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Nature as Rejuvenation in Literary Depictions of Isolation Past and Present

This research addresses tandem themes of nature and isolation across four textual proponents of 20th century and contemporary literature. In particular, I seek to address how nature may 'rejuvenate', entrench, or reflect the various states of physical, social or psychological isolation that the characters of these texts are subject to.

It is worth, before anything, attempting to locate a meaningful definition of 'nature' and isolation'; two words that refuse to be neatly pinned down. Both terms have multiple and unstable meanings that have been continually re-evaluated subject to developing critical theory. Firstly, we must consider the history of ecocriticism, the literary movement which addresses the natural and ecological world. Greg Garrard considers a history of overlapping 'waves' to ecocriticism, whereby the concept of 'nature' faces increasing scrutiny as to whether it is a cultural construct or scientific object.[1] Critics such as Garrard[2] and Timothy Morton consider how the common wielding of 'nature' as a term suggests an anthropocentric othering of ecological systems that renders humans as unique and distinct despite humans, of course, being animals too.[3] By extension of this, Morton considers that 'Putting something called nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.'[4] The suggestion is, then, that nature is a reductive term which enhances the aesthetic and non-human without demanding urgent attention to ecological crises. For my analysis, I will explore nature as an anthropomorphized entity able to influence and reflect the social, psychological and physical realities of characters. However, I

[1] Greg Garrard, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

[2] Garrard, p. 2.

[3] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 1.

[4] Morton, p. 1.

seek to approach my analysis armed with Morton and Garrard's arguments. As such I will also be attentive to how texts may uphold or erode the humanity/ nature binary, particularly in how nature may more passively shape a character's identity.

Secondly, 'isolation' also requires defining. Isolation will be taken here to mean physical and mental isolation – a character's disconnectedness and imposed difference from the surrounding world. Solitude and aloneness have been historically conflated with the cultural and artistic immersion of the well-educated gentleman, disentangled from feelings of melancholy.[5] Certainly, this is what Virginia Woolf sought to address in her polemical 'A Room of One's Own' (1929), decreeing that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.'[6] Against these definitions, 'isolation' in this essay connotes a character's estrangement or failure to belong in their respective social and physical landscape to the detriment of their psychological wellbeing.

By reading into my four selected texts, 'The Secret Garden' by Frances Hodgson-Burnett (1911),[7] 'Rebecca' by Daphne du Maurier (1938),[8] 'Wide Sargasso Sea' by Jean Rhys (1966),[9] and 'Normal People' by Sally Rooney (2018),[10] I hope to more thoroughly examine the interplay between concurrent themes of nature and isolation. Each text features characters who experience isolation, most often socially and psychologically. Equally, in each text, nature forms a vital vehicle for comprehension of that isolation which either further entrenches characters within it or allows for, as the essay title suggests, 'rejuvenation'. The texts offer unique perspectives on these themes, most notably due to their situations within different literary traditions. I have chosen to chronologically address them in this essay in order to cordon-off the different respective periods and focus of social

[5] David Vincent, *A History of Solitude* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), p. 34-35.

[6] Virginia Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own' , *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas,* ed. Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1929) 1-98 (p. 2).

[7] Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (London: Puffin, 2008 [1911]). All references from hereon will be in the text of the essay.

[8] Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Virago, 2015 [1938]). All references from hereon will be in the text.

[9] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1966]). All references from hereon will be in the text.

[10] Sally Rooney, *Normal People* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018). All references from hereon will be in the text.

discourse in each text. In 'The Secret Garden', a children's story driven by a moral imperative to encourage engagement with the outdoors, nature perhaps most resolutely regenerates the central protagonist. The natural world provides the vessel for her to reach out to others through, as well as enlivening her through its healing properties. In 'Rebecca', nature becomes fiercely aligned with the eponymous antagonist, offering the protagonist little respite from her calamitous relationship with Maxim de Winter. In 'Wide Sargasso Sea', the natural world of Antoinette, our protagonist, enriches her whilst alienating her husband. In turn, he encases her in his own brutal mythology and forces her back to an English landscape that is oppressive and jarringly distant from her perceptions of it. In 'Normal People', nature and the environment are deployed in order to reinforce Marianne's feelings of dissociation and destabilisation; her psychological isolation. For Connell, increasing movement to different locations and landscapes prove the financial forces that access to nature is contingent upon. Thus, nature cannot be considered a wholly rejuvenating entity because it is predominantly reachable by financial and class stability.

