (34).

What Nat’s responses and attitude suggest about his approach to the nonhuman and to epistemology in general emerges when contrasted with that of Mr Trigg. The boss is arrogant and dismissive of the possibility that the attacks are caused by something beyond his comprehension. Nat exhibits a greater degree of what Derrida called “aporia”, an inherent doubt and acceptance of contradictions inexplicable by logic (Lucy 1). Considering the end of the story, where Nat’s family are the only surviving villagers, it seems safe to say that a more humble, deconstructive epistemological position is favorable, particularly when at odds with the nonhuman.

Not as careless or arrogant, but equally helpless, is Nat’s wife. Understandably frightened, she fully relies on her husband’s reason and command. Other than preparing food and taking care of the children, she fails to contribute, with the exceptions of uttering naive, if not useless, questions;²⁰ “They ought to do something.” (14), “Why don’t the authorities do something?” (21), “Won’t America do something?” (38). Unlike Mr Trigg, who is smug enough to convince himself he knows better than the “lot of nonsense” they “scare you on the wireless” with (19), Nat’s wife seems to have resigned from her reasoning capacities completely, relying instead on the information fed to her, or in other words, on the established epistemological system.

²⁰ A lot has been written on du Maurier from a feminist point of view. Without engaging too deeply in this matter, I believe that the character of Nat’s unnamed, naive wife encapsulates the essence of many of the female characters she has written about. Margaret Forster notes that the short story collection was actually a welcome departure from du Maurier’s previous fiction, which was full of “pathetic and exploited women” (260). This development is evident in stories like “Monte Verità”, where the female protagonist, Anna, is indeed independent and intriguing. However, Mrs. Hocken does not make for a similar exception to the rule. As acknowledged in the introduction, Slavoj Zizek also notes the politically incorrect feminism present in du Maurier’s fiction, and her tendencies to create characters embodying “female masochism” (“Are We Allowed to Enjoy Daphne du Maurier?”). I will further elaborate on the issue of gender in Chapter Three, using an ecofeminist framework.

This helpless disorganization of humans is even more apparent when juxtaposed with the exceptional unity of the birds:

The gulls were copying the rooks and the crows. They were spreading out in formation across the sky. They headed, in bands of thousands, to the four compass points.
'Dad, what is it? What are the gulls doing?'
They were not intent upon their flight, as the crows, as the jackdaws had been. They still circled overhead. Nor did they fly so high. It was as though they waited upon some signal. As though some decision had yet to be given. The order was not clear. (17)

Here, the text's central enigma reemerges: what is the signal the animals are receiving? Where is the order coming from? This agentive confusion is a key aspect of the story that positions it in the realm of the eerie. It is not only the peculiar behavior of the birds but also the undefined nature of the entity managing the flocks—another unknown unknown. The characters have numerous theories about the signal's origin, including the tides, the east wind, the weather, or even the Russians, as believed by some villagers, including Mr Trigg. Setting aside Cold War conspiracies, there appears to be a natural law that has been altered and strengthened, excluding humans from the realm of comprehension. Curiously, the eeriness of the scene does not seem to instill panic or fright in the protagonist. His state of mind, to which the reader has access, remains composed, as exemplified by short and succinct sentences. Nevertheless, speculation, so tangible in this fragment, is an ongoing theme in the story, feeding into the mood of uncertainty and epistemological inferiority.

The signal ultimately sets the human and the nonhuman apart. Knowledge breeds cooperation, as seen with the gulls, rooks, and crows; the odd collaboration serves as another signifier of the eerie, as the birds go beyond the roles typically assigned to them and form alliances not understood and hence terrifying to the human (Fisher 64). This effect is enhanced by the imagery of the sheer volume of birds, flying overhead in 'bands of thousands' with coordinated precision. The success of the story relies on the premise (more believable than those in typical science fiction or horror stories) that tight collaboration and organized insider knowledge among a group of animals is enough to dominate the human species. Nat (human) finds himself in a race against the birds (nonhuman), chasing knowledge and new skills. Despite initially discrediting the herring gulls for having "no brains" (32), he observes that they "became bolder" (20) with

each dive, learning how to grab clothing and limbs and cooperating in a mass attack. Learning fast, gulls are still considered low on the hierarchy of perceived intelligence. And yet, utterly preoccupied with them, Nat “had forgotten the gripping power of the birds of prey” (31). More inclined to attribute reasoning powers to these predators, his fear grows, believing that buzzards and hawks could surpass his position in the food chain more readily than the supposedly mindless kamikaze birds. Consequently, the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies emerge as fragile and easily disrupted by changes in the epistemological foundation.

However, the question of nonhuman agency becomes more convoluted when taking into account the signal possibly emitted by some higher power. Nat’s speculations about the birds are anthropocentric in the way they assume hierarchy and army-like decision-making, which comes from above to guide the soldier-like gulls. In such a narrative, the birds are not necessarily endowed with reasoning powers, and their agency is negligible. However, the order-giving entity, assuming it exists, is certainly not human, which by elimination makes it nonhuman. This simple line of reasoning emphasizes that we are still dealing with human-nonhuman dynamics, but it acknowledges that the question of agency is less straightforward than it might seem. Yet another point of view through which the question of order-giving could be analyzed is linguistic. The signal may be a form of language, considerably different (more specific at the very least) from the language perceived as attainable for nonhuman animals.²¹ One might speculate that rather than mindlessly waiting for an order in the form of an impulse, the birds are engaged in widespread communication, a process requiring a degree of agency, as well as intelligence.

Possible interpretations are limitless, and few are unjustified—“The Birds” and other du Maurier stories do not reveal secrets lying at their core, thereby inviting speculation. In a rather deconstructive manner, these stories pose questions regarding the human-nonhuman relationship (Wolfe xxii), which not only determines the fate of the characters but also occupies the readers’ minds. This relationship, and the

²¹ Martin Heidegger, for one, has famously claimed humans to be ‘world-forming’ (*weltbildend*) and animals ‘poor in world’ (*weltarm*) (Cykowski 1), meaning that animals are lacking properties such as reason, spirit or language, which proves their inferiority.

knowledge about the nonhuman, presents itself as a central condition to human survival and reinvention. Though not engaged in the reimagination of the human per se, the story follows posthuman tracks by rejecting old (humanist) dogmas—negating human exceptionalism, describing the fall of figures of authority—and embracing the unknown position of the human (Oppermann 274). In this sense, deconstruction²² and posthumanism intersect in their consideration of ecocritical ideas—all involved in reimagining the human

Could Nat Hocken be considered an early model of such reinvention? In his respect for the nonhuman and a healthy fear of nature, he exhibits what could be called ecological humility. This term is gaining traction in the field of environmental studies, particularly in relation to indigenous communities, who often serve as role models with their more soulful connection to nature. As defined by Josh Weinstein, it is “humility that recognizes the simultaneous smallness of any one being in relation to the whole, and the impossibility of the whole without its constituent parts” (771).

The eco-humble qualities of Nat are not immediately apparent—after all, he is in opposition to the nonhuman. However, he understands its power, is aware of the relations within the ecosystem, and engages in trying to understand it better. His daily practice of observing the surrounding flora and fauna, being conscious of their internal relationships, echoes common thoughts— sometimes perceived as childish— that some people have, such as: What are the animals saying to each other? What is my pet thinking? Bellanca identifies eco-humility as part of the story, not so much in the character of Nat but in the narrative itself, which reminds us that “the need to survive predation continues to hover at the edge of human consciousness [...]” (41). I believe both interpretations are valid, and view Nat as an attainable role model in his interactions with the nonhuman.

