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“EVERYTHING TEEMING WITH LIFE”: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THOMAS ECCLESHARE’S PASTORAL

Leah Vitello
University of Lynchburg

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"EVERYTHING TEEMING WITH LIFE": A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF
THOMAS ECCLESHARE'S *PASTORAL*

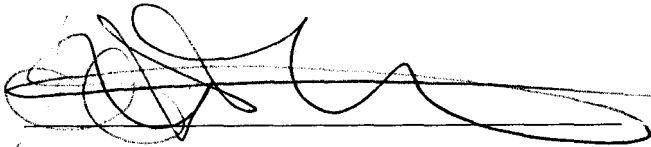
By

Leah Vitello

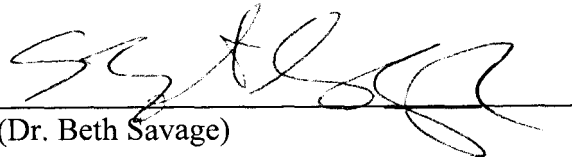
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Department.



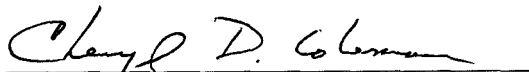
(Dr. Robin Bates)



(Professor Allison Wilkins)



(Dr. Beth Savage)



(Dr. Cheryl Coleman)

Lynchburg College

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Unlike most apocalyptic stories, Thomas Eccleshare's play, *Pastoral*, flips the genre on its head with its original take on what could come of the relationship between humans and nature. Throughout the course of the play, readers follow along as an elderly woman, Moll, and her companions attempt to make sense of their new ecologically lavish environment. Rather than humankind dominating nature, Eccleshare posits the question of what could happen if nature dominated over man. *Pastoral* is a play in which the countryside has become intrepidly abundant; however, rather than providing for humankind, nature attacks it. Set near a shopping center an hour away from London, the play takes us into a fictional reality, making readers and viewers alike wonder if the relationship between humans and nature really is stable.

Contemporary fiction, drama, and poetry often contain apocalyptic themes as writers and readers struggle with the concept of the world ending or changing drastically in some form. It often takes a "human versus nature" form. Among the numerous works of apocalyptic and dystopian literature showing a world ravaged by humankind's harsh hand lies Eccleshare's first play. This play is unlike other contemporary pieces of literature in that it reverses the "human versus nature" binary. By doing this, Eccleshare presents the consequence to the destruction humans have committed. In *Pastoral*, nature, not humans, is responsible for the destruction. The play is intriguing to watch as well as read, and since it was first performed only this year¹, scholarship has yet to explore this unique take on the relationship between nature and humankind. In this paper, I will explore *Pastoral* using ecocriticism, gender theory, and performance theory to determine how nature is viewed by the characters in the play as well as how they react to nature's furious destruction. The three theories intersect in the play by bringing to light the ways in which the characters struggle with making sense of the destruction as well as how the ecocrisis affects each character's societal role. Ecocriticism, gender theory, and

¹ *Pastoral*. Thomas Eccleshare. Dir. Steve Marmion. Soho Theatre, London. 25 May 2013.

performance theory can all be applied to *Pastoral* because evidence can be found within the text. I will draw from scholarship on post-apocalyptic literature and theatre reviews to offer some insights to this play's contribution to the genre.

Scholarship

Coined in the late 1970s, the term “ecocriticism” established a new field of study; however, the practice of applying a theory of nature dates back to the 1920s when academics began dissecting American literature in order to identify ways in which humans interact with the natural environment. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). The theory has grown to explore other aspects, which Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic describe as including “urban studies, field studies, bioregionalism, literary activism, narrative scholarship, green film studies and cultural studies, and postcolonialist and ecofeminist critiques” (xix). Ecocriticism bases itself on examining the relationship between humans and the environment, and exploring how this relationship is portrayed in literature.

The field of ecocriticism sprouted from what Timothy Clark describes as the “growing realization that one of the distinctive features of western thought has been the depth and destructiveness of its assumptions about the human relationship to the natural world” (1). This realization leads people to question whether our relationship as humans with the environment is a healthy one. Most of the time, we realize that it is not and therefore, literary ecocritical theory explores how characters in literature define and identify themselves within their ecological spheres. Glotfelty stated that “despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (xix). Because of this

interconnectedness, we as humans are responsible for ensuring that the connection is a stable, healthy one. Literature is one way in which writers portray the current state of affairs between humans and the natural environment, forcing readers to question not only their own treatment of the environment, but also of humanity's treatment of the planet.

Apocalyptic fiction concerned with the oftentimes rocky relationship between humans and nature is ripe for the picking by any ecocritic who desires to dissect the genre's depiction of the destructiveness of humans and nature. In recent years, much has been explored in this realm of criticism. Ecocritics find nature apocalyptic fiction intriguing because it tends to call for action on the sore subject of humanity's poor treatment of the environment. Already, many works of apocalyptic fiction have been examined to uncover the questions ecocritics ask of this genre's texts. The most relevant scholarship that has been done thus far addresses the aspects of ecocriticism I am exploring in this paper and discuss the treacherous relationship between humans and nature in contemporary literature and how humans react to it; however, much more can be done on this topic.