Katherine Norbury notes that there is a frequent alignment in the cultural treatment of women and nature; both are othered and historically associated with an alien, untameable wildness.[11] Norbury's analysis pertains to broader structures identified by ecofeminists, who argue that the patriarchy has systemically subordinated both women and nature to impose a hierarchal order. The intersection, therefore, between the role of gender and nature is something to be attentive to across these texts, with each offering its own unique politics of gender and the natural world.

Each text underscores the representation of nature as a crucial tool employed to reflect and elaborate on various states of social, physical and psychological isolation.

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'The Secret Garden' is a classic children story which charters the story of main protagonist, Mary Lennox upon her arrival at Misselthwaite Manor from India. Mary's foul attitude and sickly demeanour – introduced as 'the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen' - alter rapidly with the

[11] Katherine Norbury, *Women on Nature* (London: Unbound, 2021), p. 1.

discovery of the eponymous garden of her uncle's manor home and the social connections propagated by the garden (p.1). As Alun Morgan observes, the novel leans heavily on the ''outer realm' of the biophysical environment, most notably the secret garden, as an agentic character in its own right, one that acts therapeutically upon the chief protagonists.'[12] Thus, the garden takes on a central role as the driver of Mary's social connections and health that draws her out of her social and physical self-confinement. This is traced through the contrast from Mary's initial scorn for and separation from nature, to her love and embedment in the natural world. The text, therefore, platforms nature as a restorative and healing entity capable of steering character progression.

Mary's early contempt for the outdoors is seen clearly through the motif of her looking out her window. The window marks a separation; the world outside is something Mary can see but not feel. In her early days at Misselthwaite, she observes through it a 'climbing stretch of land which seemed to have no trees on it, and to look rather like an endless, dull, purplish sea' (p. 26). The window, then, comes to represent a barrier that Mary has no desire to step beyond. The outdoors represents an 'endless, dull' nothingness and is far removed from the comfortable domestic domain.

However, there is a clear difference between this perception and Mary's later love for the natural world. Mary discovers the garden in the early section of the text, led to its key by a robin. This is a crucial detail in itself; the natural world systematically reveals itself to Mary as if to confirm her burgeoning awareness of it. Mary's accumulation of animal friends and understanding of the plants and natural life corresponds to an improvement of mood and socialisation, most realised by her friendship with Dickon. Local, working-class Dickon, 'an object of wonder, an animal charmer',[13] is figured with a sense of exoticism bestowed upon him by upper-class Mary – who lends him the epithet of 'Yorkshire angel' (p. 215) . Although there is a benevolent paternalism directed from Mary towards Dickon, who fondly regards his older sister as a 'common little Yorkshire housemaid', their

[12] Alun Morgan, 'Places of Transformation in The Secret Garden', *Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden: A Children's Classic at 100*, ed. Jackie C. Horne, Joe Sutliff Sanders (Scarecrow Press, 2011) p. 81.

[13] Stefanie Kruger, 'Life in the Domestic Realm – Male Identity in the Secret Garden', *A Hundred Years of the Secret Garden: France Hodsgon Burnett's Children's Classic Revisited,* ed. Marion Gymnich, Imke Lichterfed (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2021) 69-77 (p. 73).

friendship across class boundaries redresses Mary's understanding of relationships and draws her out of her social isolation (p. 322). Far from being dictated by the strict power hierarchies of servant and master or parent and child that Mary is familiar with from India, Mary and Dickon's friendship exists with mutuality because she learns from him. The most critical knowledge that Mary receives from Dickon is that about nature, which Dickon deeply understands and is embedded in. Mary's first view of Dickon is of him playing panpipes under a tree, casting him in the image of Pan – the Greek God of the wild (p. 109). Dickon's association with nature and wilderness is evident by how entangled he is in the journey of Mary's rejuvenation:

> ''When her mind gradually filled itself with robins, […] with springtime and with secret gardens coming alive day by day, and also with a moor boy and his 'creatures', there was no room left for the disagreeable thoughts which affected her liver and her digestion and made her yellow and tired' (p. 322).