²² This will be elaborated on in Chapter 2. I use ‘deconstruction’ here and throughout both in its less technical sense of reducing elements to their constituent parts as a means of reinterpreting them or presenting them in a distinct manner and in the more abstract Derridian sense that refers to the critical analysis of philosophical and literary language so as to emphasize the internal workings of language and conceptual systems, to relational qualities that underlie meaning, or to assumptions that are implicit in specific forms of expression.

Ultimately, du Maurier's stories, and "The Birds" in particular, suggest that the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies are thoroughly influenced by the epistemological system and its shifts. The plot engages in what that Timothy Morton called "ecognosis" in *Dark Ecology* (2016), a slow attunement to the fact that the nonhuman constitutes a profound level of the human, "not just biologically and socially but in the very structure of thought and logic" (159). In this way, the plot challenges our understanding of knowledge. The liminal epistemological position—knowing that the structures of knowledge are in danger of collapsing but not being capable of identifying how, or what stands behind it—signifies that we are in the space of the eerie. The eeriness of not knowing becomes an outlet to consider agentic power beyond common comprehension, one not conventionally associated with the nonhuman, forcing the characters and the readers to re-imagine the established understanding of agentic dynamics.

If posthumanism is a site that "can produce new epistemological considerations" (Opperman 274), literature is a site that helps us imagine these new paradigms. This narrative underscores the fragility and flaws of human dominance and the importance of understanding, or even reevaluating, our place within the broader ecosystem. The aura of speculation highlights the benefits of a deconstructive and posthuman approach to epistemology, which involves going beyond conventional knowledge, not fearing the collapse of the established systems, but rather envisioning what the new structures and posthuman subjects could be. The story invites readers to reconsider traditional hierarchies and embrace a more eco-humble, interconnected perspective on the human-nonhuman relationship.

2. Entanglement

“As the moon rose, the man that climbed with it shrank to insignificance. I was no longer aware of personal identity. This shell, in which I had my being, moved forward without feeling, drawn to the summit of the mountain by some nameless force which seemed to hold suction from the moon itself.”

du Maurier 95-96

The premise that humans are epistemologically superior to nonhumans, held deeply by the former, not only justifies categorizing life forms and stacking them in hierarchies but also separates the human altogether from other elements of the physical world. This abstract division of nature versus culture is almost banal in its longevity. The artificial divide, fueled by art and science alike, produces different and often contrasting interpretations. The great Romantic writers, such as Wordsworth and Thoreau, protested against industrialization and lamented the loss of nature.²³ In more recent times, when civilization appears as the dominant force, interpretations influenced by the climate crisis suggest that nature is seeking revenge, striking back in an everlasting war with culture.²⁴

Adding yet another argument on why such a binary is unproductive and simply incorrect seems rather redundant. Instead, I would like to engage with the emerging claim that the trope of nature itself is faulty. Multiple scholars have referred to nature as a great or “Big Other” (e.g., Kane or Morton); in Lacanian terms, the (Symbolic) Big Other signifies an abstract entity that acts as a point of reference, giving meaning to other concepts and ideas related to it (Johnston). Timothy Morton, in his well-known essay *The Mesh*, capitalizes Nature to highlight its artificiality, deeming it an abstract, incomprehensible concept that is merely a strange manifestation of a real process—evolution (20).²⁵ This essay was an early inspiration for the following chapter, prompting me to think outside the scope of ecocriticism and adapt a more creative (and hopefully, productive) theoretical framework.

²³ This reference is extremely simplified for the sake of the argument, but a far more detailed account on the influence of Romanticism on ecocriticism can be found in a number of works, including: *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* by Timothy Clark and *Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies* by Kevin Hutchings (See Works Cited).

²⁴ I use this warlike language intentionally to illustrate the anthropocentric approach to this division, as suggested in Kane (42) amongst many other sources.

²⁵ Similarly, Donna Haraway uses the term “natureculture” to suggest that the reference to ‘nature’ itself is obsolete (qtd. in Clark 161).

At its core, posthumanism is deeply concerned with the question of hybridity, or in other words, with entanglement. As a framework, it blurs the boundaries between the human, the nonhuman, and technology, lending itself well to exploring more nuanced ideas regarding their interconnectedness (Clarke and Rossini xiii). This connection is most often examined in terms of the blending of organic and artificial elements, as in Donna Haraway's renowned *A Cyborg Manifesto*. In this research, however, I am preoccupied with the organic and the entanglement within, a decision informed both by the primary texts and a general focus on the physicality of the human. Notably, reimagining the category of human necessitates an analogous reimagining of nature, a task undertaken by postnaturalists. Like posthumanists with the human, postnaturalists decenter the nonhuman, conceiving it as an invention modified by the human. Arguably, one of the earliest literary examples of postnaturalism is *Frankenstein*, written and first published (1818) in the midst of the Romantic era, which advanced the idea of 'capital-N' Nature. This suggests how deeply rooted such considerations are in literary studies and in the humanities more broadly. Due to the limited scope of the current research, however, I will limit my analysis to posthumanism, while acknowledging the significance of this complementary school of thought.

A story that allows me to explore the conceptual entanglement between human and nonhuman agencies, utilizing the framework of posthumanist and ecocritical reading, is "Monte Verità". The longest story in the collection, categorized by some as a novella, it follows the lives of an unnamed male narrator and two of his friends, the married couple Victor and Anna. Over the span of 20 years, Anna abandons her husband to join a mysterious sect on the titular mountain (also known as the Mountain of Truth), unwilling to ever return. The narrative touches on subjects such as spirituality or sexuality, and to an extent, exposes the artificiality of the nature-culture duality.²⁶ The narrator, on the one hand, is "so much a man of cities, "(...) a creature of comfort" (du Maurier 79), and on the other, an avid climber often touched with mountain

²⁶ Though limited, there are some academic interpretations of this short story, which are more or less elaborate. Christine Reynier identifies outrage as the main theme of the narrative but also one that connects all stories in the collection. Slavoj Žižek emphasizes the failed sexual relationship, where the wife chooses the Other jouissance rather than phallic jouissance in Lacanian terms. Along similar lines, Margaret Forster interprets the narrative as a manifestation of du Maurier's bisexuality and a critique of male-female relationships. To my knowledge, no one has conducted an ecocritical reading of this story, which is what this chapter sets out to do.

fever, in awe of the natural world, which he describes as “savage” (57). Ultimately, however, he is rather clueless and fails to find the “Truth”—a quest in which Anna succeeds, thereby somehow transgressing the artificial duality.

In the following analysis I will focus on the respective human and nonhuman agencies, as well as on their points of connection. I will first define nonhuman agency in its own right before exploring its influence on human agency. By incorporating the concepts of the sublime and the eerie, I will examine how these ideas impact the dynamics between human and nonhuman as well as inform an eco-humble approach. A posthumanist perspective will be applied throughout to highlight its value for ecocritical reading and to provide nuance to the characters’ experiences. The dynamics between the human and nonhuman in the story materialize to form a sort of conceptual entanglement.

