

The “whore of Babylon will come forth in the last days wearing pants”: An
Ecofeminist Approach to Gender Roles within Ron Rash’s *Serena*

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For presentation at 2015 Appalachian Studies Association Conference

Ecofeminists reject the Western concept that the “masculine sphere is one where human freedom and control are exercised over affairs and over nature, especially via science and in active struggle against nature and over circumstances,” and that it is “allegedly nature, not contingent and changeable social arrangements, which determines the lot of women and which justifies inequality” (Plumwood, “Feminism” 8). These traditionally accepted gender associations are complicated within *Saints*, and a careful examination of these characters demonstrates how Rash complicates not only accepted gender roles, but also the complexity inherent in creating realistic characters.

Much of the novel is devoted to Rachel’s experiences raising Jacob alone and away from the logging camp and the Pembertons’ influence. Rachel is self-sufficient, quickly learning to provide for herself and complete the maintenance duties once performed by her father. Rachel serves as a foil to Serena throughout the novel and eventually proves resilient against her. These women, whose lives mirror one another’s in many aspects, represent an essentialized colonizer / colonized binary. Importantly, Rash gives Rachel the power to escape Serena, whose jealousy that Rachel can bear Pemberton’s son while she cannot overpowers her. Joyce Brown notes that “Rachel’s escape with her child is the single sign of hope that the powerless might at times, with help from others who make strong moral choices, be

able to win against the power mongers” (“Ron Rash’s *Serena*” 86). As Jacob’s sole protector, Rachel evades Serena’s wrath when Serena decides to kill both child and mother and eventually raises Jacob in Seattle, Washington—far beyond the boundaries of Appalachia.

Rash’s fictional depictions of nature in *Serena* do, indeed, reflect a history deeply embedded in the land of western North Carolina. He uses the land to both reflect and foreshadow events that significantly influence the plot. For example, Serena’s arrival at the camp is aligned with a description of the acres of stumps that “from a distance, resembled grave markers in a recently vacated battlefield” (23) and, portending later violence, Pemberton “heard the axes as the lead choppers began notching trees, a sound like rifle shots ricocheting across the valley” (26). Later Rash notes that, within the valley of the camp, no “tree unsmoothed the landscape” (75), and, when Serena rejoins her crew after convalescing from her miscarriage, the “valley’s forests appeared not so much cut down as leveled by some vast glacier” (221). When Pemberton decides to help Rachel by giving her money to aid her escape, he stops at the spot where he had originally and proudly shown Serena their vast holdings; rather than compare it to a battlefield, on this occasion Pemberton “stepped to the precipice and looked down at the vast dark gash they’d made on the land. Pemberton stared at the razed landscape a long time” (261). From Serena’s arrival at camp to Pemberton’s contemplation of the wounded land, each of these descriptions either foreshadows or parallels the death and destruction wrought by the timber industry.

However, nature is not merely presented as a victim here; Rash personifies nature and imbues it with agency to act and react when he writes that the “woods were hushed and attentive, the trees seeming to gather themselves closer together, as if awaiting not just the rain but some story about to be told” (81). The cutting crews themselves personify Peter Barry’s tenet of ecocriticism, realizing that “nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it” (243). The loggers are keenly aware of the death of their habitat, and they give the environment the power to react to their actions. Many workers implicate the Pembertons’ logging empire for more than merely decimating the landscape; they attribute a viciously cold winter to the effects of their clear cutting. Indeed, the workers are accurate in noting the connection between their work and the weather: According to Joshua Lee, “One way nature unintentionally seems to retaliate against its destruction is through the weather” (47). The cold suffered during Serena’s first winter at camp was argued to be worse than in Alaska (*Serena* 101), and several “workers argued that the denuded forests had allowed winter to settle deeper into the valley, so deep it had gotten trapped in the same way as an animal caught in a rabbit gum or dead-fall trap” (102). The winter cold proved lethal to many cutters who died

when they slipped trying to avoid falling trees or limbs. Another tumbled off a cliff edge and one impaled himself on his own axe and still another was beheaded by a snapped cable. A cutting crew lost its

way during a snowstorm in January and was found days later, their palms peeling off when searchers pried the axe handles from their frozen hands. (101)