Mary's health, then, has been certifiably improved by the influence of the natural world and, by extension, Dickon's role as a gateway to that. Such a radical improvement of Mary's health lends textual potency to nature's role as dominant, restorative textual force. This effect is furthered in the last chapter, where Jane Darcy observes that the narrator 'steps in to 'lecture' the child reader on the importance of the garden' – confirming a textual imperative, emblematic of children's literature, to underline the garden's regenerative properties.[14] It is important to note, however, that the dues paid to nature for the improvement of Mary's health render her sickliness, at least in part, as psychosomatic. This becomes crucial when it comes to Colin, who, when in the garden 'life began to come back to him', is able to overcome his disability (p. 322) . As Anna Clark comments, the implications of this

[14] Jane Darcy, 'The Representation of Nature in 'The Secret Garden' and 'The Wind in the Willows'', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 19.2 (1955), p. 216.

are 'haunting', and problematic; 'the diagnosis of 'it's all in his head' feels disappointing' and undermines experiences of disability. [15]

Contrary to Morgan's perception of nature as a 'agentic character in its own right', nature is also shown as a more passive enabler for social connection and so does not wholly command restorative agency. [16] Madelon S. Gohlke observes that the garden may also simply be a 'place of regeneration'; a more passive facilitator of social exchange and personal development. [17] Whilst Hodsgon-Burnett draws a direct connection between Mary's improved health and time outside, the garden also forms a social leveller and expounds the importance of 'interpersonal interaction within natural settings'.[18] It is on reviving the garden that Mary works so intently with Dickon, and later Ben Weatherstaff the gardener, before she finally introduces it to the Cravens. The portions of time spent in the garden don't just evidence the sensory properties of nature as improving Mary – ''I'm growing fatter,' said Mary, 'and I'm growing stronger.''– they also provide opportunities for Mary to systematically introduce new relationships that circumvent gender and class hierarchies and are instead formed by mutual understanding and friendship (p. 120) . The text, therefore, portrays nature as an embodied force able to both dominantly influence, and passively enable, both physical and social restoration.

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In 'Rebecca', the unnamed narrator and her husband, Maxim de Winter, find themselves haunted by the legacy of his deceased wife Rebecca, whose 'lingering presence is everywhere, both inside and outside the house.'[19] The narrator is cast in the shadow of Rebecca and tormented; unable to truly connect with her husband or new life. Across the text, nature is less of a tool of rejuvenation and progress and instead a device employed to reflect the subjugation of the narrator to the influence of

[15] Anna Clark, 'The Hidden Depths of The Secret Garden', *The Guardian* [Online] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/05/secret-garden-frances-hodgson-burnett> [Accessed 01 Sep 2021].

[16] Morgan, p. 81

[17] Madelon S. Gohlke, 'Re-reading The Secret Garden', *College English* 41.8 (April 1980), 894-902 (p. 895).

[18] Morgan, p. 81.

[19] Nicoletta Brazzelli, 'Manderley in Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier: A Haunted House', *ACME* 73.2 (2020), 141-160 (p. 152).