To approach the question of entanglement between the human and nonhuman, it is plausible to begin by acknowledging the interconnectedness within the respective groups. Human cooperation is a complex phenomenon that receives due respect in academic considerations. Disciplines such as sociology and international relations ascribe significant power to individual agents and appreciate the fruits of their joint efforts. Meanwhile, intra-nonhuman collaboration appears subconscious in the case of animate beings and even arbitrary among inanimate ones. Rarely is it considered in terms of deliberate behavior—agency. Arguably, it is the cooperation of animate and inanimate entities that makes “Monte Verità” such an eerie narrative—the seemingly coordinated actions indicate that agency is somewhere where it is not expected, as in Fisher’s definition of the concept. This short excerpt provides a view of how nonhuman interrelations are depicted:

Even so, I like to think that there can be no final desecration, that at midnight, when the full moon rises, the mountain face is still inviolate, unchanged, and that in winter, when snow and ice, great wind and drifting cloud make the limb impassable to man, the rock-face of Monte Verità, her twin peaks lifted to the sun, stares down in silence and compassion upon the blinded world. (43)

It is true that this description is from an anthropocentric point of view, as it is the narrator who recalls the scene, projecting his fantasies onto the unexplored peaks. However, by recounting this ascent, which arguably altered his perception of the nonhuman, he is able to capture this cooperation with due diligence.

The idea of an epistemological gap and a certain mystery that the nonhuman holds, explored in the previous chapter, is also present in this narrative. Looking in ‘compassion upon the blinded world’ refers to the people’s inability to find the “Truth”, which can be interpreted conventionally as a degree of spirituality, or as a deeper meaning outside the structures of civilization. The mountain, though the central figure, cannot exert such a powerful effect solely through its own capacity. The contribution of the full moon, snow, ice, wind, and cloud creates the dominant aura, but also arrives at a tangible result of making the climb impossible for men. Importantly, under normal circumstances, “no common danger kept the climber back, but awe and fear” (43); only the cooperation of the elements exercising agency can restrict access.²⁷

I acknowledge that this might appear to be a far-fetched argument—how can a change in the weather preventing a climb be considered a deliberate action? However, the narrative clearly hints that the elements of the landscape, usually serving as the background, exert particular power, deliberate rather than arbitrary. On a more general note, my own reading continuously attempts to question the anthropocentric ideas held about the nonhuman and, even if clumsily, embrace the fact that some processes of the nonhuman might be beyond common comprehension. In a posthumanist and deconstructive spirit, I try to reimagine how these processes could be approached and interpreted.

Giving more credit to nonhuman agency appears as a persuasive point of departure. Its distinction from human perception has been intriguingly highlighted by Donna Haraway, who introduced the term “coyote” to signify the natural world as an agent (qtd. in Clark 161). The word comes from Native American cultures²⁸ and can be understood as a trickster, which necessitates different expectations than the word “mother”, for example. It frames the nonhuman as a separate agent with whom we must learn to interact, rather than simply relying on our preconceived notions when dealing with an entity called “nature” (161).

²⁷ Karen Barad proposed compelling and fitting concepts of “intra-action” and “agential realism”, referring to the entanglement of agencies with distinguishing between human and nonhuman (qtd. in Liebermann et al. 13). Interestingly, she criticizes the undue power language has been granted, an issue I also grapple with in attempting to adequately represent the nonhuman with very limited linguistic resources. Like Barad, I was drawn to the term “agency”, which appears to be less anthropocentrically charged than other similar words.

²⁸ Its English form is derived from Nahuatl (Aztec) ‘coyotl’.

For the sake of clarity, I will not adopt Haraway's terminology, but I appreciate its sentiment and will continue this analysis with the idea of an unknown trickster as the representation of nonhuman agency.

I find this distinction important because it helps balance the way we view the nonhuman. The common ecocritical tendency to overcompensate for the nature-culture divide is to bury it altogether, in an attempt to level human animals with their nonhuman counterparts. Prompted by the urgent need to change human behaviors, conventional ecocriticism can arrive at essentialist conclusions that often lack nuance and is reluctant to utilize more meticulous academic approaches, such as deconstruction or posthumanism (Morton "The Mesh" 28). These schools of thought complicate the message offered by ecocriticism, which I see as an advantage and a promising direction for the development of the field.

Deconstruction provides a useful way of thinking about the differences between the human and the nonhuman. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida urges us to understand animals as fully sovereign, with their connection to humans being only a fraction of what constitutes their being. Derrida's school of thought often clashes with posthumanism, which tends to appropriate deconstruction merely as a method to blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, boundaries that ought to be acknowledged (Anderson 216). However, with due diligence, these approaches can reinforce each other by merging the radicalizing principles of deconstruction with a more focused posthumanist promise of reinventing the category of the human. Posthumanism is capable of decentering the human subject and discrediting its exceptionalism (Oppermann 275), but it should simultaneously keep the human distinct from the nonhuman.

Having established a reasonable distinction between the human, the nonhuman, and their agencies, it is possible now to consider how these entities are entangled. The following excerpt serves this purpose:

For the second time I was faced with a decision. To climb, or to descend. Above me, the way was clear. There was the shoulder of the mountain, described by Victor; I could even see the ridge along it running to the south, which was the way I should have taken twelve hours before. In two or three hours the moon would have risen and would give me all the light I needed to reach the rock-face of Monte Verita. I looked east, to the descent. The whole of it was hidden in the same wall of cloud. Until the cloud dissolved I should still be in the same position I had been all day, uncertain of direction, helpless in visibility that was never more than three feet. I decided to go on, and to climb to the summit of the mountain with my message. Now the cloud was beneath me and my spirits revived. (du Maurier 94-5)

Here, the narrator is tasked with reaching the peak of Monte Verità on behalf of his sick friend Victor, to notify Anna of his illness and of an approaching danger. The villagers are preparing to attack the monastery, seeking revenge on the inhabitants for “abducting” all the local women throughout the years. The climber struggles to recognize the right way and finds himself halfway through the climb, tired and without resources. The confusion and lack of knowledge discussed in chapter one echoes in this fragment; man’s actions become less deliberate, and his agency appears inferior to that of the surrounding nonhuman elements.

In his volume on actor-network theory, Bruno Latour proposes a definition of ‘agent’ that includes both animate and inanimate entities: “*any thing* that does modify (sic) a state of affairs by making a difference” (71). It is possible, then, to interpret the excerpt as an interplay, or entanglement, between different agents pursuing their objectives. The mountain, the moon, and the cloud are fully-fledged entities whose actions determine the climber’s conduct. While doubt regarding over-interpretation may arise again, it is not unwarranted—following the posthumanist and deconstructive sentiment—to attribute agency to these elements and consider possibilities outside of the traditional epistemological and value system (Liebermann et al. 4). It is the light of the moon and the shadow of the cloud that solely prompt the narrator to climb rather than descent, a state which could be used to reimagine something ‘trivial’ or ‘random’ such as atmospheric conditions as a mode of entanglement between the human and the nonhuman.²⁹ Here lies the significant value of literature for ecocritical studies: it offers a creative, cultural space for the nonhuman to exist in its own right and allows for reflections regarding its interconnectedness with the human.

In “Monte Verità”, nonhuman agency influences decisions but also instigates fear. The narrator reflects during his climb: “I was no longer in the thrall of mountain fever but held instead by the equally well-remembered sense of fear” (du Maurier 94), when the cloud obstructs his view and the moon has not

²⁹ The tradition of reimagining such interconnections is longstanding, with numerous concepts and theories developed to better envision these relationships. For instance, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari contributed significantly to this field with *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. This introduces concepts such as “rhizome” and “assemblage”, which signify the multiplicities of semiotic and symbiotic connections, respectively. These theoretical tools enable viewing the nonhuman in its particularity rather than merely as the “other”, influencing the work of scholar such as Timothy Morton and Bruno Latour (Liebermann et al. 9).

yet risen. Mountain fever, referred to multiple times in the narrative, is described as “a stubborn feeling inside you, on the mountains, and any opposition somehow rouses you” (58). The characters realize that their engagement with the mountain (the nonhuman) provokes strong, incomprehensible reactions within them. What serves as a mobilizing force can easily change into an overwhelming threat: “I had known fear in my life but never terror [until now]” (96).