Whether the cold itself can be directly related back to the Pembertons' clear-cutting, as the cutting crew believed, is debatable; Rash may be suggesting that environmental violence leads to human violence. This section demonstrates that though the Pembertons may alter the landscape significantly and permanently in some areas, nature itself cannot be controlled in its entirety. Lee reminds us that "Nature, however, is not completely incapable of defending itself against the forces that seek its destruction as already shown with the extended season of winter" (55). However, the future of both human and nonhuman nature is unclear, a point made evident when Ross considers his surroundings and somberly asks " 'So what happens when there ain't nothing left alive at all?'" (159). The implication is that issue will be left to the mountaineers to resolve; the timber industry will have moved on.

Not surprisingly, Serena is frequently described as an intruder to her surroundings; this fact is highlighted by her provenance of Boston and, prior to that, Colorado—indeed, two locations culturally foreign to the Appalachian loggers. Her status as an outsider has two easily discernable functions. First, practically speaking, creating Serena as an outsider traveling to Appalachia might connect more easily with other mainstream readers—who themselves reside outside Appalachia. Such a tactic is one of the oldest in the history of the novel in various countries: Many nineteenth-century Irish novels, for example, similarly featured English protagonists who come

to Ireland—and were aimed at a readership much larger in much more populous England than in Ireland. If this was a deliberate tactic of Rash’s, it was successful: The novel was reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* and has received ample media attention beyond the attention normally garnered by Appalachian “regional” literature. To wit, the forthcoming film *Serena*, starring the *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Hustle* dynamic duo of Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper, will surely increase the novel’s popularity. The adaptation of this novel to the screen indicates a growing national concern over irresponsible use of natural resources mirrored in art; recent counterparts to *Serena* include alarming documentary films such as *The Last Mountain* and *Gasland*.

Rash also goes to great lengths to establish Serena as not just an outsider, but also someone who is inherently juxtaposed against the southern Appalachian environment. What is interesting is the variety of terms that Rash employs to create this contrast. She is cold and unwielding, described as having unblinking eyes, “irises the color of burnished pewter. Hard and dense like pewter too, the gold flecks not so much within the gray as floating motelike on the surface” (20); matching her eyes is Doctor Cheney’s observation of a “certain coldness in the tone,” (37). However, Serena is clearly meant to be seen as more unnatural than merely a woman without emotions. Readers are led to question her mortality when she describes to Doctor Cheney the death of her family in a flu epidemic. Expressing his surprise at her survival when three siblings and both parents died, Cheney queries, “What then did my fellow healer ascribe your survival to?” Serena replies: “He said I simply refused to die” (33). Serena later affirms her lack of warmth in literal terms:

“I like to feel the cold,’ Serena said. ‘I always have, even as a child. My father used to walk me through the camp on days the loggers claimed it was too cold to work. I shamed them out of their shacks and into the woods’” (75).

As if to highlight her alien presence in Appalachia, Serena orders a Berkute eagle that she tames and hunts with. Lee emphasizes the creature’s origin “from a different habitat, thus causing a disruption in the natural order of nature” (47)—a description that could also be applied to Serena. To tame the eagle enough to return to her calls Serena did not leave the stall of the stable in which it is housed: Indeed, she lives in the eagle’s conditions until the bird shows Serena its neck, making itself vulnerable. Interestingly, after spending two days and nights without leaving the stall, the eagle trusts Serena with its life; similarly, Serena figuratively shows Pemberton her neck when she emerges, confiding in him her past. In doing so, Serena’s narrative underscores her presence as something outside human nature, almost supernatural. In conversation with Pemberton she describes walking barefoot on over the embers of her smoldering home in Colorado and then notes her footprints: ““They were black at first and then gray and then white, growing lighter, less visible with each step. It looked like something had moved through the snow before slowly rising. For a few seconds, I felt that I wasn’t on the horse’” (89). With this confession Serena purges her past and fulfills an earlier wish made to Pemberton: ““This is what we want,’ she said, her voice deepening, the emotion so often controlled fully unbridled now. ‘To be like this. No past or future, pure enough to live totally in the present’” (87).