Rebecca. The emergence of nature in the text comes at points of Rebecca's triumph, and thus there is an alignment fostered between the two; both hold a pervasive power and create a locus to which everything returns. Rebecca's connection with nature reflects Norbury's assertion that both nature and women are related by their relegation to 'the spare rib' – a shared othering which entrenches the perception of both as an unknowable, untameable thing. [20]

This is particularly explored in the novel's opening chapter: a dream of the ruined Manderley, du Winter and the narrator's former stately home. Manderley, in a state of decay and ruin – taken over by nature – becomes 'a house of secrets where the young bride is haunted by the ghostly presences of the first wife'.[21] That this staging of Manderley is the introduction is crucial on two counts. Firstly, it establishes the text to come with the precondition of Rebecca's victory. For the narrator and du Winter, 'There would be no resurrection' (p. 4). Secondly, the chapter galvanizes the connection between nature and Rebecca as a force of pervasive destabilisation for the narrator across the subsequent text. As Kim Youngjoo observes, 'nature in the dream sequence is grotesque and monstrous [...] associated with death and destruction'.[22] The narrator describes how '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' (p. 1). Indeed, there is a violence to nature's dominion of Manderley, which is figured in militaristic terms and able to 'choke'; 'Nettles were everywhere, the vanguard of the army. They choked the terrace, they sprawled about the paths, they leant, vulgar and lanky, against the very windows of the house' (p. 3). Moreover, we see that the narrator is actively embodying nature and that it is gendered female – nature has come into 'her own'. Nature, far from delivering restoration to the protagonist and her husband, is constructed as an anthropofeminized agent of destruction that consolidates the isolating presence of Rebecca.

[20] Norbury, p. 1.

[21] Kim Youngjoo, 'Romance with Daphne du Maurier: Revisiting the Ruins of Englishness in *Rebecca*', *Feminist Studies in English Literature Volume* 19. 3 (Dec 2011), 5-44 (p. 7).

[22] Youngjoo, p. 20.

There are moments when nature forms a refreshing respite for the narrator. However, these moments are presupposed by the knowledge that they must reassert Rebecca's insidious power. In the Happy Valley – the rhododendron lined walk down to the cove where Rebecca drowned - the narrator is able to overwrite experiences of Rebecca and bask in natural beauty. The narrator describes how 'The air was full of [rhododendron] scent, sweet and heady, and it seemed to me as though their very essence had mingled with the running waters of the stream' (p. 121). Significantly, this richly sensory description of tranquillity corresponds, in part, to the narrator and du Winter's time in Italy at the beginning – the time they are away from Manderley and most removed from Rebecca's influence. However, this moment of release and idyll becomes jarringly halted. Rebecca's command over the landscape, embedded with reminders of her, emerges only moments later as the narrator reaches the beach of Rebecca's death. As Teresa Peterson asserts, 'Rebecca's presence pervades Manderley to the extent that she seems alive.'[23] The narrator – far from being peacefully intoxicated by the Happy Valley – finds herself drawn back into Rebecca's mystery: 'The beach in the cove was white shingle, like the one behind me, but steeper, shelving suddenly to the sea. The woods came right down to the tangle of seaweed marking high water, encroaching almost to the rocks themselves…' (p. 124). Du Maurier, then, embeds the narrator in a bleak place – sympathetic to the mystery shrouding Rebecca's life and death.

Crucially, the description of the cove feeds into the Gothic coding which informs the text. Gina Wisker considers that the house 'not only looks like, but is, a Gothic (fictional) construction', able to resonate with the 'power of the Gothic to manipulate illusion and disillusion.'[24] Manderley, a place of psychological and temporal confusion which destabilises the narrator's social and psychological grounding, therefore finds an apt relation in the Gothic figuring of the cove which disguises the truth of Rebecca's death and, by extension, holds the narrator in factual and temporal disorder. Later on, once Rebecca has been drawn from the waters, the narrator describes how:

[23] Teresa Peterson, 'Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca : The Shadow and the Substance', *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 112 (2009), 53-66 (p. 58).

[24] Gina Wisker, Dangerous Borders: Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca : Shaking the foundations of the romance of privilege, partying and place, Journal of Gender Studies 12.2 (2003) 83-97 (p. 88).

> 'I knew now the reason for my sense of foreboding. It was not the stranded ship that was sinister, nor the crying gulls, nor the thin black funnel pointing to the shore. It was the stillness of the black water, and the unknown things that lay beneath. It was the diver going down into those cool quiet depths and stumbling upon Rebecca's boat, and Rebecca's dead companion' (p. 295).

