

Internal Colonialism and the Wasteland Theme in Ron Rash's *Serena*

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Ron Rash's *Serena* (2008) is about the clash between northern industrialists who cut timber in southern Appalachia and conservationists who want the area converted into a national park. Set during the Depression, it also addresses our own times of unchecked greed and environmental holocaust. This article relates the situation of internal colonialism, which turns the region into a sacrifice zone, with the theme of the wasteland. The latter is related in the novel not only to T. S. Eliot's poem but also to other works that Rash acknowledges as influences, including *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby* and Christopher Marlowe's tragedies about the will to power. Characterized by what Erich Fromm calls the *exploitative orientation*, Serena Pemberton wields hard power and embodies the rapaciousness of economy, in contrast to a local female character, who stands for ecology and soft power.

Keywords: Ron Rash; *Serena*; wasteland; resource curse; internal colonialism

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Colonialismo interno y la tierra baldía en *Serena*, de Ron Rash

Serena (2008), de Ron Rash, narra el conflicto entre los empresarios del norte que cortan madera en el sur de los Apalaches y los conservacionistas que promueven la creación de un parque nacional en la zona. Este artículo relaciona la situación de colonialismo interno, que convierte a la región en una zona de sacrificio, con el tema de la tierra baldía. Este último conecta la novela no solo con el poema de T. S. Eliot, sino también con otras obras que Rash reconoce como influencias: *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby* y las tragedias de Christopher Marlowe sobre la voluntad de poder. Caracterizada por lo que Erich Fromm llama la *orientación explotadora*, Serena Pemberton encarna la rapacidad de la economía y ejerce el poder duro, en contraste con un personaje femenino local que representa la ecología y el poder blando.

Palabras clave: Ron Rash; *Serena*; tierra baldía; maldición de los recursos; colonialismo interno

1. INTRODUCTION

In his review in the *Guardian*, Jay Parini hailed *Serena* ([2008] 2010), the fourth novel by the Appalachian writer Ron Rash, as “a spectacular book” and “by far his most accomplished work to date” (2009). For Joyce Compton Brown too, *Serena* is “the best thus far from this author/poet” and “its richness of epic grandeur made finer by the poet’s exacting use of language detail results in a compelling read” (2009, 61). The author himself has, indeed, acknowledged that “*Serena* for me is the best novel I will ever write” ([2012] 2017c, 152). Set in western North Carolina during the years of the Great Depression, roughly from 1929 to 1932, *Serena* tells the story of northern industrialists, led by Serena Pemberton and her husband George, who cut timber in the mountains of Haywood and Jackson counties and fight against the conservationists that are promoting the setting up of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

This article addresses the situation of internal colonialism that makes the southern Appalachian region a victim of the so-called resource curse and relates it to the theme of the wasteland. The latter connects Rash’s novel not only to T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* ([1922] 1998) but to other literary works that the author recognizes as influences and evokes more or less explicitly: Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* ([1851] 1972), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* ([1925] 2000) and Christopher Marlowe’s tragedies of ambition. *Moby-Dick*, significantly rescued from oblivion by the modernists, has more recently come to be seen as a warning against totalitarianism and a prediction of ecological catastrophe, both of these being central concerns in *Serena*. The *libido dominandi* that drives Serena is similar to the tragic overreaching that undoes Melville’s Ahab, both of these issues being anticipated in Marlowe’s power plays *Tamburlaine* ([1590] 1976a), *The Massacre at Paris* ([1593] 1976b) and *Doctor Faustus* ([1604] 1965). In interviews, Rash frequently reveals a broad conception of intertextuality in acknowledging the various echoes of other texts that he draws into his own writing. Michael Worton and Judith Still claim that “all writers are first readers [...] all writers are subject to influence, or [...]—to generalize the point—all texts are necessarily criss-crossed by other texts” (1990, 30). In other words, as Roland Barthes famously argued, intertextuality is a condition of all texts in the sense that no text is a closed, self-sufficient system, but rather it is woven from the threads of other texts, whether or not authors are conscious of this. As he put it in *Writing Degree Zero*, “a stubborn after-image, which comes from all the previous modes of writing and even from the past of my own, drowns the sound of my present words” (1984, 23).

2. APPALACHIA AS A SACRIFICE ZONE

One of the most enduring definitions of imperialism is that of Edward Said, who describes it as “an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical

identity must therefore be searched for and somehow restored" (1993, 225). The situation that Rash presents in *Serena* is precisely characterized by the total control of southern Appalachia by the colonizing forces of the northern timber industry. For Brown, "in many ways, *Serena* is a study in post-colonialism. Takers come in, wreak havoc to a people and a way of life, and leave" (2009, 64). In his book *Our Southern Highlanders*, Horace Kephart, the conservationist who appears as a character in Rash's novel, quotes a northern lumberman who admitted to him that "all we want here is to get the most we can out of this country, as quick as we can, and then get out" ([1914] 2016, 260).