Here, the power of the sublime is at play. Edmund Burke first defined this notion in 1757 as an intense feeling of a delightful terror with a transcendental outcome. The source for such awe is most often a natural phenomenon, capable of exercising subliminal control through an unconscious process of influencing thoughts and behaviors. Arguably, this is where the sublime merges with the eerie; the nonhuman exercises agency to enchant the human, which is enhanced by the aura of speculation since the nonhuman agent is not tangible. Gregory Marks (thewastedworld) also made this connection in his blog, where he recognized that Fisher’s eerie could be interpreted as a “species of *Posthuman sublime*” (“Into a Silent Universe: The Sublime and the Eerie in Byron and Ballard”). Drawing from the Gothic tradition, the eerie decenters the human subject and places it outside itself, forcing it to question its agentic power and its relation to the sublime power.

The constructive function of experiencing the eerie and the sublime is the ability to transcend the bounds of understanding: “For the first time in my life I looked on beauty bare. [...] This indeed was journey’s end. This was fulfillment. [...] I stood there staring at the rock-face under the moon” (du Maurier 96). After years of searching for the “Truth” in vain, the narrator steals a glimpse of it through this eerie sublimation exercised by the nonhuman multiplicity (mountain, cloud, moon), and also by the creatures inhabiting the mountain.

The narrator's susceptibility to the sublime could also be interpreted as enhancing his eco-humility, and climbing itself being an eco-humble endeavor. Reflecting on his climbing experience with his friend Victor, the narrator says: “In time we became less foolhardy and more weather-wise, and learnt to treat our mountains with respect—not as an enemy to be conquered, but as an ally to be won” (44). This simplified and binary premise still captures the sentiment of treating the nonhuman as a being separate in its

particularity, possessing agency that ought to be reckoned with. Such an attitude is more difficult to develop when only engaging with the domesticated nonhuman of urban spaces. Only when the social advantage of the human is limited to the gear he is wearing, can a person appreciate the agentive entanglement with the nonhuman to its full extent. Therefore, it is surely no coincidence that the author chose to make the main character a climber, allowing his attitude towards the mountain to be much more believable.

Intriguingly, Victor, who shares the narrator's passion for climbing, is not able to grasp the "Truth" to the extent that his friend does, in which way the narrative seems to suggest that being open to the sublime and the eerie is a quality not everyone can possess. At the same time, I would argue that Victor exhibits a degree of eco-humility, meaning that sublimation or the capacity for awe is not a necessary prerequisite to becoming an eco-humble subject. This humility is something to be learned by rejecting one's superficial human dominance.

The sublime has also been noted for its ability to reinvent and "transcend the normative, the human" (Kauffman 180).³⁰ Similarly, the eerie, through its emptiness and speculation, allows "the mind [to] spiral away from itself, toward explanations both sacred and profane" (thewastedworld). The narrative engages with sacred elements and includes a significant spiritual theme. It is through worship that the mountain dwellers, deemed a sect by the villagers, are able to reach the "Truth" that both the narrator and Anna have been searching for since before discovering the mountain's existence. The anthropocentric instinct, as represented by Victor, is to assume commonly understood religious connotations. Seeing his wife for the last time after she joined the mountain dwellers, he is only able to recall the biblical transfiguration to describe her face: "It was not hysteria, it was not emotion; it was just that [transfiguration]. Something—out of this world of ours—had put its hand upon her" (du Maurier 74).

³⁰ Interestingly, Kauffman refers to the attempts by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous to reframe the sublime as a "feminine mode-to-invent". Irigaray and Cixous argued that semiotics are more often feminine-coded, and that women's experiences are frequently overlooked compared to those of men. The connection of the sublime to the emotions and spirituality is supposed to enable those affairs to be acknowledged. While the narrator in "Monte Verità" is obviously male, he is the only man susceptible to the sublime effect; the only other inhabitants drawn to the mountain are women. This suggests that exploring gender-based interpretations of the sublime merits greater attention, a fact acknowledged in Further Research.

In the years to follow, he tries to capture the ‘out of this world’ entity not through susceptibility to the sublime and the eerie, like the mountain inhabitants or even his friend, but through gathering knowledge. He researches the pre-Christian mountain cults and how their entanglement with the nonhuman kept them young and beautiful. Yet, in his well-meaning but limited way of being, he will never be able to understand his wife's decision and motivation to flee the exclusively human world.³¹ This is because her worship escapes the narrow anthropocentric and Western understanding of the word. “Here is no creed, no saviour, and no deity. Only the sun, which gives us light and life. This is how it has always been, from the beginning of time” (105), thinks the narrator as he observes the praise given by the mountain dwellers. Instinctively, he feels the impact of the nonhuman, the power drawn from the moon, the sun, and their agentive influence on the (post)human. Ultimately, even the narrator is unable to make the transition and embrace this entangled process fully: “I was lost between two worlds. My own was gone, and I was not of theirs” (97). He finds himself in a liminal space between the human, the nonhuman, and the posthuman, scratching the surfaces of each but unable to commit.

The key to making the transcendent state permanent appears to be outgrowing the human form, both in body and in mind, emerging as a certain image of a posthuman subject. The inhabitants of Monte Verità are ageless, sexless, genderless, and beautiful in an otherworldly way. They seem to be an extension of a nonhuman sublime, their chanting “rang in my ears, unearthly, terrifying, yet beautiful in a way impossible to bear” (97), as the narrator describes. Their intense connection with the nonhuman elements corresponds with the principle of hybridity so prevalent in posthuman thought.

Throughout the narrative, it seems as if some part of Anna is out of place from the human point of view. She despises material possessions and keeps her rooms bare, there is an aura of stillness around her, and she stays outside in freezing cold to look at the full moon. She anticipates transcendence and embraces entanglement long before she reaches Monte Verità. Importantly, her time on the mountain is not universally positive. When the narrator sees Anna twenty years after she joined the dwellers, her face is

³¹ In her analysis of “Monte Verità”, Christine Reynier recalls the Swiss peak Monte Verità, which became a hub of nature-lovers and anarchists, attracting notable visitors such as Herman Hesse, Carl Jung or D.H. Lawrence (6).

half-eaten with leprosy. She emphasizes: “it isn’t Paradise” (110), thereby rejecting the angelic or religious connotations and complicating the posthuman experience.³²

Anna’s statement: “Living’s hard, because Nature’s hard, and Nature has no mercy” (105), underscores the pivotal message of the story. Here, the use of ‘capital-N’ Nature lacks the ridiculing quality seen in Timothy Morton’s work, instead highlighting its significance. Whether termed Nature or the nonhuman, it represents a distinct and potent entity with genuine agency, existing independently and not merely in relation to the human. And yet, even though the human and nonhuman exist in their own respect, the conceptual entanglement between them is inevitable. They inform each other, engaging in a constant process of renegotiation, meaning the dynamics between them are fluid and subject to perpetual change.

The constant redefinition and enigmatic intra-nonhuman cooperation make “Monte Verità” an eerie narrative, as it disrupts the confident and well-informed (conceptual) position of the human. In this narrative, the eerie is intertwined with the sublime, evoking awe and fear—a mix capable of altering human attitudes toward nonhuman entities and fostering a more eco-humble perspective. The conceptual entanglement described is inherently posthuman, which not only diminishes the differences between the organisms but also insinuates a “dystopian condition filled with anxieties about a fuzzy human experience” (Oppermann 277). Chapter One emphasized the confusion regarding the human category, with the lack of knowledge positioning human agency on par with the nonhuman. This chapter suggests that human agency (and category) is not only not superior to the nonhuman but is also not completely separate; instead, it is somewhat deeply entangled and informed by it. The renegotiation of the agentive dynamics between the human and nonhuman, though unsettling, is necessary.