Whether Rash is aligning Serena with the eagle itself or a more metaphorical power is unclear; however, the workers are acutely aware that, like Serena, the eagle “ain’t from this country” (106) and they respect both bird of prey and its handler: “I’d no more strut up and tangle with that eagle than I’d tangle with the one what can tame such a critter,” (107). In creating a character that clearly does not belong to the environment and culture of the southern mountains, Rash removes her emotional attachment to place, which contributes to her status as a threat.

Rash conclusively situates Serena outside the societal expectations for women when she becomes pregnant but miscarries the child. Proving the Colorado physician’s words true once again, Serena apparently refuses to die in a situation that other women would likely not survive. However, she accepts that she will not fulfill her desire to procreate with Pemberton, acknowledging to him after the miscarriage, “It’s like my body knew all along” (210).

While she cannot procreate, Serena is a constant force—one that will outlive her husband, many of her workers, and much of the nature that surrounds her in western North Carolina. Serena reinforces this image of herself at Pemberton’s last birthday party. She wears a familiar, shimmering green dress in this scene, and the sole clear thought that pervades Pemberton’s drunken consciousness consists of a single word: Evergreen. Interestingly, the trees that Pemberton Lumber Company cuts are primarily deciduous, suggesting that Serena will survive even her own destruction and persist elsewhere, strengthening Pemberton’s drunken claim to the

gathering of dinner guests that he and Serena will “cut down every tree, not just in Brazil but in the world” (346).

It is fitting that Pemberton sees himself as a conqueror of the wilderness. Mei Mei Evans reminds us that “heterosexual white manhood is construed as the most ‘natural’ social identity in the United States; the ‘true American,’ *the* identity most deserving of social privilege” (author’s emphasis, 183). It is the elite white male who advances our national narrative of an “errand into the wilderness.” As a female, Serena confronts the constructed gender assumptions and quickly deconstructs them, adopting masculine qualities throughout the novel. She constantly challenges others’ social constructs of femininity, from McIntyre’s proclamation that the “whore of Babylon will come forth in the last days wearing pants” (31) as Serena does, to beleaguering Doctor Cheney’s attempt to commend her intelligence:

“I toast you as well, Mrs. Pemberton,” Doctor Cheney said.

“The nature of the fairer sex is to lack the male’s analytical skills, but, at least in this instance, you have somehow compensated for that weakness.”

Serena’s features tightened, but the irritation vanished as quickly as it had appeared, swept clear from her face like a lock of unruly hair.

“My husband tells me that you are from these very mountains, a place called Wild Hog Gap,” Serena said to Cheney. “Obviously, your views on my sex were formed by the slatterns you grew up with, but I

assure you the natures of women are more various than your limited experience allows.” (34)

Interestingly, this deconstruction is effective and the crews soon become comfortable about working without their shirts on while she is present. Serena’s possession of “masculine” personal attributes, coupled with her inability to bear children, render impossible any fulfillment of her role as matriarch. Instead, she adopts the position of patriarch, a position threatened only by Pemberton’s sole progenitor, Jacob Harmon. Later in the novel, Pemberton effectively signs his own death warrant by assisting Rachel and Jacob’s escape, thus guaranteeing that his own patrimony would continue away from Serena’s clutches.