Local writers and social scientists have long called attention to the ruthless colonization of Appalachia. Wendell Berry, another writer from southern Appalachia, acknowledged as an inspiration by Rash ([2006] 2017b, 79), considers the modern industrial economy to be "as totalitarian in its use of people as it is in its use of nature" (1990, 761). In his essay "Compromise, Hell!" Berry exhorts his fellow rural Americans: "We need to quit thinking of rural America as a colony. Too much of the economic history of our land has been that of the export of fuel, food, and raw materials that have been destructively and too cheaply produced" (2005, 367-68). Among social scientists there has been a long-standing debate about the most appropriate terminology and the best model to explain Appalachia's chronic poverty and underdevelopment. Helen Mathews Lewis rejects the so-called "culture of poverty" model as applied to Appalachia by, among others, Jack Weller in his book *Yesterday's People* (1965). Such a model sees deficiencies in the subculture of lower-class socioeconomic groups as being the root of the problem and blames attitudes and values such as conservatism, psychological dependency, fatalism and conceptions of honor that supposedly characterize poor Appalachians. Opponents of this model counter that these elements are in fact reactions to poverty and powerlessness, rather than their causes. Lewis argues that the best perspective from which to understand the region is "the model [that] has been variously called the Colonialism Model, Internal Colonialism, Exploitation or External Oppression Model" (1978, 1). This approach "examines the process through which dominant outside industrial interests establish control, exploit the region, and maintain their domination and subjugation of the region" (2). Thus, she argues that "the colonial process can be used to explain many areas and situations throughout America where technological, industrial society has controlled the resources and people" (3).

For some, internal colonialism is a useful analogy, but not the most appropriate one. When applied to the US, the term presupposes similarities between the situation of its ethnic minorities and that of colonial people throughout the world. Charles Pinderhughes defines internal colonialism as "a *geographically-based* pattern of subordination of a differentiated population, located within the dominant power or country" and he notes that the situation of African Americans in the US is characterized by "a set of conditions that have strong parallels in external colonies and former colonies that continue to suffer neo-colonial domination" (2011, 236; italics in the original). But the oppressed population of Appalachia is composed of poor whites, not

members of an ethnic minority. This leads David Walls to argue that Lewis's internal colonialism model—which sees the region as an example of an internal colony because of the outside, but national, industrial interests that exploit its resources, prevent autonomous development and destroy the local culture—does not in fact provide the best characterization of the region and that the analogy with racial minorities has limitations. He prefers to consider Appalachia in the context of advanced industrial capitalist development and proposes the periphery theory model, arguing that “it seems reasonable to me to apply the term peripheral to such regions within advanced capitalist countries as Appalachia which share many of the characteristics of underdevelopment, poverty, and dependency found in the peripheral countries of the Third World” (Walls 1978, 338).

In the 1980s, Allen Batteau argued for a synthesis of the orientation that finds the structural causes of underdevelopment to be the most basic—which encompasses both Lewis and Walls, despite the differences between them—and the approach associated with the “culture of poverty” theories that emphasize personal causes—as propounded by Weller. As he says, “to posit these as mutually exclusive alternatives is illusory” (1983a, 142), in that the economic problems of Appalachia have both personal and structural manifestations. In his opinion, the problem is “to understand how social structures elicit individual attitudes and behaviors, and how individual actions maintain the larger structures even when the latter are experienced as oppressive” (142).

Serena is about the exploitation of southern Appalachia that continues to this day. Rash has repeatedly denounced the persistent theft of resources and the contamination of air and water in his region. In an interview with Frédérique Spill, he says: “The part of the upper South I focus upon has certainly had its share of hardship, of a failure to achieve the prosperity of the rest of America, though that failure is in large part due to the fact that more has been taken from the region, from coal and timber to soldiers for our wars, than given back” ([2014] 2017d, 186). In *Serena*, these concerns are expressed by the editor of the local newspaper, who asks the Pembertons, “but think how much you already have profited here [...]. Can't you give something back to the people of this region?” ([2008] 2010, 137).

One of the characteristics of colonial processes is precisely resource theft in the places being dominated. Rich in resources such as coal and timber, Appalachia has been a notable victim of the *resource curse*, a term that has gained currency in recent years, and which Syed Mansoob Murshed describes as “the stylized fact that developing countries richly endowed with, or heavily dependent on, natural-resource-based economic activities on the whole consistently underperform compared to resource-‘poor’ developing countries” (2018, 1). Regions or countries affected by the paradox of plenty are flooded with large sums of toxic cash that displace more productive economic activity and often lead to weak governments that do not invest in education or infrastructure. Despite its rich natural resources, southern Appalachia is one of the poorest regions in the US, its local citizens suffering the poisoned air and toxic water

that have resulted from the activities of the coal and lumber conglomerates.