³² Christine Reynier curiously interprets Anna’s disease as a metaphor for her lesbianism, through which she accepts and embraces the otherness within her (6).

3. Physical Entanglement

“How hard and unyielding was the naked wood, and the bark was rough, hurting his numb hands.”

du Maurier 154

The previous chapter touched upon the conceptual idea of the entanglement between the human and the nonhuman. By exploring the well-known theme of nature versus culture and considering how that artificial duality could be transcended, I laid the groundwork for examining a deeper, material entanglement between the two. After all, ecocriticism is primarily concerned with investigating the connections between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). It is this physicality that I wish to explore, focusing on the dynamics between agencies and the implications this focus brings for the human.

One of the far-reaching consequences of the nature-culture divide discussed previously is the corresponding separation of body versus mind. The liberal humanist tradition has emphasized the importance of the latter, consistently diminishing the value of physicality, often understood as something sinful, vain or animalistic. Philosophers have clung to the human capacity to reason when creating the epistemological hierarchies discussed in Chapter One, placing humans above animals who can barely feel, not to mention the inanimate nonhuman, which was left out of the conversation entirely. These tendencies are naturally carried on by transhumanism, understood as a continuation and intensification of humanism (unlike posthumanism, which stands in opposition to it), by following the ideal of human perfectibility, which encompasses physical improvements, most likely via technology.

There are numerous theoretical approaches to the question of physical entanglement, such as the idea of “agential realism” developed by Karen Barad. In her formative volume, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Barad posits that matter has agentic power, enabling it to create and reconfigure the world in an ongoing process of “intra-action”. This study challenges some well-established philosophical principles, such as that of separation between the body and the mind, by stating that meaning and matter, subjects and objects are inseparably entangled, hence proving relevant for the argument made in this chapter. Although her theory, which draws heavily from quantum physics, is too extensive and complex to

be adequately covered in this dissertation, many of her findings, such as granting nonhuman and inanimate entities agency, are reiterated here. Regardless, Barad's work provides a holistic basis for further considerations on the entanglement of reality and for a radical reimagination of agency.

Barad is also extremely relevant in the way her work has inspired material ecocriticism, the central argument of which is that "matter is endowed with creative expressions" (Oppermann 274). The two central concepts identified by Oppermann, "storied matter" and "narrative agency", encapsulate this idea of creativity of things which fuels the agentive power in all nonhuman entities (281). This function makes the material sub-field of ecocriticism closely related to posthumanism, which can look to the nonhuman and its creative agencies to reinvent the category of the human, considering that the two are inevitably entangled. Stacy Alaimo draws links between material posthumanism and Barad's concept of "intra-action", positing that the new "posthuman species" can emerge through this process of constant reconfiguration of matter's agencies (154). What is crucial for this dissertation is the importance that material ecocriticism bestows on matter, or physicality, and its creative or imaginative power, particularly in the posthuman context.

The last theoretical element that needs to be discussed is "trans-corporeality". This concept succinctly expresses the posthuman sentiment of the human being perpetually intermeshed with the nonhuman, a premise that necessitates eco-humble thinking, where the human ceases to be represented as an isolated unit. Common examples or imaginations of trans-corporeality include the idea of pesticides or microplastics running through our veins—the (inorganic) nonhuman an ongoing element of our bodies. The concept can also be simply understood as the "body being a sponge in its transcorporeal interchanges with other bodies" (Oppermann 274) or, more broadly, with other matter. These physical connections make divisions between entities and an understanding of the "self" that is less pronounced and more fluid. Such fluidity extends to thinking about the trans-corporeal bodies, which, while theoretically more concerned with ontology than epistemology, are also a site of precautionary principles and epistemological considerations (Alaimo 144). The oddity of these physical bonds ignites new imaginative understandings, while prohibiting the making of any affirmative statements.

I aim to carry this imaginative approach in investigating the role of physical entanglement in the last short story, “The Apple Tree”. In this narrative, Buzz, a recent widower, notices how an old apple tree in front of his house bears an unsettling resemblance to his deceased wife, Midge. The memories of his unhappy marriage and the tree itself begin to haunt him, ultimately leading to his death (and that of the tree). Common interpretations revolve around gender-based or psychoanalytic readings. Setara Pracha, for example, claimed the story is about delusion and mania, with Buzz projecting his guilt onto the symbolic tree (“Apples and Pears”). However, in a recently published volume on du Maurier’s fiction, *The Pathology of Desire* (2023), she emphasized the corporeal dimension of the narrative. In my analysis, I will give more attention to the tree itself rather than the widower, taking the plot at face value. I will make use of the imaginative function of trans-corporeality in considering the dynamics between the human and nonhuman agencies depicted.

Building on that theoretical background, I will consider what “The Apple Tree” contributes to the question of the dynamics between the agencies, with respect to the physical entanglement of the human and the nonhuman. I will expand the posthumanist analysis conducted thus far by analyzing the human-nonhuman avatar of a tree and include an ecofeminist lens to enrich my ecocritical reading, particularly considering gender dynamics. Additionally, I will briefly examine the genre of ecohorror and its overlap with the eerie, with reference to the narrative and the agentive power of its characters.

Midge, though a devoted and dutiful wife, lacks any qualities capable of sparking sympathy in her husband and the reader alike. A notable figure in the line-up of du Maurier’s unlikable female characters, she spends her life staying busy with unnecessary tasks (according to her husband), in a martyr-like manner crawling through the days with her inseparable, killjoy sigh. One of her most pronounced characteristics is passivity, expressed in her inability to exercise any meaningful influence, or agency, in the aspect of her life which matters to her the most and seems to bring the sharpest dissatisfaction—the relationship with her husband. Her death, like her life, is rather unremarkable: “[...] mercifully swift, the illness that took her from him. Influenza, followed by pneumonia, and she was dead within a week” (du Maurier 119). The question arises whether it is possible to frame a disease as an agentive power of the nonhuman. After all,

virus particles are a form of matter, necessarily entangled with other organisms and exerting a self-oriented influence. Whatever the case, a disease is an ultimate reminder of physicality, particularly for humans who tend to give less attention to their bodies, as I've discussed before. Midge's disease offers a symbolic transition to her consecutive physical form - the apple tree.

The tree was scraggy and of depressing thinness, possessing none of the gnarled solidity of its companions. Its few branches, growing high up on the trunk like narrow shoulders on a tall body, spread themselves in martyred resignation, as though chilled by the fresh morning air. The roll of wire circling the tree, and reaching to about halfway up the trunk from the base, looked like a grey tweed skirt covering lean limbs; while the topmost branch, sticking up into the air above the ones below, yet sagging slightly, could have been a drooping head poked forward in an attitude of weariness. (114)

This initial description of the apple tree begins the not-so-subtle process of anthropomorphization. Trees, often thought to symbolize rebirth or interconnectedness, also signify transformation and liminality (Pracha "Apples and Pears"). Midge finds herself precisely in this liminal space between the human and nonhuman, making the question of the dynamics between them even more convoluted. The chilling description of branches spread in 'martyred resignation' or sagging like a 'drooping head' positions us in a space of ecological, or more precisely, vegetal horror, often characterized by a lack of clear boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Dawn Keetley points out that "there is horror in this blurring but also the prospect of a new kind of being" (paragraph 5),³³ the horror she refers to could be reasonably reframed as eeriness connected with agentic displacement, an issue I will discuss more closely in the following paragraphs. Importantly, the idea that blurring creates new beings conceptually aligns vegetal horror with posthumanism. This disturbing merger of a human (Midge), organic nonhuman (the tree), and even inorganic nonhuman (the roll of wire) creates an unclassifiable image, opening new speculative avenues.