The natural landscape of Manderley is thus an ideal theatre for the Gothic confusion and power of the dead Rebecca. Youngjoo remarks upon the 'profoundly atmospheric and precise descriptions of place in Rebecca make Manderley […unfold] in a mixture of desire and terror.'[25] Certainly, the sensory qualities of the 'stillness of the black water, and the unknown things that lay beneath,' – of the 'cool quiet depths' exacerbate a pervasive eeriness, later cemented when they are confirmed to shroud Rebecca's death (p. 295).

It is important, perhaps, to realise that Rebecca's influence seems to extend primarily over Manderley – at most over England. Indeed, it is abroad on the continent where the narrator and de Winter find themselves most able to escape her. This would suggest that Rebecca has a command over Manderley, rather than nature itself. However, the willingness of nature, or at least the narrator's perception of nature, to shape and enact the horrors and mystery underlying Rebecca's death entrenches a powerful relationship there. The nature of Manderley, far from offering the narrator the 'rejuvenating' or enlivening fresh start in life promised by newfound security, instead ultimately reflects and enacts the influence of Rebecca and decrees that, whilst the narrator is there, she will be held in a place of stagnation and decay.

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'Wide Sargasso Sea' interprets the natural world's properties as contingent upon the central two characters; the married Antoinette and Rochester. Rochester, a member of the English landed gentry

[25] Joungyoo, p. 10-11.

arrives in the West Indies to marry Antoinette, who adopts a liminal identity through her deceased family; 'hated by the black majority for their involvement in slavery, but [..] also despised by the white elite for being poor and of Caribbean origin.'[26] Each belongs in the landscape of their homeland, crafted to reflect their respective psychological and social identities, and suffers away from it. The effect of this antagonistic pairing ensures that either partner will feel alienated in the natural environment that the other most thrives in. The geographic chasm opened up by the distance between England and the West Indies enforces the isolation both impose upon each other within the bounds of their marriage, and its subsequent deterioration. This is most critically realised in Antoinette who, holding less currency in the relationship as a financially-dependent Creole woman, is subjugated by Rochester and the imposition of colonial, patriarchal order he represents. Antoinette's lack of social security and inevitable physical displacement culminates in intense psychological derealisation. Whilst Rochester also experiences a loss of self and isolation, he has the social and economic means to escape and force a return to England. Thus, it is Antoinette who bears the tragic consequences of this isolation in her death. The natural world, therefore, forms the landscapes of identity that either respective character is embedded in, but also exacerbates the physical and emotional isolation experienced by both characters.

Antoinette's enjoyment and love for the natural world of the West Indies reflects her person. Despite social othering in the West Indies, Carr acknowledges Antoinette's fundamental relationship to her landscape.[27] Kathleen DeGuzman remarks upon how Antoinettes early narration is 'sensitive to the connections between landscape, social reality, and her position as a human subject,'[28] evident in Antoinette's imbuement of her garden with life-giving properties: 'It was large and beautiful as that Garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there' (p. 5). Rochester, however, codes the same landscape

[26] Karina Smith, ''The Attic of My Grandmother's Subconscious': 'Whiteness', 'Illegitimacy' and Migration in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea and Honor Ford-Smith's 'Grandma's Estate'', Women: A Cultural Review 25.3 (2014) 287-304 (p. 294).

[27] H Carr, ''Intemperate and Unchaste': Jean Rhys and Caribbean Creole Identity', *Women: A Cultural Review* 14.1 (2003) 38-60 (p. 39).

[28] Kathleen DeGuzman, 'Wide Sagrasso Sea's Archipelagic Provincialism', *Small Axe* 23.2 (July 2019) 1-16 (p. 6)

and subsequently Antoinette as a threat - an association inflected by the loss of colonial order and the removal of his power mechanisms. He describes how 'We pulled up and looked at the hills, the mountains and the blue-green sea. There was a soft, warm wind blowing but I understood why the porter had called it a wild place. Not only wild but menacing. Those hills could close in on you' (p. 51). Rochester, then, overwrites the place with a sense of fearful exoticism; it is a 'wild' unknown where he has no power. That Rochester imbibes this landscape as a place of fear and disorder underwrites the power of it and Antoinette to undermine the structures his identity is conceived through.