During the timber boom in southern Appalachia nearly all the timberland was owned by outside interests. The economy of the region was almost wholly dependent on timber and the growth of this industry without local development left the mountain communities impoverished while it irrevocably damaged the region's agriculture. Between 1900 and 1930, the amount of farming land declined by almost twenty-five percent, which permanently altered the local culture. Ronald D. Eller notes that by 1910, "in that portion of western North Carolina which later became the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, over 75 percent of the land came under the control of thirteen corporations, and one timber company alone owned over a third of the total acreage" (1982, xxi). Eller does not use the term *resource curse*, but what he describes is no different from the situation of Third World countries whose resources are pillaged by colonialism: "The rapid rise in demand for mineral and timber resources from the 1890s to the early 1920s resulted in substantial economic growth in the region, but very little long-range local development occurred" (229). He adds that "this condition of growth without development placed the mountains in a highly vulnerable relationship to the larger market system," creating a situation of economic "underdevelopment" that is "similar to the exploitation experienced by many Third World countries that provide raw materials to larger, more advanced industrial nations" (229).

3. *SERENA* AND THE LITERARY TRADITION: THE WASTELAND THEME

Rash has shown an obsessive desire to be considered not just a southern writer but a US writer whose fictions are based on the local but also have a universal appeal. In an interview with Brown, he distinguishes regionalism from local color, describing the former as "writing that transcends the local. It's writing that is strongly grounded in a particular place, but it also transcends that place" (Rash [2003] 2017a, 30). He often refers to a well-known maxim by Eudora Welty, which he paraphrases as "one place understood helps us understand all other places better" ([2003] 2017a, 35).¹ In *Serena*, his intention to connect the novel to Greek and Elizabethan tragedy, as well as to the US literary tradition, is most evident. He takes the novel's epigraph directly from Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*—"A hand, that with a grasp may grip the worlde" (Rash [2008] 2010, n.p.)—and in the very opening chapter he has Serena quote directly from Euripides's *Medea* ([ca. 431 BCE] 1929), whose heroine has perverted family affections and kills her own children to achieve her aims: "*Myself will grip the sword—yea, though I die*" (Rash [2008] 2010, 18; italics in the original).² The many connections and parallels between *Serena* and *Lady Macbeth* have already been described and explored by Barbara Bennett and Christopher Morrow. Bennett argues that "both women subvert female gender expectations and, by doing

¹ What Welty says in "Place in Fiction" is: "It seems plain that the art that speaks most clearly, explicitly, directly and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood" ([1956] 1987a, 132).

² Rash's quotation from *Medea* matches A. S. Way's translation (Euripides [ca. 431 BCE] 1929, 163).

so, disrupt a balance of order in nature, in the community, and in the universe” (2018, 137); she further remarks that, if scholars like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir are right in their conception of gender as a cultural construct, “Lady Macbeth and Serena are simply refusing to play the role assigned to them by society, instead choosing their actions consciously to move beyond expectations of female behavior” (137). On his part, Morrow comments on the connection to *Macbeth* ([ca. 1606] 1997) that both publishers and reviewers identified and promoted when *Serena* was published in 2008: “This connection, while consistently identified, is ambiguously defined. What is clear, however, is that Shakespeare is used as a component of the marketing strategy to guide reviews of the novel as well [as] to attract consumers to purchase the book” (2013, 138).

In Michael J. Beilfuss’s opinion, “*Serena* is perhaps unique in its particular blending of a modern understanding of environmental concepts with a canonical literary tradition” (2015, 394). Although Rash writes in a traditional form, I believe that thematically *Serena* displays a modernist sensibility due especially to the prominence of the wasteland theme, which has long been an appropriate means of describing the situation of Appalachia, both in fiction and nonfiction. Eller notes that “in the 1920s, most of the lumber companies abandoned the mountains, leaving behind a land and a people deeply scarred by their operations” (1982, 127). In his novel *The Hills Beyond*, Thomas Wolfe laments the destruction of his beloved homeland of Appalachia: “It was evident that a huge compulsive greed had been at work: the whole region had been sucked and gutted, milked dry, denuded of its rich primeval treasures: something blind and ruthless had been here, grasped, and gone. [...] Something had come into the wilderness, and had left the barren land” ([1941] 2000, 236-37).