Is the new posthuman object so entangled with the nonhuman that it becomes unrecognizable? Can the apple tree avatar be considered a possible imagination of such? Many posthumanist thinkers, such as Katherine Hayles in her work *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), propagate the idea of disembodiment as central to the posthuman subject. However, I tend to agree with another group, represented by Cary Wolfe, who associates those autonomous, disembodied fantasies more with transhumanism—a

³³ Whilst the article indicates page ranges, no specific pages are shown in the published version accessed.

continuation of humanism—rather than with posthumanism, at its core (xv). It is the embeddedness in physicality across all matter that seems capable of creating a more appropriate vision of this new being. Hence, I think it is valid to treat the apple tree avatar as a working posthuman subject and analyze Midge’s agency before and after she entangled so intensely with the nonhuman.

The question of gender, which I have not yet analyzed at length, is crucial to investigate agency and physicality in “The Apple Tree”. Ecofeminism, another branch of ecocriticism, focuses on analyzing the gendered perception of nature and the physical environment in literature and other media. Common conclusions suggest that nature tends to be feminized in cultural depictions, either through associations with motherhood (Mother Earth), or virginity (conquering the virgin lands). If men represent culture, women represent nature; if men embody the mind, women personify the body.³⁴ There is a cross-cultural tendency to perceive women as more corporeal (Soper 139), more connected with the elements. Daphne du Maurier follows suit by making Midge the one who embodies the tree, despite lacking any other characteristics besides being a woman that would suggest she is particularly inclined towards nature.

Entangled with a tree, Midge acquires a newfound maternal agency. Buzz “used to think it psychological, because they themselves were childless, that she should so grudge the entry of new life into the world” (du Maurier 115). Being childless somehow ties into the passivity she exhibits, tangibility of offspring is yet another factor denied to Midge, contributing to her perceived insignificance.³⁵ In contrast, in her nonhuman tree form, though old and barren for years, the gardener claims, “There’s life here yet, and plenty of it” (124), after dozens of buds appear on its branches. Desirable or not, the nonhuman form exhibits a much stronger fertile agency, aligning with the ecofeminist conceptualization of nature as a powerful maternal force, an intensification of womanhood.

³⁴ In previous chapters, I dismissed similar binaries as oversimplified and counterproductive. But I incorporate such discourse here to showcase some common assumptions of ecofeminism in as clear a way as possible. Additionally, I want to make an attempt to base my considerations on conventional ecocritical notions and arrive at conclusions that are slightly more nuanced.

³⁵ Obviously, no judgment is passed here regarding motherhood or the lack thereof; but considering the social and historical context of this narrative, such an interpretation seems plausible.

Other than a space of nurture, the feminine nature is also a “site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction” (Soper 141). This function is highlighted in the story through the character of May, a young and fresh country girl who is pitted against mature and dull Midge—a contrast visible even in their names. Buzz shares a kiss with the nineteen-year-old May, an act that Midge turns a blind eye to, displaying her passivity yet again. May, who dies tragically, also appears to take the form of a tree, a young and pretty one, which is “dwarfed and hidden by the freak” (du Maurier 139), referring to Midge’s avatar. Women’s rivalry appears to continue in the nonhuman sphere, and only in this form does Midge manage to exercise reproachful agency, prohibiting the smaller tree from growing.

To an extent, this vision is Buzz’s sexual projection, which echoes another facet of ecofeminist thinking. Buzz, who seeks to “master” feminized nature, exhibits guilt over the very fact of his dominance and experiences “emasculating fears inspired by her awesome resistance to seduction” (Soper 143). In its nonhuman form, his wife evokes helplessness, frustration, and a lack of understanding (Pracha 173), reversing patriarchal structures so that when she offers the feminine gift of fertility with her buds, Buzz feels “a queer distaste to touch them” (du Maurier 124).

He is a clearly patriarchal figure who, following ecofeminist thinking, extends his dominance not only over women, but also over nature. He fantasizes about a “native wife”, who would offer “no criticism ever, the obedience of an animal to its master, and the light-hearted laughter of a child” (134). This not only acknowledges and emphasizes the relationship between women and the nonhuman but also paints Buzz in a highly unfavorable light, suggesting that his fate, dying at the “hand” of an apple tree, is a well-deserved punishment. His lack of eco-humility manifests in the way he treats the nonhuman (and women) solely as resources: “Axing a tree was a healthy exercise, and apple wood smelt good. It would be a treat to have it burning on the fire” (121). This reflection captures his symbolic treatment of physicality—taking care of his body by destroying the body of the nonhuman. I believe that the eco-humble approach advanced in this research extends to holding respect for the physical dimension. This involves not only the need to improve one’s body, as suggested by transhumanists, but also understanding it in its fullness, as an asset, a limitation, and a point of connection with other matter. Arguably, the physical dimension is particularly dangerous for

human agency, which draws mainly from the intellectual or epistemological assets, unlike the nonhuman which appears to be more balanced across the body and mind divide. Buzz's agency illustrates this premise, violent and hardly deliberate, guided by a queer feeling of frustration at the "freak" of a tree rather than the reason that human culture, which he represents, prides itself on.

Because of his isolation in the "culture" element, Buzz exemplifies the inevitability of the physical entanglement with the nonhuman. I want to adopt Rachel Carson's visualization of this interconnectedness, which she introduced in the famous *Silent Spring* (originally published in 1962), namely, of the human as a porous vessel, not bordered by their perceived individuality. Buzz, unwillingly, becomes such a trans-corporeal vessel; the tree, via its logs and fruits, has entered his house and body. The gardener and the maid made a fire with apple wood: "The smoke that came from them [the logs] was thin and poor. Greenish in colour. Was it possible she did not notice that sickly rancid smell?" (128). Interestingly, only Buzz is susceptible to the reeky qualities of the wood; the staff enjoys the smell, as they do the fruits. Similarly to the narrator in "Monte Vertià", who was the only one susceptible to the sublime, the signal (or warning?) sent by the tree avatar is for Buzz only.³⁶ He is the only one who has a physical reaction to it.

An important facet of trans-corporeality is not merely the fact that nonhuman matters travel through the human body, "but how they do things—often unwelcome or unexpected things" (Alaimo 146). The scent of the wood induces nausea and dry heaving in Buzz, choking him and keeping him sick for several days.³⁷ Similarly, the apples: "The pulpy rotten tang clung to his tongue and the roof of his mouth, and in the end he was obliged to go up to the bathroom and clean his teeth" (143), only to be tortured in the following months with jams and tarts from the leftover fruits. An apple has a very obvious biblical symbolism regarding gender; it stands for temptation and corporeal sin, a weakness of the woman.

³⁶ Different from "The Birds", where the entire human population is at (unknown) odds with the nonhuman, the relationship in "The Apple Tree" is more intimate and personal. Even this small analytical angle as the relationship of the (male) narrators with the nonhuman, shows the breadth of those kinds of relationships enclosed in the collection. Although rather not deliberately, du Maurier was able to capture the diverse male attitudes towards the nonhuman, which escape the (often narrow) assumptions of ecofeminism.

³⁷ Ironically, when lying sick he thinks of Midge: "now she was gone he could breathe" (du Maurier 133), soon after her tree avatar nearly choked him. This ironic comment highlights Buzz's ignorance and limited perception of his engagement with the nonhuman.