As the Pembertons’ empire thrives, Jacob becomes the only variable that could threaten Serena’s dominance. Though his patrimony is indisputable, his heritage is firmly Appalachian. Jacob is born of the mountains and tied to them: As Widow Jenkins states to Rachel, “If you’re born here they’re a part of you. No other place will ever feel right” (197). The southern mountains are bred into Jacob’s very eyes: Rachel notices soon after his birth that “the eyes that had been blue at birth [are] now brown as chestnuts” (39). Her choice of tree is significant and poignant: The American chestnut, like pre-1880 Appalachian culture, was unique and strong, but would soon fall prey to blight and become extinct. Williams heralds this extinction as “perhaps the most notorious ecological disaster to occur in the United States, [that] destroyed one of the mainstays of the Appalachian forest, a tree whose role in human, animal, and plant ecology was irreplaceable” (298). Seen figuratively, then, Rachel views Jacob as a precious mainstay of the Appalachia

culture and ecosystem that she strives to protect from his own non-native threat: Serena. In contrast, Pemberton, Jacob's father, sees in his son's eyes his own empire, noting the "eyes dark as mahogany" (171)—for Pemberton, Jacob's eyes are the color of future profit. Though Pemberton would not live to harvest mahogany himself, this eye color also foreshadows the demise of the Pemberton empire during its investment in mahogany, in later centuries and on another continent.

Whether chestnut or mahogany, Jacob evidences to the reader the regenerative process that even the mountains of western North Carolina experience. However, this regrowth is problematic, as DeLoughrey and Handy observe: "Engaging nonhuman agency creates an additional challenge because nature's own processes of regeneration and change often contribute to the burial of postcolonial histories." And thus we come full circle back to the role of fiction. Rash's task within *Serena* is to mark history, to uncover some of the regeneration that masks past colonization, and to demonstrate that the ultimate outcome of the Pembertons' empire was Serena's own death at the hands of Jacob, her husband's son.

In addition to the significant displacement that is a sub-plot, *Serena* presents readers with a number of dichotomies that complicate the at-times oversimplified colonizer= bad, colonized= good relationship. Harmon, Rachel's father, aligns with Pemberton; Galloway is paired with Sheriff McDowell; Rachel matches Serena. On a grander scale, the Pembertons can be contrasted with the various crews of sawyers; however, the intrusion of the national park scheme complicates this clear industry-versus-culture clash. Rash incorporates yet another juxtaposition through his use of nomenclature throughout the novel: Male characters are commonly (and most

frequently) referred to solely by their surnames. This is true to the extent that the first name of many major male characters is not provided anywhere in the novel. In contrast, Rash refers to Rachel and Serena consistently by their first names; indeed, *other* characters refer to Serena as “Mrs. Pemberton.” While this pattern can easily be dismissed since both Serena and Rachel are orphaned either before or during the course of events depicted by the novel, it offers another, more important, significance. This nomenclature suggests that while male characters are important to the environmental events of novel, the true conflict occurs between Serena and Rachel, and all that they culturally represent.

The opening gruesome scene of the novel quickly establishes these dichotomies, and Pemberton’s murder of Rachel’s father at the train station is easily metaphorical. In dashing Harmon’s expectations and denying Rachel’s in utero infant patrimony, Pemberton disgraces the Harmon name and repudiates mountain culture. However, Pemberton is not content to merely deny Rachel’s child his name: His disemboweling of Harmon, a coldly yet casual act, announces Pemberton’s intent to establish himself as a dominant force in the region.

This act resonates with Rachel as she resolves not to “love anything that can be taken away” (*Serena* 51), surely the consequence of her mother’s abandonment and father’s murder. Her father, who she acknowledges as “a hard man to live with, awkward in his affection, never saying much” (49), taught her “about crops and plants and animals, how to mend a fence and chink a chain” (50). After his death, she maintains their cabin, provides food and shelter for herself and Jacob, and passes skills on to Jacob when he was merely a toddler, telling him ““There may

come a time you need to know how to do this So watch me” (193). Her connection to place is not merely a lesson learned from her deceased father and absent mother, but a connection to a longer heritage; Jimmy Dean Smith states that Rachel “shows her respect for spirit country and for the father who taught her to hear its voice” (115). When she leaves, fleeing Serena and Galloway, she “took the child’s hand and pressed it to the dirt. Her father had told Rachel that the Harmons had been on this land since before the Revolutionary War,” then admonishes Jacob to “don’t ever forget what it feels like” (272). This simple act situates Rachel among the many people displaced by outside interest in the mountains.