Recently critics have discussed the relevance of modernist aesthetics for our world in its condition of global warming. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the fountainhead of literary modernism, is set in a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization and its droughts, fires and floods are read today as predictors of the environmental degradation of our own times. In *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison writes: “The wasteland grows within and without and with no essential distinction between them, so much so that we might now say that a poem like Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is in some ways a harbinger of the greenhouse effect. Or better, we can say that the greenhouse effect, or desertification of habitat in general, is the true ‘objective correlative’ of the poem” (1992, 149). In *The New Poetics of Climate Change*, Matthew Griffiths contends that Harrison’s observation “offers the opportunity to move away from consideration of Eliot’s geological and meteorological imagery solely in terms of cultural or emotional sterility” (2017, 46). Griffiths further argues that “the environmental neglect of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries manifests the aridity of the poetic wasteland in the world around us,” and that “what Eliot identified as a cultural malaise is now an environmental one as well, a pathetic fallacy made true; we are in the endgame of the ‘Game of Chess’” (58). Gabrielle McIntire wonders “if we might consider *The Waste Land* as, at least in part, an eco-poem that is already sounding the warning about

environmental disaster that we are facing in the (post)modernity of today,” asserting that “it is very possible that in terms of its ecopoetics *The Waste Land* functions both as a memorial for what had already been lost or destroyed, and as a harbinger for the ecological crises we are experiencing today” (2015a). In the very opening scene of Rash’s novel, Serena Pemberton is presented as an annihilating force that brings only death and devastation. She is the one who incites her husband to kill Harmon, a local mountaineer who appears at the train station to take revenge on George Pemberton for seducing and impregnating his daughter Rachel. The Pembertons’ appearance is thus marked by an attack on the local culture, something that likens them to colonizers, who simply take and destroy. As the Pembertons leave the platform, the narrator describes the wasteland that they leave in their wake wherever they go: “Cinders crunched under their feet, made gray wisps like snuffed matches” (11).

“The wasteland” is a phrase used repeatedly in Rash’s novel to describe the devastation caused by Serena’s ruthless ambition. The cutting crews are like an advancing army that decimates everything in its way: “As the crews moved forward, they left behind an ever-widening wasteland of stumps and slash, brown-clogged creeks awash with dead trout” (115). At the end of chapter thirty-five, the most explicitly ecocritical section, the chorus of local workers, aptly described by John Lang as “one of the novel’s centers of moral conscience” (2014, 91), comment on the devastation caused by massive deforestation:

McIntyre raised his eyes and contemplated the wasteland strewn out before him where not a single living thing rose. The other men also looked out on what was in part their handiwork and grew silent. When McIntyre spoke his voice had no stridency, only a solemnity so profound and humble all grew attentive. “I think this is what the end of the world will be like,” McIntyre said, and none among them raised his voice to disagree. (336)

The quasi-religious solemnity and the depth of the ritualistic silence indicate that we are facing not only ecological apocalypse but something even more difficult to grasp, probably something buried deep in our consciousness, similar to what Harrison describes as the many “untold memories, ancient fears and dreams, popular traditions, and more recent myths and symbols [that] are going up in the fires of deforestation which we hear so much about today and which trouble us for reasons we often do not fully understand rationally but which we respond to on some other level of cultural memory” (1992, xi).

4. ECHOES OF *The Great Gatsby* AND *Moby-Dick*

Aware that literary meaning is always relational and that when we read or write a text we (re)construct it through its relation to other texts, Rash acknowledges connections to canonical US novels that he, more or less consciously, evokes to construct his themes. When asked by Brenda D. Stephens about the source of Serena’s estrangement from

humanity, he said that he saw her “as similar to Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and of course Gatsby, but also Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” three “American innocents—in the sense of believing that they have their own grand design, and that design overwhelms their sense of humanity” (quoted in Stephens 2010, 31).

Like *The Waste Land*, *The Great Gatsby* was written in the aftermath of the Great War, which wrecked so many ideals and brought about so much material and moral destruction. One central aspect of *The Great Gatsby* that invites connection with *Serena* is the theme of the US as a wasteland, which Rash may have taken from Fitzgerald's novel, the original title of which was to be *Among the Ash Heaps and Millionaires*. In turn, *The Great Gatsby* is intertextually related to Eliot's poem; it is, “as Lionel Trilling has hinted, a prose version of Eliot's ‘Waste Land,’ a poem Fitzgerald knew almost by heart” (Bicknell 1973, 68). Kenneth Eble notes that the dark events that followed the 1920s, like the Great Depression and the Second World War, may have made modern readers more responsive to the serious dimensions of *The Great Gatsby*, including all its references to environmental destruction: “For it has been since World War II, and particularly in America, that the realities of living in a world of limited resources have begun to register [...]. Without exaggerating greatly, one can place *Gatsby* with those classic statements that recall us to the fact that, as Fitzgerald came to recognize, one cannot both spend and have” (1985, 89). In chapter two of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway describes “a certain desolate area of land” that is “a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (Fitzgerald [1925] 2000, 26).³ This “grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it” is presided over by a huge advertisement expressive of the commercial exploitation that transforms the US landscape into a wasteland: the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg “brood on over the solemn dumping ground” (Fitzgerald [1925] 2000, 26) the US has turned into, “their empty gaze [...] a reminder that God has been replaced by fading signs of American materialism” (Mangum 1998, 14), which creates the appalling inequality that displaces the unprosperous damaged car dealer George Wilson and his wife Myrtle to the poor brick houses “sitting on the edge of the waste land” (Fitzgerald [1925] 2000, 27). As Jeffrey Hart says, “indeed, after the 1922 *Waste Land*, no reader of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) could read the words *valley of ashes*, described as a ‘waste land,’ without thinking of Eliot's poem” (2012, 11; italics in the original).