Considering the repulsion Midge evokes in Buzz, both in a human and nonhuman forms, the fruits emerge as a grotesque symbol of their rotten relationship, as well as Buzz's corrupt attitude towards the nonhuman and physicality.

Through entangling Buzz and emphasizing his body's function as a vessel, the tree avatar exercises agency. It would be a mistake to discredit this agency as simply vengeful, brought by a bitter wife from beyond the grave: "And whichever way he turned his chair, this way or that upon the terrace, it seemed to him that he could not escape the tree, that it stood there above him, reproachful, anxious, desirous of the admiration that he could not give" (139-40). Its agency, unlike Buzz's, isn't violent; it is veiled yet persistent, all-encompassing, entangling both the mind and the body of its subject. The tree appears to say: "I am like this because of you, because of your neglect" (115), acknowledging the relationship between them and offering an explanation of its motives, which correspond with both, Midge the wife and the apple tree avatar. The crucial difference is that "the avatar has much more power than the living wife had" (Pracha 181).

Part of that power might come from the eeriness that nonhuman agency evokes. In the genre of eco-horror, vegetation is rarely the predator itself, and even if it is, the agency it is given is very human (Keetley). In the case of "The Apple Tree", anthropomorphization is evident, but the narrative cannot be classified as particularly terrifying. Arguably, the familiarity of the tree and its fluid but definitely displaced (and enhanced) agency is not a manifestation of horror, but of the eerie. Robert Macfarlane hints at this difference in his article: "Horror specialises in confrontation and aggression; the eerie in intimation and aggregation" ("The Eeriness of the English Countryside").³⁸ Characterized as such, the nature of eerie is similar to the nature of nonhuman agency presented in the story—more difficult to understand, lingering somewhere on the outskirts of comprehension, but undeniably real.

³⁸ Even though he proposes his own conceptualization of the eerie, it does correspond with Mark Fisher's framework explored in this research. Additionally, referring to the consideration on the sublime in the previous chapter, there exists a difference between horror and terror. While terror refers to strong emotions which are the source of sublimation, horror is an overwhelming feeling of fear which cannot be productive. In this sense, a small conclusion contributing to the theoretical framework of the eerie can be made, positing that the eerie coincides with terror, rather than horror.

Towards the end of the story, the human and nonhuman agencies engage in a more straightforward battle. Buzz, after months of delay, attempts to cut down the apple tree: “The saw bit into the wood, the teeth took hold. Then, after a few moments the saw began to bind. He had been afraid of that. [...] He took up his axe and started hacking at the tree, pieces of the trunk flying outwards, scattering on the grass” (du Maurier 152). The first strokes are his, dependent on the saw and the axe (inorganic nonhuman/technology) he sets out to assert his dominance and defeat this enemy, the nuisance that has been bothering him for reasons he cannot understand. The saw ‘bites’, its ‘teeth take hold’—the animalistic language employed here gives the impression that the inorganic nonhuman, following human orders, braces for the battle that is very corporeal, needing to match the physical agency of the organic nonhuman.

After a while, the “healthy exercise” of axing the tree turns into a violent outburst fueled by his buried grievances:

Now she’s groaning , now she’s splitting, now she’s rocking and swaying, hanging there upon one bleeding strip. Boot her, then. That’s it, kick her, kick her again, one final blow, she’s over, she’s falling...she’s down...damn her, blast her...she’s down, splitting the air with sound, and all her branches spread about her on the ground. (152)

For the first time, the tree is so clearly gendered and referred to as female. The anthropomorphization present throughout the narrative reaches its peak here, transforming the supposedly neutral act of cutting down a tree into a brutal and passionate murder. The tree becomes a victim, a female victim, passive in her lack of resistance to the violence exercised by the male assassin. Human agency dominates in this violent outburst, not because the nonhuman fought and lost, but because it remains dormant. Buzz’s projections, and the corporeality of the description as if he were dealing with human flesh, suggest that in this bizarre avatar of a wife and a tree, the human wife is somehow at the forefront in this particular interaction. This dynamic shifts once Buzz confronts the physical repercussions of his act and returns to the “crime scene”.

The entanglement of the elements discussed in Chapter Two resurfaces when Buzz, exhausted, fights against time and weather to finish loading the cut-up tree and complete the job, “If he rested but an instant to draw breath and renew his strength, it [snow] seemed to throw a protective cover, soft and white, over the pile of wood” (153). The intra-nonhuman cooperation not only reaches down the collar of his neck

in the form of flakes and numbs his fingers with cold, but also hides the wood and the stump of the tree with snow. Slowly and persistently, the nonhuman agency begins to take over, unnoticed by the self-satisfied and unsuspecting man. Rushing off to the Green Man pub, he spends his night drinking, exclaiming “Never mind the snow, never mind the weather” (155), only to return to his garden on foot, the car stuck in a drift due to a heavy snow storm. Suddenly, Buzz falls, his foot jammed between the jagged split stump of the felled apple tree, hidden by the snow.

He could not move. Exhausted, he laid his head upon his arms and wept. He sank deeper, ever deeper into the snow, and when a stray piece of brushwood, cold and wet, touched his lips, it was like a hand, hesitant and timid feeling its way towards him in the darkness.” (159)

The story’s final paragraph captures the husband dying by the tree, “*entangled* in its fallen wings in a winter storm [my emphasis]” in the words of Slavoj Žižek, who also chose the word ‘entanglement’, unrelated to his essay yet perfectly describing the story’s disturbing finale. This passage exemplifies the reassertion of nonhuman agency. Buzz, representing the “eco-arrogant” human lies on the ground defeated, forcibly reminded of an inevitable physical entanglement with the nonhuman. His misguided agency gives way to the avatar’s agentic power, an uncertain merger of a human and a posthuman. In this final episode the boundaries and the binaries blur—Buzz melts into the snow, branch, like a hand, expresses emotion; the scene is almost serene, as if between reality and a dream, yet certainly beyond reason.

Though the mystery of the apple tree remains unsolved, the ending brings closure. For one, the story begins in spring and ends in winter, respecting the symbolic but also very tangible functions of the seasons. Initially, “it distressed him [Buzz] to think of her [Midge’s] poor lonely body lying in that brand new coffin [...] Death should be different” (121). The hatred he projected on her tree avatar ironically provided that ‘different’ closure, when he threw the logs, anthropomorphized as her limbs, where “they could rot and perish, grow sodden with rain, and in the end become part of the mouldy earth” (131). Curiously, the practice of tree burial pods has been gaining popularity in recent years not only as an eco-friendly solution but also as a more spiritually enticing alternative, a sentiment that perhaps Buzz, to an extent, expressed at his wife’s funeral, and symbolically followed on his own “death bed”. Regardless, his

own physicality, which he tended to ignore or diminish throughout his life, was at the forefront of his death, his final moments inextricably linked to the very elements he sought to dominate.

Even though a plausible and a common interpretation is that “The Apple Tree” exemplifies a revenge plot, I conclude that it is not solely about retribution. Rather, it is a story about the clash between human and nonhuman, with motives that are neither entirely clear nor reducible to simple vengeance. The conflict between Buzz and the tree avatar may seem absurd on the surface, but illustrates a process that occurs daily on a subtler scale: the constant re-negotiation of boundaries between nature and culture, body and mind. The finale could serve as a warning, not just against being a neglectful husband, but against being oblivious to one’s connection to the surrounding environment, surrounding matter. On a broader note, it echoes the considerations regarding human attitude towards climate change, which David Abram describes as “failing to respect or even to notice the elemental medium in which we are immersed” (301).