In her examination of Meridle Le Seur's literary works, Stacy Alaimo presents an argument that the writer "offer[s] illuminating accounts of how human relation to the natural world is mediated by structures of power" (55). Alaimo claims that the writer's imagery and descriptions of the earth as a body have been overlooked by ecocritics. Alaimo examines Le Seur's poetry to identify ways in which the writer depicts earth as a body and how humans are tied to the planet. Using a gender lens, Alaimo discusses Le Seur's ability to show Mother Earth as a body overtaken by man, much as women's bodies often are. She then links this idea to capitalism and the ways in which it "devastates humans and nature alike, extracting economic value and leaving behind wreckage and waste" (Alaimo 58). One common image arising in

apocalyptic nature fiction is the idea of a wasteland. Writers set their stories in a world ravaged by man, leaving the landscape desolate and incapable of providing humans with the necessities. Le Seur's work is no exception. "Eroded Woman" is a story in which a "tough, gnarled woman echoes that of the 'abandoned lead and zinc mines', which 'stand in a wasteland of ruined earth and human refuse'" (Alaimo 58). By paralleling this woman to the environment surrounding her, Alaimo argues that Le Seur is tying the woman to the land. "Eroded Woman" is just one example among Le Seur's works that addresses the notion of humans being tied to the land, especially if it is a wasteland created by man's destruction.

Cynthia Dietering adds to this conversation with her argument that the fiction of the 1980s is a prime example of writers setting their works in wastelands to suggest that humankind is to blame for the lack of abundance in nature. Dietering coins the term "toxic consciousness" in explaining how novelists of the decade "showed an increasing concern with the pervasive problem of toxic waste" and to offer "insight into a culture's shifting relation to nature and to the environment at a time when the imminence of ecological collapse was, and is, part of the public mind and of individual imaginations" (196). Dietering discusses the impact ecological crises, such as the Three Mile Island nuclear incident, had on the novelists of the 1980s and how they may have influenced their work. Novelists, Dietering argues, reflect on accidents and ecocrises like these in order to make sense of it while setting before readers the idea of an apocalypse of nature at the hands of humankind. This toxic consciousness is a reflection of "a fundamental shift in historical consciousness; for at some point...something happened, some boundary was crossed beyond which Americans perceived themselves differently in their relation to the natural world and the ecosystems of the American Empire" (Dietering 197). Toxic consciousness, in Dietering's opinion, is the way in which writers pointed out how badly humans were treating the

environment. This idea of a shift in historical focus is one that cannot be ignored, since, as Dietering says, a boundary has been crossed in Americans' perceptions of themselves in terms of their relationship to the environment.

This shift has continued today. Writers all over the world have adopted this consciousness and continue to publish works highlighting the dangers of potentially imminent apocalyptic incidents. Dietering uses Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* to show how American fiction adopted toxic consciousness and underwent the shift in regards to nature. Dietering comes to the conclusion that the novels, among other novels written in the 1980s, "provide representations of a postnatural world, of a culture defined by its waste, and of a nation that has fouled its own nest...to raise the environmental consciousness of the society that sees itself in the mirror" (202). Dietering's main point is that, through toxic consciousness, novels allow readers to reflect on their own actions and awareness. Even today the apocalypse genre continues to hold a mirror to humankind in exposing its treatment of the environment.

In addition, Astrid Bracke's dissertation on the contemporary British novel sheds light on society's recent rise in interest in nature and how it is treated. Bracke discusses how global warming has impacted humans' perception of the environment and its changes. This "cultural hype" brought about much discussion about the environment in pop culture, publishing, and literature (Bracke 2). This rise in attention to climate change and the environment sparked a rise in environmental criticism. In the dissertation, Bracke explores different aspects of the contemporary British novel and breaks it down into three sections: "pastoral, place and apocalypse" (4). Apocalyptic literature, to Bracke, presents the "end of the idea of nature as an external, independent force" (111). Literary scholars tend to view this genre negatively, arguing

that it only stokes readers' imaginations and fails to raise any serious concern for the reader. Bracke argues "for a reading of apocalypse that is not environmentalist or activist, but rather perceives it as an image of nature which is used to represent the collapse of society due to political, economic and/or environmental issues, and which provides insights into human-nature relations under pressure" (115). By approaching readings of apocalypse in this way, ecocritics will be able to study more widely as it will be more inclusive. This reading allows for more inclusivity of novels that are not as environmentally focused in theme.

Numerous ecocritics focus on ecocrisis in literature because it presents an idea that holds a mirror to society's awareness of their complicity in the destruction of the environment. Neal Bukeavich's exploration of ecocrisis in John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* is interesting in that it delves into Brunner's question of whether Western society is capable of coping with ecocrisis in a reasonable and healthy way. The novel "asks readers to evaluate the ways in which various individuals and institutions perceive, explain, and respond to environmental crisis" (Bukeavich 58). Like most other works of literature dealing with ecocrisis, *Stand on Zanzibar* forces readers to reflect upon their relationship with the environment by way of presenting the characters' reactions to ecocrisis.

Due to the theory's American origins, most ecocritics focus their studies on American literature; however, as the field continues to grow, it is likely the theory will take on an international scope once theorists recognize and incorporate social justice in their exploration. International ecocriticism is a new horizon for the theory, and there is no doubt that it will continue to expand in its critiques of literature. Ursula Heise is a scholar promoting ecocriticism's growth, and presents environmental criticism in ways that globalizes it. As it globalized, the theory has grown to encompass not only American literature, but also literature

from numerous cultures. Heise argues that this globalization of ecocriticism is not similar to the globalization of other literary theories because it “has always distinguished itself by its interest in how the nonhuman interacts with human culture: how ecological conditions shape cultural expression and, conversely, how culture shapes the perception and uses of natural environments” (638). She says ecocriticism is different because it does not deal with the “purely human” (Heise 638). Because the environment impacts all people, it only makes sense that environmental literary theory be applied to literature of all cultures. Heise cites East Asian literary scholar, Karen Thornber, to state that “because damaged environments are a global phenomenon, literary treatments of ecodegradation regularly transcend their particular cultures of production and together form intercultural thematic and conceptual networks” (638). The transnational shift in ecocriticism is due to the fact that the issues and concerns addressed in literature and the environment cross cultural and physical boundaries, therefore making the theory incredibly easily applicable to all cultures. While the issues may vary from country to country, the idea is the same. Though ecocriticism in the developed world may focus on aesthetic nature and materialism, it can also focus on the lack or degradation of environmental resources in third world countries. If, as some scholars argue, all texts are environmental, then ecocriticism’s growth on the global scale demonstrates that the theory is more flexible than others. There has been a recent rise in applying the theory to British literature, especially within the Romantic and contemporary periods. As scholars continue writing on environmental criticism and literature, it is likely that the theory will expand to encompass all genres of literature worldwide.