As the text draws to a close, Rochester explicitly foregrounds this:

> 'I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it' (p. 144).

Critically, this passage capitalises upon the connection Rochester frames between the landscape and Antoinette, 'for she belonged to the magic and the loveliness' (p. 144). That Rochester is able to detect the power and beauty of this landscape more poignantly underwrites Rochester's lamentation of 'what I had lost' (p. 144). However, his sense of self is challenged by his perception of Antoinette and the landscape, joined as an unknowable, threatening other. Rochester, immersed in a landscape that compliments his wife's opposed identity, is removed from the framework of his own.

By contrast, when Antoinette is forcibly moved to Britain - the place where Rochester belongs and is able to most concretely feel his power and influence– she suffers extreme and inescapable depersonalisation. Areej Almutairi remarks that 'the displacement of the female protagonist mirrors the loss of value ascribed to the relationship between a person and the land', and as such, Antoinette

loses the aspects of her identity formed by the West Indies as a her social and physical homeland.[29] Antoinettes's loss of self is underlined by her refusal to believe that the reality of England accords with what she has been sold; a constructed dream by the veiled power of empire and patriarchy, typified by Rochester. Crucially, England is formed as a 'truer reality' due to the significance Rochester places upon the metropolitan landscape of London – a conception which subjugates the natural landscape of Antoinette's homeland.[30] Antoinette in England suffers complete derealisation and temporal destabilisation because the sociopolitical powers that have formed her othered identity prove to be disappointing and false. Upon her arrival, she implores; 'Dear Richard please take me away from this place where I am dying because it is so cold and dark' (p. 154). This reality forms a jarring contrast with her internal construction of England: 'That afternoon we went to England. There was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water. This, I thought, is England. If I could be here I could be well again and the sound in my head would stop' (p. 155). Thus, we see that this landscape brutally isolates through its failure to match her homeland's beauty – with the 'grass and olive-green water' figured in the image of the West Indies – but also through how it fails to align with the myths propagated by Rochester (p. 155).

Given the contrast between the two environments in which each of the other thrives in, Rochester and Antoinette are predicated to alienate the other whilst in their homelands. However, given that Rochester belongs to the dominant sex, ethnicity, and class, it is ultimately his will that is able to confine Antoinette within his landscape and isolate her. This suggestion tragically culminates with Antoinette's death in the final pages of the text. Once Rochester has Antoinette in England, his territory, she suffers and dies – an ultimate, and final indicator of her isolation. Nature in this text, then, shapes and embeds the powerful identities of each character. Rather than being a separate, autonomous entity, nature finds its textual levity in how it heightens the contrasting characterisation of Rochester and Antoinette, and the isolation then exacerbated between them.

[29] Areej Almutairi, 'An Ecocritical Reading in 'Wide Sargasso Sea'', *CS Canada Studies in Literature and Language* 7.1 (2013), 47-51 (p. 50).

[30] DeGuzman, p. 6.

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'Normal People', a contemporary millennial text, most prominently grapples with emotional and psychological isolation. Marianne, 'reviled, desired and ostracised by her peers' and abused by her family is unable to communicate her needs to Connell, her closest friend and romantic partner.[31] Marianne's isolation from the world around her and subsequent derealisation is marked by a distance from physical and natural environments, as well as her surreal perceptions of different landscapes. Connell, by contrast, feels alienated by his working class status at university – 'even after his elevation, through his association with Marianne, to the status of 'rich adjacent', Connell never quite fits in.[32] Space, movement and landscape are proven to be contingent upon financial status, and only become available to Connell through the receipt of a monetary grant. Connell's ultimate ability to emigrate to the U.S. is what allows Connell to self-realise and move away from feelings of isolation. For Marianne, nature plays a passive, introspective role across the text. Rather than constructing her psychological reality, it remarks upon it. For Connell, however, geographical movement and immersion in foreign landscapes enable his self-discovery and rejuvenation. Whilst not an embodied force, scenery constructs a new reality for Connell.