In an intended allusion to *The Great Gatsby*, one of Serena's associates is named Buchanan. The Buchanans in Fitzgerald's novel embody the carelessness and moral bankruptcy of the powerful that turned the wonderland supposedly contemplated by

³ Echoes of this passage can be detected in chapter thirty-three of *Serena*, where the men putting out a fire that has destroyed part of the logging camp are described thus: “From a distance they appeared not so much like men as dark creatures spawned by the ash and cinder they trod upon” (321).

the first settlers and mythologized by Nick at the end of the novel into a wasteland. One of the issues *The Great Gatsby* illustrates is that the American Dream has come to mean unlimited power to Gatsby and Buchanan, with the necessary consequence of economic and social powerlessness for those who, like the Wilsons, live in the valley of ashes. One of the most celebrated passages in the novel describes the destructive insensitivity of the Buchanans: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (Fitzgerald [1925] 2000, 170). This is clearly echoed in Rash's novel when we see the aggressive insensitivity of Serena, as reflected through the consciousness of Rachel Harmon: "Not needing to [look anywhere but straight ahead], because she didn't have to care if someone stepped in front of her and the horse. She and that gelding would go right over whoever got in their way and not give the least notice they'd trampled someone into the dirt" (132).

Like Gatsby, Serena also came from the West—Colorado—to the East—Boston—and she also erased her past: she does not even keep pictures of her parents or of herself taken before her whole family died, and she had the house burnt to the ground before she left for good. When asked about her father, she says, "he's dead now and of no use to any of us" (38). As Joshua Lee notes, "she not only never mentions the past, but utterly annihilates any trace of it" (2013, 45). After settling down in the logging camp, Serena tells George that she wants "to be like this always. No past or future, pure enough to live totally in the present" (87). In an exchange later on with the conservationist Kephart, she asks, "what future? Where is it? All I see is the here and now" (136). In an interview, Rash expressed his discomfort with this attitude: "We live in a culture that doesn't value an understanding of the past. I find that kind of ignorance frightening" ([2003] 2017a, 38).

Serena's destructive greed is even more ruthless and violent than that of the robber barons represented by Gatsby's role model and mentor Dan Cody. Berry takes aim at the "economic violence" to which regions like southern Appalachia have been subjected: "It is true that economic violence is not always as swift, and is rarely as bloody, as the violence of war, but it can be devastating nonetheless. Acts of economic aggression can destroy a landscape or a community or the center of a town or city, and they routinely do so" (2005, 366). Serena's ruthless practices are nothing more than what Berry describes as "economic weapons of massive destruction" (2005, 366), and she displays the willingness of all totalitarians to ravage their own country. For Serena, people and nature are simply resources to be used for her own benefit. Logging on a massive scale is equivalent to declaring war on the life of the land—the tools of the loggers are repeatedly compared to weapons of war; the axes that cut the trees make "a sound like rifle shots ricocheting across the valley" (26); and the local workers are like soldiers in an imperialistic army who frequently lose not only body parts but indeed their lives. Rash relates the destruction of the forest ecosystem to the environmental

devastations of war—the same theme that inspired *The Waste Land*—in a novel where there are echoes of the First and predictions of the Second World War. Early in the novel, Serena rides her horse through the mountains, “passing through acres of stumps that, from a distance, resembled grave markers in a recently vacated battlefield” (23). To the loggers who fought in the First World War, the ravaged landscape looks like “that land over in France once them in charge let us quit fighting [...]. Like there’s been so much killed and destroyed it can’t ever be alive again. Even for them that wasn’t around when it happened, it’d lay heavy on them too. It’d be like trying to live in a graveyard” (335). Snipes, a member of the “Greek chorus” of workers, warns that “a feller over in Germany looks to be ready to set a match to Europe soon enough, and quick as they snuff him out there’ll be another to take his place” (336), which can be taken as a hint that Serena is moved by the same all-consuming thirst for power as Hitler. Indeed, in the novel’s coda we learn about her later years in Brazil, where she hoped to purchase “*a tract of brazilwood in Pernambuco [...] with the help of a West German tractor company*” (369; italics in the original), an obvious allusion to the tractor company owned by the family of Joseph Mengele, Auschwitz’s infamous “Angel of Death.”