As ecocriticism steps onto the global scale, scholars are not only looking at nature as the Other, but also at how humans defy it based on their location. As previously mentioned, developed or first-world countries’ literature may encompass more themes of materialism and

cosmopolitanism. Ecocritics have begun to identify how humans' materialism impacts the environment negatively. Scott Hess pinpoints technology and advertising's influence on postmodern earth in his discussion of the leap from the shepherd pastoral days to the world we live in today. The break from traditional pastoral to a postmodern pastoral is intriguing in that it encompasses a new cosmopolitanism and society's materialistic ideals. Hess states that "although it calls for a return to nature, however, pastoral has never called for an actual return to the challenges of earning a subsistence from the natural world" and that "instead, it imagines a perfect world of leisure, in which a temperate and completely beneficent nature provides for human wants without the necessity or curse of labor" (73). Hess' statement is interesting, because *Pastoral* does not present this Edenic world we think of upon hearing the play's title.

'We've been ambushed': Ecocrisis and Toxic Consciousness in *Pastoral*

Looking first at the title, we see that the word, "pastoral," does not play out its definition in Eccleshare's play. The word itself is hard to define, as its definition has changed drastically from Virgil's time². An agreed-upon modern-day definition of "pastoral" does not exist; however, we can see how the word has changed with the times. Rather than writing of shepherds leading sheep across mountainous fields, writers today present to us an entirely different image. In the past, the pastoral poetry genre had within it "deliberately conventional poem[s] expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the supposed peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting" (Abrams). A pastoral work is usually set in a rural environment and "generally praises a rustic way of life" (*Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*). The term is often applied by critics to a work that "represents a withdrawal to a place apart that is close to the elemental rhythms of nature, where the protagonist gains a new

² Virgilian pastoral evokes an image of shepherds herding their flock amidst lush, idyllic land, and in Virgil's *Eclogues*, a peaceful past is differentiated from the unstable, alienated present (Gifford 19).

perspective on the complexities, frustrations, and conflicts of the social world” (Abrams).

Pastoral literature is concerned with valuing simplicity and praising it (*Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*). Not so in *Pastoral*. In this play, we do not get the satisfaction of seeing any character gaining a new perspective, or at least not the perspective we want them to gain.

Thomas Eccleshare’s *Pastoral* sets itself apart from other nature-oriented apocalyptic fiction. Rather than shedding light on humans destroying the natural environment, the play flips the dynamic upside down by showing a world dominated by nature. The England presented here is one in which nature has decided to retaliate and invade. This state of ecocrisis contrasts from other literature in that humans fall prey to nature’s destruction. *Pastoral* demonstrates a reversal in domination and how people react to the upheaval. The humans in the play attempt to fight back with man-made materials and try to survive in this new wilderness. One would expect the text to acknowledge or question whether or not this ecocrisis was mankind’s fault; however, *Pastoral* makes no move to address this question. Instead, it presents us with different characters reacting to the ecocrisis in different ways while at the same time working together to survive and adapt to the new environment they are faced with.

The characters in *Pastoral* are varied in age, ranging from the young to the elderly. The youngest is Arthur, an eleven year old boy, who is the son of a middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Plum. Moll is an old woman who owns the flat in which the entire play takes place. Moll’s assistants are two men in their twenties, Hardy and Manz. The play does not indicate the exact relationship between the men and Moll, but it is clear the men are responsible for taking care of Moll. While these characters dominate the play, two others add to the play’s intrigue: the Ocado man and the Bride. The two arrive later in the play; however, they are integral to *Pastoral*’s plot.

Pastoral's characters refuse to address the possibility that they may have played a role in nature's retaliation. As the play does not delve into a moral or ethical debate on the subject, the characters fall in line with our society's typical reactions to the environment. Patrick D. Murphy discusses this idea in saying, "human beings generate static perceptions of the processional realities unfolding through and around them, so that they invariably cannot think ecologically or interrelatedly about the planetary events in their grandest forms, such as geological periods, or their smallest ones, such as infections" (26). This static view of the environment makes humans incapable of grappling with the responsibility they have as inhabitants of the planet. The problem ultimately stems from two conflicting perspectives humans have: that the earth exists solely for the benefit and use of humans, therefore no ecocrises can occur, and the view that humans cannot substantially help the environment, as the planet is always undergoing changes (Murphy 26). These two views contradict one another, but both carry the idea that while humans seem to hold the most dominance over the planet, they cannot help the planet's changes in any real positive way. In *Pastoral*, the characters are passive in their relationship with the environment and make no moves to address the significance and cause of nature's retaliation. Because the human species have the mindset that they can do anything, they are found hopeless when all else fails. Murphy states that humans' "behavior in relation with an environment shapes the[ir] identities, worldviews, and psychological health" (28). A negative portrayal of the relationship between humans and the environment and how it impacts humans' identities and overall health exists within *Pastoral*.

Harkening back to Bukeavich's examination of John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, we can see how cultural attitudes toward problems existing within the environmental and social spheres affect those facing the problems. Bukeavich's discussion of the consequences of

consumption and depletion of resources lends good insights to how *Pastoral* suggests humans are much too materialistic. Because of this separation of nature and culture, humans' reactions to ecocrisis may change based on their perception of nature and consumerism. The term Murphy uses to describe the problem humans have in their relationship with the environment, "environmental generational amnesia," comes into play in *Pastoral* (79). The term illustrates the idea that with each generation the relationship with nature disintegrates. The younger generation of today has a much lower awareness of the natural environment in contrast to their grandparents. In contrast from Dietering's idea of toxic consciousness that made humans realize how poorly they were treating the environment, Murphy's environmental generational amnesia shows how the younger generations are unaware of how powerfully their actions affect the environment. The rise of consumerism and technology has attributed to this decrease, and therefore humans lack a strong connection with the natural environment.