Marianne's physical and natural landscape is not something that makes sense to her because she has no social experience of it. Rooney manifests a distance between the place Marianne lives, what should be a key component of her identity, and herself; writing that 'She doesn't know the name of the river that runs brown and bedraggled past the Centra and behind the church car park, snagging thin plastic bags in its current, or where the river goes next. Who would tell her?' (p. 32). This separation is reinforced by physical demarcations of difference. As in 'The Secret Garden', windows show a world that characters can feel but not be a part of. In the early text, at one point Marianne sits alone on the bus:

[31] Helen Charman, 'Sally Rooney's 'Normal People'', *The White Review* [Online] <https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/sally-rooneys-normal-people/> [Accessed 02 Sep 2021].

[32] Charman.

> 'Out the window: black cattle, green meadows, white houses with brown roof tiles. The football team were all together at the top of the bus, drinking water and slapping each other on the shoulders to raise morale. Marianne had the sense that her real life was happening somewhere very far way, happening without her, and she didn't know if she would ever find out where it was and become part of it' (p. 11).

We see then, that Marianne – like Antoinette – suffers a derealisation whereby she is not able to embody the landscape formed by the people around her. Whilst the rest of her class find their identities belong to and are able to inhabit this place, Marianne does not. The window as a barrier confirms that the scenery out there is not part of the life Marianne understands or participates in. Thus, the natural world reflects Marianne's social isolation.

However, there is a second suggestion. Rooney describes how:

> 'In a few weeks' time Marianne will live with different people, and life will be different. But she herself will not be different. She'll be the same person, trapped inside her own body. There's nowhere she can go that would free her from this. A different place, different people, what does that matter?' (p. 65).

This suggests that Marianne's isolation transcends the physical environments, spaces and social groups she participates in. Rather, Marianne's isolation is psychologically rooted. Rooney partially suggests this through Marianne's sensory displacements and loss of reality in a variety of different settings. Marianne crosses to both Sweden and Italy, and yet in both places there is still a marked lack of participation with the physical, tangible aspects of her 'real life'. In Sweden, for example, 'People have seemed to her like coloured paper shapes, not real at all' (p. 191). Whilst in Italy, the sky is cast with an over-saturated strangeness: it is a 'thrilling chlorine-blue, stretched taut and featureless like silk' (p. 170). The physical spaces surrounding Marianne, then, are rendered heightened and unreal – unable to reach her on ordinary sensory terms. Nature does not bar Marianne's participation or permit social connection. Instead, it reflects a greater depersonalisation and sense of dissociation with the world around her.

Connell's movements and isolation are affected in a different way. Connell is not 'damaged like [Marianne] was' (p. 169). In some ways, the natural world reflects the sense of distance between Marianne and Connell. In Italy, the hot and oppressive atmosphere compounds the tension between them; 'They get to Marianne's house at three, in baking afternoon heat. The undergrowth outside the gate hums with insects' (p. 160). However, for Connell, socially secure until university, nature defines him most by how it embodies financial and political limitations. At university, Gloria Fisk remarks that Connell's 'diminished status as a scholarship student makes him a minor character in the privileged circles where [Marianne] travels.'[33] As such, Connell finds his biggest barrier to space and natural locations to be his class. When Connell receives a bursary allowing him to travel, 'It's like something he assumed was just a painted backdrop all his life has revealed itself to be real' (p. 160). The contingency of Connell's movements upon his economic status reveals just how entrenched class is as a marker of accessibility. Social mobility is the tool that opens up landscapes to Connell – an idea frequently elaborated upon by critics such as Samantha Walton. In 'Everybody Needs Beauty' (2021), Walton explores how access to nature is often prioritised on financial and class terms. Exploring access to parks as one example of 'eco-gentrification', Walton considers how 'you can only appreciate the mental health benefits of […] a green view if you can afford it.'[34] Thus, we see that nature is perhaps a blunt tool for rejuvenation in the context of characters such as Connell, who require the financial and class means to access natural and physical spaces already afforded to their wealthier counterparts. Instead, nature lays out the possibilities for socialisation and self-realisation afforded by greater financial security.