As mentioned earlier, *Serena* also consciously evokes *Moby-Dick*, one of the books Rash has reread many times. The twenty-dollar gold piece that George offers for the location of a mountain lion in *Serena* echoes the gold doubloon that Ahab nails to the mast of the Pequod as a reward for the first crew member to sight the elusive white whale, that mastodontic creature perhaps recalled by Rash in the description of “the valley and ridges [that] resembled the skinned hide of some huge animal” (333) after the last tree is felled. Significantly, the action in *Serena* takes place in the interwar period, coinciding with the heyday of modernism and its prominent wasteland theme, and it is of note in this respect that Melville’s masterpiece did not find a truly responsive audience until the modernists came to appreciate it. The context of the First World War had a lot to do with this, as Kevin Hayes notes: “The way people viewed the world after the Great War more closely coincided with Melville’s perspective,” in the sense that “after the war the concept of all-pervasive evil no longer appeared far-fetched” (2017, 8).

Some critics have in fact seen *Moby-Dick* as an indictment of imperialism and global capitalism, as well as a predictor of our time’s irresponsible mass extinction of species and climate apocalypse. According to Philip Hoare, “Melville predicts mass extinction and climate breakdown, and foresees a drowned planet from which the whale would ‘spout his frothed defiance to the skies’” (2019, 7). With his toxic hate and his ability to enlist others in his unreason, Ahab is modeled on obsessives like Tamburlaine and Faustus and anticipates twentieth-century dictators who manipulate others into playing out their obsessions. Thus it is that Serena leads her husband to murder and turns her henchman Galloway into a puppet she can control at will. It is evident that Serena shares many traits with single-minded Ahab, the representative of an epoch in which whaling was a manifestation of colonial attitudes towards nature. Serena’s brutality is no different from that of the whaling industry which, according to Graham Huggan,

has made whales into “both symbols and symptoms of a Western-style industrial modernity—for which colonialism is the flip side—that has created the conditions for its own unravelling” (2018, ix). Like Ahab, Serena is both diabolical and an awe-inspiring goddess—when riding her Arabian horse, which seems to blend into the snow, “she appeared to ride the air itself,” and “the men ascribed all sorts of powers to Serena, some bordering on the otherworldly” (68). Bolick, one of the workers, refers to her as “a true manifestation of the godly” (134). She even transcends the supernatural and comes close to the mythical—riding her horse with her Mongolian eagle, “at a distance, horse, eagle and human appeared to blend into one being, as though transmogrified into some winged six-legged creature from the old myths” (102). Both Ahab and Serena are villains who appear to be somehow unkillable, and are irrationally committed to the hunt—in Serena’s case, the hunt for quick, unlimited profit—and to bending the world to their will. Serena also resembles Ahab in her relentless obsession to subdue what her husband perceives as the “disconcerting *otherness* that was part of these mountains and would always be inexplicable to him” (118; italics in the original).⁴ She exhibits the same disregard for the mystery of a forest ecosystem that Ahab exhibits for the ungraspable mystery of *Moby Dick*. Like Ahab, Serena abhors any limits or barriers being put on her delusional design to subdue and destroy, so much so that she inspires in her husband “a sense of being unshackled into some limitless possibility” (15). The “limitlessness” of Ahab and Serena is precisely one of the characteristics that Berry attributes to what he calls our “Faustian economics”: “The problem with us is not only prodigal extravagance, but also an assumed godly limitlessness. We have obscured the issue by refusing to see that limitlessness as a godly trait” and “we have founded our present society upon delusional assumptions of limitlessness” (2010, 450).⁵

5. THE *Exploitative Orientation* AND THE WILL TO POWER

Serena does indeed represent this Faustian economics that contemplate no temperance or containment. As if decimating the forests of North Carolina were not enough for her, from early on in the novel she announces her intention to go to Brazil to take advantage of its “untapped resources, its laissez-faire attitude toward businesses” (215). Brazil is attractive because it has “Virgin forests of mahogany and no law but nature’s law” (29)—and by “nature’s law” she does not mean respect for or harmony with nature but, rather, social Darwinism. Serena is thus characterized by the *exploitative orientation* that Erich Fromm, an expert in the psychology of authoritarianism, attributes to robber barons and totalitarian leaders:

⁴ Hoare describes *Moby-Dick* as “an icon of otherness” (2019, 7).

⁵ When comparing Serena to a line of destructive fictional antecedents like Ahab, Gatsby and Flannery O’Connor’s *The Misfit* in her short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” ([1953] 1955a), Rash tells Brown and Mark Powell that “Americans become victims of their own obsessions to the point that they think they can transcend history, transcend conventional morality, human limitations” (Brown and Powell 2010, 84).