This amnesia becomes very clear in *Pastoral* early on when we see that the main character, Moll, depends on man-made materials in order to go about her day. As the play begins, we see Moll eating pre-packaged fruit and that she owns many electrical food-preparation devices such as a food processor and electric whisk. The pre-packaged fruit and electrical appliances indicate that the world she lives in is dominated by the idea of convenience, and that she is a part of it. Her first words are "Everyone out there is fat" (Eccleshare 21). She sees other people as over-fed and lazy; however, she says that she has "got nothing against the fat," which further characterizes Moll as the stereotypical sarcastic and judgmental old woman (Eccleshare 22). The idea of "the fat" presents to us the poor relationship people today have with food and the environment. The scene continues with her description of the consumerist-oriented environment consisting of shops, boutiques, and a grocery delivery service. The world Moll lives

in is one that possesses everything a person would need at his or her fingertips. The streets are lined with boutiques for consumerists' pleasure and a delivery service so people need not waste their valuable time grocery shopping. This consumerism has led to people's laziness in Moll's eyes, though she has fallen into the trap of materialism and cosmopolitanism just like everyone else. Moll's old age indicates that it is possible she may have grown up with an awareness of the environment. Seeing the world she lives in today makes her judgmental of the generational amnesia that is affecting the younger generation. Though the staging prevents viewers from seeing the world outside Moll's flat, we become aware that there is a difference between Moll's flat environment and the outside environment. This depiction of cosmopolitan England sets the tone for the rest of the play: the world outside Moll's flat is about to change drastically - and very quickly.

As plants and trees take over the land and invade the flat, the line dividing the inside and outside begins to crumble. This invasion poses a threat to the human characters and reminds readers and viewers that walls cannot keep everything out. In between scene changes, the outside world begins to invade the set – flowers shoot down from above as spikes on the outskirts of the stage, a tree bulldozes its way in where a window used to be, and animals threaten to burst into the flat. As the play progresses, the once safe indoor environment that was Moll's flat begins to fall apart and becomes one with the outside environment. This breakdown in stage setting and sense of safety worries the characters in the play as they struggle to comprehend their new surroundings. An ecocrisis has begun, yet it is nothing like anyone thinks it is. Nature, not humans, becomes the destroyer.

As the environment takes a turn for the dangerous, the characters find themselves trying to survive and retaliate. Manz leaves it up to the army to “deal with all of this” and to “clean it

up” rather than coming up with ways to solve the issue (Eccleshare 26). One way humans react to ecocrisis would be to place the burden on someone else. Manz places the burden of dealing with the wild nature on the army and puts his hope in soldiers’ abilities to fight back. He does not take any of the blame and passes the job off to someone else. Later on, we see the characters’ loss of hope about the situation when Hardy and Manz, who have unspecified responsibilities to Moll, discuss that nothing can be done. Hardy recounts his experience seeing a rabbit warren in Aldi and how “no one did anything about it” (Eccleshare 32). By defining the ecocrisis as a mess that needs cleaning up and a situation in which humans are powerless, the characters fall prey to the quickly invading environment. Hardy’s statement that nobody takes the responsibility for anything suggests that humans tend to give up on taking action if all else fails.

Another way humans deal with drastic changes in their environment is by retaliating against it. However, laying down concrete, building plastic walls, and using chainsaws to cut down trees do not hit the mark in *Pastoral*. Humans are inclined to have dominance over everything, especially if the object in question poses a threat to the human. Most often, humans exert dominance because they are capable of doing so. They will concrete all they can and quarantine everyone if it means they can continue having some form of control over their environment and surroundings. Joseph W. Meeker describes humans’ inclination to have control by stating that

We transform complicated wilderness environments into ecologically simple farmlands. We seek unity and we fear diversity. We demand that one species, our own, achieve unchallenged dominance where hundreds of species lived in complex equilibrium before our arrival. In the present environmental dilemma, humanity stands like a pioneer species facing

heroically the consequences of its own tragic behavior, with a growing need to learn from the more stable comic heroes of nature, the animals.

(164)

In the midst of chaos and crisis, it is human nature to exert dominance in order to regain control. Even the tiny act of stomping on something as small as an ant shows humans' natural inclination to acquire control. Moll's fascination with an ant crawling on her finger and subsequent mindless flicking it to the floor and stomping on it is a prime example of how humans, in spite of their fascination and curiosity, will still use their ability to maim or kill in order to display dominance.

The characters' view of nature is much different from the days of pastoral poetry and perceiving nature as a benevolent provider. In *Pastoral*, nature is viewed negatively and perceived as a danger to humanity. Hardy describes the new environment as "teeming with life," a statement that, in normal cases, would be positive; however, Hardy's statement carries a negative connotation (Eccleshare 32). Hardy's use of the word is interesting, because the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as breeding offspring. "Teeming" is used to describe something that is "abundantly productive; fertile, prolific" (*OED Online*). The word should indicate that something positive is being bred and growing; however, Hardy's use of the word indicates that nature's prolific abundance is undesirable. Similarly, "life" is given a positive connotation in the *OED Online* and is defined as "the condition or attribute of living or being alive...opposed to death or inanimate existence." Life is always regarded as positive; however, Hardy's perception of life in his statement shows that the life dominating the environment is not positive, but rather destructive. Moll's statements, "We've been ambushed" and "Plants are dangerous," show nature as retaliating and declaring war against humanity (Eccleshare 37, 44). The group sits in Moll's flat discussing how the changes have affected them. As the environment takes on a more

bountiful existence, the characters do not celebrate it; rather, they complain and view it as an inconvenience and danger. Unlike other eco-apocalyptic literature, *Pastoral* turns the genre on its head by presenting a situation in which humanity's wishes are granted, but taken much too far. After Hardy and Manz return from their expedition to find food, they describe the world outside: animals and plants have taken over, people's efforts are futile, and stores have been looted clean. Nothing seems to be working and the environment continues to invade. Hardy's description of the animals' fearlessness shows that humankind's domination over them is weakening. The fact that animals are no longer scared of humans is frightening to the characters because it means they are losing control. As one of the few aspects of life that they can control begins to overtake them, the characters become fearful and afraid of their powerlessness.