Nature embodies and reflects two very different types of isolation in 'Normal People' – although in neither case is it the active vehicle of restoration or isolation. For Marianne, nature seems to simply mark and further entrench a world she does not feel psychologically able to belong in. For Connell, however, nature harbours this same reflective property – it is able to comment upon the distance

[33] Gloria Fisk, 'From Reading Sally Rooney', *Post 45* [Online] <https://post45.org/2020/06/what-are-feelings-for/> [Accessed 02 Sep 2021].

[34] Samantha Walton, Everybody Needs Beauty (2021: Bloomsbury), p. 180.

accumulating between him and Marianne - but finds more potency as an indicator of sociopolitical identity. For Connell, the access to movement and new spaces allows him to feel step away from the social isolation he feels at university as a working class student, and to find new spaces to inhabit. Connell's ultimate move to America suggests that he has located his passion and self. Yet, natural representation is deeply entangled in the psychosocial landscapes of both characters, the crafting of their identities, and how they in turn move through life.

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Rather than holding a single value, nature inhabits fluid and shifting roles across and between texts. Novels must be read on a text-by-text basis in order to understand the complex and multi-faceted ways nature operates on a literary level. Although I sought to view nature as an embodied entity able to influence and construct the realities of characters, nature also assumes more passive and reflective textual roles (most notably evident in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' and 'Normal People'*).* Equally, nature is not uniformly a device for 'rejuvenation'; it may also echo and entrench isolation, as it more commonly does in the latter three examined texts . This points to an erosion of the human/ environment binary implied by the term 'nature' in itself. If nature is able to construct and shape the realities of characters, then the ways in which it is woven into their psychological, physical and social states suggests less of a difference than supposed by intent to examine it as an independent, autonomous force.

I believe it also worth briefly again picking up the implications for women posed by nature. There is an alignment formed between women and nature, particularly in the latter three texts, whereby their shared conception as wild and unknowable speaks to the subjugation imposed upon women by the social frameworks they exist in. Isolation is evidently and obviously more common for women and those of marginalised identities. Going back, then, to the belief laid out by the phrase 'nature as rejuvenation', the suggestion is that these people might find respite in the environment. However, these texts also evidence that nature is woven into the fabric of social and political forces and so it can be similarly manipulated to consolidate division and isolation. To consider the real-world implications

of this mutual 'spare-rib'ism, the common subjugation of both woman and nature to man on a textual level points to a necessity for understanding and liberation.[35]

Again, while these texts do highlight an intimate entanglement between man and nature as the constructors of characters' realities, a positive reference should we start to foster a more symbiotic and nurturing relationship with the environment – and yet one that still must be handled with awareness of pervasive anthropocentrism - it is worth drawing attention to the actual picture. The increasing commodification of nature, something experienced by Connell and Antoinette as their movements are dictated by the dominant sociopolitical order, does the opposite of break down the human/ nature dichotomy. Rather, it exponentially affirms the power of those dictating it. When nature is shown to belong to certain groups, and not others, an oppression is formed not just over marginalised identities but nature itself.

I believe this worth drawing attention to in the context of textual analysis. The possibilities for dialogue and reflection offered by literature are integral to a wider discourse about the contingent relationship between humanity and environment. These texts evidence how intimately and fundamentally nature is able to underscore a character's social, psychological and political reality and, in that, the contingency and co-relating of 'human' and 'nature. I hope that this will speak to an appreciation of nature in our own lives, now; a time when nature is increasingly fraught and destroyed. Ecocritical thought posed by critics such as Greg Garrard considers how the arts can start to develop a 'literacy' to comprehend ecological issues.[36] Certainly, when this 'literacy' speaks to the significance of the co-constituting relationship between man and nature, it becomes a useful tool for environmental and social justice.

[35] Norbury, p. 1

[36] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

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