The exploitative character, with its motto “I take what I need,” goes back to piratical and feudal ancestors and goes forward from there to the robber barons of the nineteenth century who exploited the natural resources of the continent. [...] Our own age has seen a revival of naked exploitativeness in the authoritarian systems which attempted to exploit the natural and human resources, not so much of their own country but of any other country they were powerful enough to invade. They proclaimed the right of might and rationalized it by pointing to the law of nature which makes the stronger survive; love and decency were signs of weakness; thinking was the occupation of cowards and degenerates. (1947, 87-88)

Actually, for Serena “altruism is invariably a means to conceal one’s personal failures” (136), as she says when referring to the sacrifices made by Kephart in order to preserve the forest ecosystem.⁶ In his analysis of the woods in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* ([1854] 1974), Harrison laments the fact that the fate of the US “was to reiterate and exasperate the rage for possession, and to fall into the watery mire of what is not life” (1992, 231). Serena does fit Harrison’s description of those “capitalists who in their strange uncertainty about life pursue the delusions of recovery in their appropriation of everything” (1992, 231).

Ambition is indeed a salient quality in giving Serena her place in the pantheon of tragic figures. In an interview Rash stated that, “though I consciously evoked *Macbeth* in the novel, I see the book as more in the tradition of Marlowe’s plays, which are always about the will to power” (2008b, 8). It should come as no surprise that, as mentioned earlier, Rash takes the epigraph to *Serena* from Marlowe’s *The Massacre at Paris*, the play in which, according to Laurie Maguire and Aleksandra Thostrup, the ambitious machinator Guise “wants to be Tamburlaine” (2013, 39) when he says, “Give me a look that when I bend the brows / Pale death may walk in furrows of my face; / A hand that with a grasp may gripe the world” (Marlowe [1593] 1976b, 241). *Tamburlaine* is the work by Marlowe which, according to Harry Levin, “laid down the outline of a new dramatic genre, the tragedy of ambition” (1961, 75). Tamburlaine is, “in his very inhumanity, as proud a figure as human presumption could frame” (Levin 1961, 49), moved by the quenchless thirst of what Levin calls “*libido dominandi*, boundless ambition in its grossly material aspect” (51). Although it is not possible to know for a fact to what extent Rash modeled Serena on Marlowe’s protagonists, Tamburlaine and Faustus are undoubtedly literary antecedents of the imperialistic capitalism represented by a relentless exploiter like Serena. As Levin observes, “while science, capitalism, imperialism were at the beginning of their modern development, Marlovian tragedy was able to project the inordinate courses they would pursue, through Marlowe’s insight into the wayward individualist and into the life that is lived—as he would put it—‘without control’” (188). Levin contends that “Marlowe’s protagonists are goaded, like Captain Ahab, by the devilish tantalization of the gods” (185). They are what Levin terms “overreachers,”

⁶ In this she also resembles Ahab, who describes himself as the man who has “no heart at all” (Melville [1851] 1972, 582).

modeled on Icarus, whose “waxen wings did mount above his reach” (Marlowe [1604] 1965, 72).⁷ Like Faustus, Serena sells her humanity to the devil in exchange for a power that ultimately enslaves her. There seems to be no essential difference between Serena’s boundless ambition to plunder the forests of North Carolina and Brazil and Faustus’s resolve to have obedient spirits “fly to India for gold, / Ransack the ocean for orient pearl, / And search all corners of the new-found world / For pleasant fruits and princely delicates” (Marlowe [1604] 1965, 76-77).

In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks, another southern Appalachian writer, makes a distinction between the *will to power* and the *will to meaning*: “In dominator culture the will to power stands as a direct challenge to the cultural belief that humans survive soulfully because of a will to meaning” (2009, 29). When the will to meaning prevails, human life maintains dignity and “the capacity of humans to create community, to make connections, to love, is nurtured and sustained” (29). In *Serena*, the will to meaning is represented by Rachel Harmon, the local girl who nurtures her son, Jacob, fathered by George Pemberton, and protects him from Serena’s murderous intentions. As Rash says, “there are always Serenas out there, but there are always people who will fight them and people who will find their power from love instead of the desire for power” ([2014] 2017d, 183). Rachel represents on the individual level what Kephart represents in the political sphere—protection of life and landscape. Whereas Serena, with her persistent destruction of life, embodies the worst of the invading culture, Rachel, with her soft power, stands for the best of the local culture. Rachel gives and preserves life, in contrast to Serena, who cannot conceive again after miscarrying the baby that would have been her first. The presence of Rachel’s child, a reminder of the successful mix of local blood with George’s, blinds Serena with murderous rage. Rachel and Jacob actually constitute a threat to Serena’s patrimony in that she herself would like to be the origin of a bloodline that would continue her domination of the people and their environment, whereas the child Jacob is in fact a product of the land Serena deliberately destroys.