Survival of the fittest comes largely into play in *Pastoral* as the characters attempt to compete against the destruction and try to live comfortably in their new environment. However, Moll's foreshadowing commentary on materialism and cosmopolitanism at the very beginning comes into play as the characters struggle to hunt for food, build a fire, and fend for themselves. Their greed gets the best of them, leading them to their downfall. Manz and Hardy fight over each other's inability to provide for the group. Manz criticizes Hardy's hunting skills while Hardy condemns Manz's inability to build a fire. The two young men blame each other for their failure to help the group and neglect to face the fact that the odds are completely against them. Later, despite feeding himself with the Ocado man's meager bounty along with the group, Hardy declares what they are all thinking: "It's not enough" (Eccleshare 56). Their hunger and greed gets the best of them and the group ends up killing the delivery man and eating him. The cannibalism is disturbing, and shows the lengths people will go in order to survive. While the group attempts to keep its humanity intact by waiting for the Ocado man to die, Arthur steps

forward and shoots him. The group's lack of survival skills leads them to commit murder in order to live. This idea turns back on itself once more when Hardy and Manz are killed later on by a bear. Nature triumphs by eliminating the two young men who failed to carry out their duties. Later, Arthur's parents desert him in attempt to leave town. As the characters struggle to survive and adapt, they find themselves giving in to greed and the deceptive promise of escape.

Humans have always believed in survival of the fittest and that only the strong can survive, and this perception is fleshed out in *Pastoral*. When Hardy and Manz confirm that there is a checkpoint at a plastic wall the army has built, the group feels a glimmer of hope. However, that hope is dashed when Hardy reveals that the army will not allow Moll or Arthur through because they may be considered too "frail" and that children are not being allowed through as well (Eccleshare 62). The humans in the play contradict the rules of etiquette that proclaim women and children should be protected first in the event of disaster. Contrasting from standard evacuation procedures, *Pastoral* shows a situation in which people like Moll and Arthur are unable to undergo the decontamination process due to their age. The play departs from the norms that have been set in the event of disaster, which leads one to question what it means for the new world posited by the play. Will the new world be one in which a lush London and south of England is inhabited by the old, the weak, and the young such as Arthur, hordes of other feral children, and those like the Bride too traumatized to understand the forever-changed world around them while the mid-aged and strong, like Arthur's parents, can be evacuated? Do the mid-aged and strong have to be evacuated because they cannot survive in the natural nightmare and the seemingly weak, infirm, and insane have the skills to survive it? *Pastoral's* non-adherence to tradition is an aspect worth considering what the nature-dominated world means for those that live within it. In the beginning, the play enforces the belief that only the strong

survive; however, we see this is not true as Moll and Arthur are left standing amidst the destruction at the play's closing.

The play's title comes alive near the end when Arthur and Moll are alone in the flat and discussing the former days of England. Moll describes the world King Arthur lived in as "when England still had lions and dragons and fairytale princesses. When ghosts rustled in the trees. There weren't streets. There weren't shops. Just copses and brooks and clearings and dells" as well as "big castles by the sea or on hills" (Eccleshare 67). This description of a formerly pastoral England encapsulates the idea that this England no longer exists. Moll's nostalgic tone as she speaks enforces what pastoral literature hearkens to: a desire for a previous rural nature in which one could find peace. Soon after Moll speaks, children are heard shouting and running. The idealistic image of nature Moll talks of starkly contrasts the reality she and Arthur live in. The sudden sounds of the children shock everyone back to reality. The pastoral literature of today does this more often than the pastoral stories and poetry of the past as it will present an image of an Edenic world for a few moments, and then jolt us back into our own reality or the reality of the characters.

Soon after Moll and Arthur chat about the times past, a worn-down bride appears. She has completed a list of duties she must carry out before she marries her fiancé, Scott. Arthur helps the bride complete her tasks by kissing and dancing with her. As music plays, Arthur parts with the bride and begins dancing with Moll. The bride then begins her speech, ending *Pastoral* with the declaration that "the world seems fresh, full, and alive. Birds are singing, the sun is shining. And we have a whole new future ahead of us" (Eccleshare 72). While the statement is directed at her absent fiancé, the bride also speaks to the world in its entirety, speaking of a new beginning in which the world is fresh and alive. This declaration gives readers and viewers the

hope that tomorrow will bring a better life – one in which humans and nature will coexist peacefully and that Moll and Arthur will be a part of it.