However, Rachel’s education in the natural world is a sharp juxtaposition against her limited academic education, though both aid her survival. Once it became clear that Rachel could give birth and Serena could not, Jacob serves as a visual reminder that Rachel’s mountain blood has joined with Pemberton’s—a fact that drives Serena’s murderous envy. Rachel and Jacob threaten Serena’s ability to dominate and become progenitor of a bloodline that would continue to dominate the people and the landscape; Rash confirms this, telling Stephen Fox in an interview that “*Serena* is very much a story about who has the birthright.”

When Rachel left the mountains, she was forced to abandon her own native literacy—that of the mountains—and rely upon her formal education. Nixon addresses the effects of this experience: “When refugees are severed from environments that have provided ancestral sustenance they find themselves stranded not just in place but in time as well” (162). Though she is removed from her home place, readers have reason to hope that Rachel will not remain stranded in

time but has rather found grounding with another displaced Appalachian: Joel Vaughn, Rachel's constant champion and friend, who fled Galloway's wrath immediately after he warned Sheriff McDowell that Galloway and Serena were planning to murder Rachel. Though Rash does not explicitly draw Rachel and Joel together, he provides enough circumstantial evidence for readers to surmise that they reconnected in Seattle.

The novel's coda reveals much about Rash's intentions for the novel. Completely italicized—as is Fred Chappell's opening chapter of *I Am One of You Forever*, "The Overspill," to create a heightened tone, as addressed here in Chapter 2—this final chapter reads as if viewed from a distance. An adult Jacob reads a magazine article that chronicles and celebrates Serena's continued success as a South American lumber magnate. The scene mirrors the grisly opening scene neatly: When Serena is murdered by Jacob, who her guard describes as eerily similar in stature and appearance to Pemberton's photo taken with Serena, the coda suggests that Serena did indeed refuse to die and proceeded to struggle against her assailant before "*taking slow but unwavering steps across the verandah*," while attempting to free the "*huge pearl-handled knife planted hilt-deep in her stomach*" (370-71). Astute readers will recognize the knife as the bloody gift from Serena to Rachel in the first chapter.

Readers are led to assume that though Rachel never returned to her home in Appalachia, Jacob achieves a small measure of retribution with Serena's death. Rash continues his portrayal of Serena as unnatural in the coda: The guard claims that he saw "*a garland of white fire flamed around her head*" as she died, and later testified

that "*Serena had been still standing but the guard swore that she was already dead*" (371). Within this chapter Serena's character fully assumes the role of allegory implied throughout and, as such, becomes a warning to readers. Left unchecked, unscrupulous forces of greed, Rash seems to be telling us, won't extinguish themselves, but will rather spread, leaving a swath of destruction in their wake. Rash himself confirms Serena's motives, stating that "Serena has no accountability; she is outside the pale of humanity" (Fox). It is the responsibility of those affected, such as Rachel and Jacob, to halt the drive of such individuals and reclaim a measure of their past autonomy.

This selection of writers implies that Luke is guilty of what Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughry refer to as the "worst charge [to be made] against ecocritical models": That its "proponents are blind to its naturalization of a western white male subject in his claims to a new environmental and epistemological territory" (73).

Plumwood asserts that a calculating, scientific approach to knowledge (reminiscent of Luke's insistence on black-and-white photography) involves "not only the highly valued masculine traits of objectivity, abstractness, rationality and suppression of emotionality, but also strongly exhibit the masculine virtues of transcendence of, control of and struggle with nature" ("Feminism" 11)—