In this chapter, I have emphasized the importance of this medium, physicality, for understanding the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies. One key analytical outcome is that embeddedness in matter is crucial for the emergence of a posthuman being, such as the tree avatar. The blurred boundaries between human, nonhuman and posthuman, achieved in part through anthropomorphization, create a speculative space for this grotesque posthuman subject to emerge. This subject is characterized by an enhanced agency in a physical context compared to its human form—an agency that is persistent and sweeping. It is eerie in the sense that it cannot be fully grasped or understood, and that it interferes with human agency, rendering it more confused and uneasy.

The question of gender further complicates the already convoluted matter. The narrative arc would not be as effective, or perhaps even adequate, were the gender roles reversed. Undoubtedly, gender influences cultural perceptions, validating the existence of ecofeminism as a field. However, I do not think it necessarily alters the nonhuman/posthuman agency of this particular subject. Rather, I lean towards the conclusion that the posthuman being is genderless, as suggested in the analysis of “Monte Verità”. This outcome aligns with current debates in sociological and gender studies, which urge us to view this category as a spectrum, thus challenging yet another binary concept of male and female.

The interchangeable reference to human, nonhuman, and posthuman agencies may seem confusing, but these categories are difficult to keep separate, given that the argument I am making hinges on their physical entanglement. On that note, this analysis does not suggest that people literally reemerge as trees or other objects. Instead, it presents a symbolic imagination of how the physical dimension reinforces the nonhuman (creating a lesson for the posthuman), strengthening its agency, a conclusion discernible from all three short stories analyzed in this research.

4. Conclusion and Further Research

What “The Birds”, “Monte Verità” and “The Apple Tree” have in common is the confused, uneasy feeling they instill in the reader, haunting them with veiled questions in the days that follow. This quality mirrors the Anthropocene, global warming or climate change—whatever the name, this phenomenon influences our minds and bodies with its liminal and intangible, yet very real presence. This similarity suggests that Daphne du Maurier’s haunted narratives lend themselves ecocritical analysis, allowing me to explore the research question: What do Daphne du Maurier’s ‘nature’ short stories suggest about the dynamics between human and nonhuman agencies?

In answer to that question, I believe that my initial thesis statement has been validated; the dynamics are dependent on an epistemological order and characterized by intense entanglement, both conceptual and physical. Exploring such dynamics is worthwhile, not only for the sake of better understanding and possibly altering our corrupt relationship with the nonhuman, but also for the very sake of people themselves. As depicted in the short stories and reiterated daily by awareness of environmental degradation, the perceived human domination is fragile and in a need of a constructive reimagination, which constitutes the significance and motivation behind this research.

My first conclusion emphasizes the importance of knowledge in shaping agentic dynamics. The consequences of that are twofold: first, the strong dependence on the current semiotic system poses a serious threat for the human, as well as an excessive reliance on authorities that uphold established epistemologies. Second, an attitude of eco-humility could be developed, inspiring a more open-minded approach to knowledge-creation, possibly beyond the limitations of human reason. That is to say, embracing forms of nonhuman epistemologies could allow humans to mitigate some of the dangers of the Anthropocene.³⁹

Chapter Two concluded by identifying interconnectedness as an appropriate vision for the relationship between human and nonhuman agencies. This perspective reaffirms the general academic and

³⁹ In terms of combatting environmental issues, this conclusion urges greater emphasis on nonhuman-based solutions, for example preserving wetlands and incorporating rain gardens in urban designs, rather than solely relying on man-made tools such as reservoirs or offsetting environmental damages.

popular trend to move beyond the nature-culture binary that has traditionally defined human-nonhuman discourse, and welcomes a more intertwined and holistic understanding. Recognizing that the human does not form an entirely separate category from the surrounding world can bring not only a degree of consolation and fulfilment through rediscovering the instinctual relationship with nature (as in the case of the characters on Monte Verità), but can also foster a humble and open mindset that allows us to view the nonhuman as an equal, and draw inspiration from its agency.

Lastly, this entanglement has been determined to extend from concept to bodies, highlighting the physical dimension of agentive dynamics. Building on previous chapters, Chapter Three reflects upon the dominance of reason in human agency and sustaining the binaries of nature-culture as well as body-mind. It concludes that physicality, often insufficiently acknowledged in the human realm, enhances the agentive power of the nonhuman. This need not be seen as a threat in an eco-horror style, but rather as an encouragement to pay more attention to corporeality, both in terms of analyzing the trans-corporeal relation with the nonhuman, as well as reconnecting with one's own physicality. Appreciating the material dimension has the potential to inspire more well-rounded and humble approaches when interacting with the physical environment—a necessary adjustment.

The theoretical framework I have utilized, combining ecocriticism with posthumanism and further enhanced by the concept of the eerie, has allowed me to arrive at additional tangential conclusions. One notable characteristic of the agentive dynamics between human and nonhuman is eeriness. In the stories, entities that normally lack agency are bestowed with it, while human agency is stripped of its usual power—displacing the traditional roles of agency. Although the concept of the eerie is more limited in its academic application than posthuman or ecocritical theories, it compels the human to confront the limits of comprehension and underscores the validity and importance of nonhuman agency in a straightforward manner. It also hints at affective responses toward physical environment and the entities within it, especially when coupled with the sublime. This emphasis on feelings and instincts beyond reason encourages a reworking of the current understanding of the human-nonhuman relationship and supports a posthumanist reading.

In many cases, posthumanism itself can evoke angst akin to the eerie—fear of the unknown, of change, and of lost domination. However, as Oppermann notes, “posthumanism can be as uncanny as it is liberating” (278), especially when the nonhuman ceases to be perceived as a threat but rather an ally, or even a part of the self that ought to be acknowledged and embraced. This imagination, a promise of a new category was a significant posthumanist contribution to this research. Using a “posthuman subject” as both a tool and an end-goal to evaluate the agencies of the characters in the stories allowed to discern certain desirable characteristics, such as eco-humility, attunement with materiality, embracement of the nonhuman and possibly the lack of gender. In this (limited) analysis, a posthuman subject can serve as a substitute answer to a follow up research question—what could human agency entail to improve the dynamics with the nonhuman?

In this way, I have attempted to push the ecocritical reading beyond how natural elements serve plot development or reception, focusing instead on what they allow us to imagine in terms of coexistence with the nonhuman. Including eerie and posthumanist thought facilitated this approach. Fundamentally, though, I set out to treat the literary narrative as a breeding ground for ideas that fuel academic considerations, help imagine the unknown unknowns, and analyze the convoluted nature of agentic dynamics between the human and nonhuman elements.

Hopefully, this analysis opens new avenues for future research that could harness the combined theoretical frameworks of the eerie, ecocriticism, and posthumanism to examine the inorganic nonhuman, omitted in this dissertation due to the plot constraints of the primary texts. Exploring the potential of du Maurier’s lesser-known works or extending the analysis to other authors who similarly challenge traditional genre boundaries could offer valuable insights into the complexities of human-nonhuman interactions in literature. Conducting more eco-feminist analyses on how gender can influence those agential dynamics, as well as the experience of the sublime connected with eerie, can prove worthwhile. Additionally, delving into the implications of the eerie and posthumanism in conjunction with indigenous perspectives on ecology and animism could enrich our understanding of non-Western environmental philosophies and their relevance to contemporary ecocritical discourse. The liminal haunting that climate change (and du

Maurier's narratives) exerts on Western populations is not true for the inhabitants of the Global South, for whom the consequences are dire and tangible, and the need for action is urgent.

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