‘It’s my job to be brave’: Gender in *Pastoral*

The scene in which the Bride appears presents Arthur with an opportunity for realizing his own sexuality. Arthur is somewhat sexually attracted to the Bride, who is the sole female character closest to Arthur in age. She momentarily pulls Arthur away from Moll and forces him back into his boyish mindset of needing to win the girl. The Bride puts herself between Arthur and Moll, a move that is unexpected, as the two have been inseparable since Arthur and his family first appeared on the stage. Arthur and Moll's relationship is an interesting one, since the two are on opposite ends of the age spectrum. Arthur is a young teenage boy who is just discovering his sexuality; meanwhile, Moll fits the typical "old lady" stereotype: uses a cane, is cranky, and full of wisdom. As the two characters navigate this new world, they depend on one another for support, especially as they receive news that they will not be allowed past the barrier. As the young and old weak ones, the two are left at the end to fend for themselves. Moll has a great impact on Arthur and her stories imprint themselves upon him. For example, after Moll explains Arthur's namesake as being that of King Arthur's and tells the boy who the ancient king was, he becomes a modern-day King Arthur by acting like a man of honor and bravery. He wields his sword as if it was real, steps up to the plate when a human sacrifice must be made, and guards Moll whenever there is a potential threat. He physically stands by Moll and connects with her on a level completely separate from any other character. Even as the Bride appears and dances with him, Arthur breaks from her embrace and moves over to Moll. Their friendship is Harold-and-Maude-esque, with the young assisting the older, and the older dispensing wisdom to the younger. Sexuality is explored in *Pastoral* as Arthur develops his own idea of it, while Moll

is portrayed as someone Arthur protects in a genteel way. At times, their relationship borders on sexual; however, the Bride seems to flip a switch in Arthur. He is obviously attracted to her and even wonders if she is a porn star. He helps the Bride complete her bachelorette party checklist, and then reverts back to being Moll's right-hand man. Despite their age difference (or maybe *because* of it), Moll and Arthur find a sense of love and comfort in each other that helps them survive the destruction.

Along with exploring sexuality, Eccleshare dabbles with many other concepts in *Pastoral*, one of them being gender roles. Underneath all the play with humor, set design, and the “nature versus human” binary, there exists a statement on gender roles and how the characters address, or fail to address, their designated role. The cultural gender roles that have been set in place declare that men should be strong and brave while women are to be weak. Arthur, Hardy, and Manz are the three youngest males in the play, and therefore are boxed into a stereotype that they must be brave providers for the women. Hardy and Manz work desperately to make Moll happy and comfortable by attempting to build a fire, hunting, and fighting off a bear. Although Arthur looks up to the young men as well as his own father, he ends up formulating his definition of a man through King Arthur's example. His masculine identity begins to form once he learns about what kind of man King Arthur was from Moll. Arthur ends up being Moll's sole protector, and is the only one who steps up to shoot the Ocado man when no one else would. While his morals may be in question, Arthur performs bravery by channeling the ancient king.

On the other hand, females are stereotyped to be weak and act as damsels in distress. In *Pastoral*, Moll seems perfectly capable of holding her own, yet her old age prevents her from physically assisting the group in their endeavors in hunting and scavenging. Her sense of complacency in the play is obvious, and her snarky attitude makes us aware that she probably

would have carried on just fine if she was younger. The other two females in the play, Arthur's mother and the Bride, are two who are boxed into their roles. Mrs. Plum ends up leaving her role as a mother when she deserts her son and escapes the destruction with his father. The Bride is lost without her fiancé, and her presence in the play is a symbol of reassurance and hope. Though she looks distraught, she represents what is left of the society after it has been ravaged by nature. Her speech is reassuringly sad, and comes off as a manifesto for everyone living in the new society. Cultural gender roles are enforced in *Pastoral*; however, most of the characters either abandon their role or develop their role through different means due to the ecocrisis.

In addition to the idea of humans abandoning their cultural gender roles, Eccleshare brings into question nature's gender. Today, we can see that nature, truly, is much more powerful than we are, and *Pastoral* is a prime literary example of this. However, the question of power brings to mind the popular definition of nature as a mother. Culturally, nature is gendered female. Among the various names for nature is "mother nature" or "earth mother," which carries the connotation that our planet is meant to be nurturing, life-giving, and sustainable. Much scholarship has been done on this idea of nature gendered female. Carolyn Merchant's 1980 book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, is regarded as a founding ecofeminist text in which she argues to end gendering nature. Charis Thompson draws from Merchant's work, and states that the ecofeminist movement argued that "women's ways of being and thinking...made them natural (in many senses of the word) inhabitants and guardians of Mother Nature's garden in an antipatriarchal and oft-times prelapsarian imaginary" (506). She argues that pairing women and nature together "expressed a refusal to base society and community in the power hierarchies of a capitalist patriarchy whose 'invisible hand' operated as if it owned not just the means of production but those of destruction and reproduction as well"

(Thompson 506). This statement is an interesting one to address with *Pastoral* in mind, because the play offers an image of nature as angry and destructive. This image does not match with the popular notion that nature is female and a mother. The play posits the question of whether nature in *Pastoral* is male or female, or whether it needs to be gendered at all. Culturally, people will view nature as female; however after reading and experiencing *Pastoral*, they may see nature in a completely different light. Some may say the nature presented here is akin to a dominating male forcing his hand upon humanity merely because he has the power to do so. On the other hand, some may argue that nature is similar to a stereotypically pissed-off female who wants to exact revenge upon those who scorned her. This angry female nature perspective may come from the stereotype that women are only allowed to get angry when they have been wronged; meanwhile men are free to treat people however they please because of their gender. Thompson's statement about patriarchal societies owning the means of destruction and reproduction can also be applied to matriarchal societies as well. Who is to say that females cannot also have the power to destroy?

Nature in *Pastoral* may be either gendered or genderless, but it does express its desire to be much more powerful than humanity and therefore encompasses all ideas of gender. Just as godlike figures sometimes have no gender because humankind cannot fathom something so much greater than itself, nature does not need to be defined by gender. In an article she wrote years after publishing *The Death of Nature*, Merchant writes that she addressed the problem of nature-as-female depictions "by advocating the removal of gendered terminology from the description of nature," which led her to argue for a perspective of nature "as no longer symbolized as mother, virgin, or witch but instead as an active partner with humanity" (515). Taking Merchant's standpoint and applying it to *Pastoral* brings to question that nature does not

need to be gendered because it is so much more powerful than humankind, and it is meant to be in a give-and-take relationship with all species on the planet; we get what we put into it. While *Pastoral* prevents us from knowing the reasoning behind nature's destruction, it does leave it open to interpretation.

'Looks like it's over before it's begun': Performance

Like any drama, *Pastoral* is one that demands to be read, seen, and heard. Performance itself adds to the experience of a text, and this play is no exception. The text does not offer much in stage direction, leaving it up to the director's discretion in how he or she will present *Pastoral* on stage. One of the most prominent aspects reviewers remark on is *Pastoral's* set. Reviews abound with writers and bloggers marveling at the genius set design Steve Marmion created for the first performances of the play at the Soho Theatre. *The Independent's* Michael Coveny describes his favorite effect that added to the disintegrating stage as being "that of a row of flowers thudding into the stage on darts dispatched from above." Jemma Wilson from *A Younger Theatre* also remarks on the dart flowers, saying that a "frightening tone sets in" through the "memorable deterioration of the set, including a collapsing floor, growing tree, and daffodil darts falling from the sky: a clever touch by director Steve Marmion." Many reviewers remark on the stunning cast; however much more is said about the creative set. *The Metro's* Robert Shore declares that "the mutating set...steals the show." Staging always plays a large role in how a drama is presented, and when a text offers little in stage direction, it gifts directors with a generous amount of creative license.

Pastoral is also hailed a success with regard to its casting. Theatre critics are impressed by the play's characters' complexities and are captivated by the actors that play their quirky roles. Doug Coombes from *In Suffolk* says actress Anna Calder-Marshall shines as Moll, as she

"is on stage when *Pastoral* opens and never leaves. The stillness and stoicism of her character compared to the other characters' nervous movement underlines this as the quietly dominant performance of *Pastoral*, played to perfection, with many of the play's funniest lines (of which there is no shortage.)" Coombes' comment about Moll's stoicism among the other frantic character rings true, for I also noticed her lack of movement. While the other characters panic and become desperate, Moll is content in her seat off to the side. Some may say her stoicism is due to her old age; however, it may be her own personality and outlook on life that makes her so calm.

Several reviewers spend some time commenting on Moll and Arthur's unlikely friendship and partnership. Coombes notes that "the burgeoning sexual interest of Polly Frame's Arthur chimes well with the fertile nature that threatens to overwhelm Moll's flat and the scenes between Moll and Arthur are among *Pastoral*'s most effective. His hair is 'like autumn,' she says, when he says hers is 'like gold." Coombes' remark on this friendship brings to light how Moll and Arthur both serve as a foil for the destructive earth mother. *The Guardian*'s Michael Billington comments that "there is even something oddly touching about Eccleshare's idea, as Calder-Marshall's perky Moll and Polly Frame's boyish Arthur share their last cigarette, that the old and young may make common cause in whatever crisis awaits us." As previously discussed, the two are the ones least likely to survive the ecocrisis, yet remain standing at the play's conclusion. Wilson agrees with Billington's comment by stating that "the final image of Moll slow dancing and sharing a cigarette with Arthur, her young knight without shining armour, was strangely touching. Both were left abandoned by society, deemed too weak to escape." Arthur is a modern-day version of the past king, and lends a mythical air to *Pastoral*. *Exeunt Magazine*'s Catherine Love states that "wistful hints of mythology" are "encapsulated in the youthful hope of

Polly Frame's bolshy yet faithful Arthur, an eleven-year-old boy with an ancient king as his namesake." Arthur and Moll's relationship shines on the stage, and it is clear that the two represent a paradox that Mother Nature has carelessly overlooked in her destruction. Moll and Arthur may be deemed too weak and incapable by society, but they manage to prove the system wrong.

Another character that has garnered much interest in theatre critics is the Bride. This character seems to puzzle most readers; however, her presence does not stir up much confusion among theatre critics. Wilson writes, "A bride-to-be appears in the auditorium fully equipped with fairy wings, tutu and personalized T-shirt, but this sight, which previously was laughed at, now instills a sense of grief as she delivers her powerful wedding speech." Coveney describes her as a "distraught blonde girl...in a pink dress and smudged make-up" who "walks through the audience into the play for her fairy-tale wedding and smoochy dance. She's hailed as a porn star princess by the gallant Arthur, who consoles this remnant of the social system and extends the courtesy of friendship advocated by dear old Moll." The two critics touch on the idea that the Bride is a piece of society that remains standing among the broken social system that exists at the end of the play. The Bride can be seen as a version of Meridle Le Seur's eroded woman; the Bride, like Le Seur's female character, is an echo of devastation. Rather than being an example of humanity's devastation of the environment like the eroded woman, the Bride exemplifies nature's devastation. Her physical appearance indicates what nature has done to her life and to those she loves. The Bride is similar to Le Seur's eroded woman in that she is a parallel to the environment surrounding her with her tattered clothes, distraught disposition, and grief that parallel the ecocrisis. She is a standing wasteland that has been eroded by nature – not by man.

While her presence may seem unnerving to some, most others see the Bride as a beacon of light amidst the lush, dangerous post-apocalyptic world.

Pastoral has been termed a “black comedy” by several theater critics, and it is clear the dark humor of the characters and the play’s overarching theme blend well together in order to present to viewers and readers that comedy is oftentimes the only way characters, and possibly even humans in general, can deal with whatever obstacles they face. In Catherine Love’s review of the play, *Pastoral* is described as a “black comedy” that “offer[s] a madcap mix of mythology, nostalgia and post-apocalyptic narrative tropes.” Michael Billington’s review in *The Guardian* describes *Pastoral* as a “black, surreal comedy.” Joseph W. Meeker’s work on the comic mode shows that comedy is different than tragedy in its goal to show viewers and readers a certain perspective of life. Comedy, Meeker states, “is unconcerned with cultural systems of morality” and “avoids strong emotions” (158). Any strong emotion or passion is considered fake or out of place in comedy. The ways man is presented in a comedy demonstrate that “men behave irrationally, committing follies which reveal their essential ignorance and ridiculousness in relation to civilized systems of ethical and social behavior” (Meeker 158). This statement still rings true in dark comedy, but with an obvious dark twist. Characters commit follies such as murder and cannibalism and behave irrationally due to hunger and greed. The actions of the characters in *Pastoral* show their ignorance toward the seriousness of what is happening in the world around them. Meeker also describes comedy as “imitat[ing] the actions of men who are subnormal or inferior to the social norm,” meaning that comedy makes a statement about human nature (158). Meeker’s definition of comedy typifies it as a pessimistic genre. This pessimism is crystallized in *Pastoral* with the characters’ inability to supersede nature’s destruction. The comedic hero is one who achieves small victories despite the odds and manages to survive.

These small victories are not small to the hero, because he or she is someone living in a world that will only permit small accomplishments. Arthur is the comedic hero of *Pastoral* with his small acts of bravery despite his weaknesses. *Pastoral* is a comedy because it represents mankind as being capable of holding its own amidst a dangerous world and “concerned with muddling through, not with progress or perfection” (Meeker 160). As Arthur and Moll are the only two characters of the original group left standing, we see them as imperfect heroes. They may not be strong, one is young and immature and the other is old and dependent, but they manage to survive. Moll and Arthur represent two humans who have adapted to their environment and leave us with the hope they will continue to do so.

Considering a comic ecological view of life, Meeker presents the idea of a “return to nature” and what would be necessary in order for both humans and nature to peacefully coexist. His argument is that humankind would have to readjust its values and goals to keep equilibrium intact. Meeker suggests that

If a “return to nature” were to be based upon the model of a climax ecosystem, civilization would have to become far more complex than anything man has yet produced. Human values could no longer be based on the assumption that man is alone at the center of creation; allowance would have to be made for the welfare of all the plants, animals, and land of the natural environment. Mankind would have to cultivate a new and more elaborate mentality capable of understanding intricate processes without destroying them. Ecology challenges mankind to vigorous complexity, not passive simplicity. (168)

While Meeker's return to nature indicates a world in which the environment returns to its original abundance, it does not quite fit the return to nature *Pastoral* presents. However, Meeker's suggestion that mankind would need to shift its focus and values to accommodate the new way of life does play into *Pastoral*'s latent argument. Despite the fact that the characters fail to make transparent statements about humanity's complicity in nature's vengeance, readers and audiences understand the play's underlying cry for action. While the return to nature in *Pastoral* is not quite a return to "normal" nature, it does indicate that humans are not so powerful after all.

Conclusions

In examining theatre critics' receptions of *Pastoral*, we can find that Eccleshare and director Steve Marmion have been successful in posing difficult-to-answer questions and a situation, while farcical, could very well happen today. *Exeunt Magazine*'s Catherine Love comments that "Eccleshare also leaves us in the dark as to the cause of this environmental anomaly, a decision that opens the way for interpretation but leaves questions hanging frustratingly in the air." Such questions force audience members and readers of the play to wonder if the destruction is humanity's punishment for treating the environment poorly or if the new land should be considered a return to an Edenic idyll. It also asks us the biggest question of all: if we were in any of the characters' place, how low would we stoop in our humanity? These questions do, in fact, hang frustratingly in the air, and it is up to us to decide for ourselves how we want *Pastoral* to end.

Readers may gain some form of ambiguous closure when they reach the last page; however, Eccleshare leaves us even more in the dark by including an appendix that offers an alternate scene that can be placed into act III scene V. While not extremely different from the original scene, it does drive home the question of what happens to the weak ones in light of this

apocalypse. In the alternate scene, a young boy and girl break from the running mob of children to ask Arthur why he isn't running with them, and to comment that the mob is going to attack the wall. They suggest that Arthur go with them, and he takes a step forward as if he will join the ranks, but then he stops himself. He says he has to stay "in case anything happens." The boy and girl do not question Arthur. Instead, they leave and join the crowd of whooping children and once they are gone, Moll thanks Arthur. This scene portrays children as the wild, feral, and weak demanding to be heard. Just as nature fights back by producing an overly lush landscape, the children also retaliate. Because they are deemed too weak by their elders, the children attempt to be mature by fighting back since they are now independent, either due to orphaning or abandonment. The crowd of children decides to take charge of the situation and act like adults in the best way they know how. The leader of the pack, according to the boy, found a gun and therefore became the one in charge. When this kind of power is put into someone's hands, they carry the weight of it and will unleash it. These children demand to be heard and are fighting against what has been deemed inevitable by the higher-ups in society: they are going to die. This alternate scene presents a situation in which children have taken authority in the face of disaster, which is alarming. However, it is true to human nature because when the weak band together, they form a power greater than themselves. While readers and audiences hope the children were successful, Eccleshare keeps us in the dark on what ultimately comes out of the alternate scene.

Pastoral's characters' relationship with nature is not one of complacency, but rather one of fear and annoyance. No matter how hard they fight back, they fail and nature continues invading the world around them. Instead of being the pastoral world Hess speaks of, England has become a place in which nature reclaims itself and retaliates against the postmodern cemented, plasticized, and cosmopolitan world. *Pastoral* is a unique play that sets itself apart from

contemporary fiction concerned with the relationship between humans and the environment.

While I have attempted to explore the play using various lenses, I hope that more work will be done to identify ways in which gender and identity play a role in the characters' relationship to *Pastoral's* destructive environment. While more work can be completed on *Pastoral*, other contemporary works should also be examined, since many current works of literature present the consequences of mankind's treatment of the environment as well as enforce the idea that maybe, just maybe, there is hope for us yet.

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