Two qualities that empower Rachel are her attachment to the land and her capacity for love. She learned from her father “about crops and plants and animals, how to mend a fence and chink a cabin” (50). In harmony with the local culture, she knows exactly where to find ginseng: “She walked slowly, looking not just for the four-pronged yellow leaves but bloodroot and cinnamon ferns and other plants her father had taught her signaled places where ginseng grew” (78). In contrast to Serena’s rapaciousness and all the outside capitalist ventures that steal the local resources, Rachel shows care and respect for renewal: “She separated the berries from the ginseng plants and placed them in the broken soil, covered them up and moved on to the next plant” (79). While Serena does not believe in any future beyond herself, Rachel is careful to preserve the

⁷ According to Levin, Marlowe’s protagonist is always “the overreacher whose tragedy is more of an action than a passion, rather an assertion of man’s will than an acceptance of God’s” (43).

resources of the forest ecosystem for the future. When she leaves her place, escaping from Serena and her henchman Galloway, “she [takes] the child’s hand and press[es] it to the dirt. Her father had told Rachel that Harmons had been on this land since before the Revolutionary War,” and she tells the child, “don’t ever forget what it feels like” (272), a passage that undoubtedly speaks for the author, who values attachment to the land and to the past.

As Erik Reece notes, “no one who felt a responsibility to other citizens within a community would destroy its water, homes, wildlife, and woodlands. The difference between conquerors and community is the difference between the words ‘economy’ and ‘ecology’” (2005, 186-87). After all, ecology is about connection, about how everything and everybody connects to everything and everyone else. Serena is the conqueror allied to economy, who does not feel any responsibility to the citizens of a community whose resources she plunders. As the representative of ecology, Rachel counters the Faustian impulse of industrial greed. Although Serena’s strength sometimes looks superhuman, it is a strength that destroys rather than enriches the lives and the environment around her. Rachel and her child’s successful escape, with the help of others who have to make difficult choices, indicates that hard power can be defeated with soft power. In a 2010 interview with Brown and Chris Davis, “A Mountain Landscape of Loss and Reclamation,” Rash explicitly contrasts Rachel’s quiet persistence with Serena’s brutal force: “In a sense you see Serena as not exactly a role model for strong womanhood, but in her own way Rachel shows superb strength” (quoted in Stephens 2010, 12).

The novel’s coda, a flash-forward to 1975, digs deeper into the wasteland theme and confirms the fact that Serena uses her power in a way that alienates her from nature and humanity. The description of a picture in her home in Brazil notes “*a wasteland of stumps and downed limbs whose limits the frame could not encompass*” (369; italics in the original) that she left behind in North Carolina—limbs of trees, and limbs, and lives, of workers as well. We also learn that Serena has left orders to be buried in a lead coffin “*because it won’t rot or rust*” (369; italics in the original)—even in death she wants to be detached from nature and to avoid mixing with and fertilizing the soil. This is related to an earlier passage in which George tells Serena, “Kephart told me at the first meeting how it pleased him to know I’d die and eventually my coffin would rot, and how then I’d be nourishing the earth instead of destroying it” (117). Her vision is so narrow-minded that she even overlooks the very mortality that makes her human. Apart from her physical barrenness after losing her baby, Serena has set herself so firmly against life in every respect that she logically refuses to die into life, thus becoming one of Eliot’s wastelanders, with no potential or desire for rebirth. Overall, the problem with Serena is her persistence in ignoring the fact that humans are linked to nature, a failure that produces a short-sighted culture that leads to the loss of lives and magnificent ecosystems.

To her very end, Serena exhibits the unnaturalness that elevates her to the level of myth and sets her alongside figures like Melville’s Ahab. When she dies, after being

stabbed by Jacob, a guard claims that “for a few moments a garland of white fire flamed around her head” and that she “had still been standing” even when “already dead” (371; italics in the original), indicating perhaps that the flames of her unlimited ambition can only be quenched with her own blood. The fire connects her once again to that (self-)destructive Satan that is Ahab, compelled onwards to (self-)destruction, to keep pushing “against all natural lovings and longings” of “[his] own proper, natural heart” (Melville [1851] 1972, 653). In “The Candles” chapter, Ahab addresses the fire of lightning as “my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not” (617), a “sweet mother” that, according to Kerry McSweeney, “may be thought to refer to the benign aspect of the natural world, with which Ahab feels no longer in contact” (1986, 74). What in Ahab was the (self-)consuming fire of what Ishmael terms “fatal pride” (628) is, in this twentieth-century reincarnation, the destructive fire of fatal greed. Rash has said that “my title character Serena has no accountability; she is outside the pale of humanity” (2010). With the same rigid inhumanity as Ahab, she embodies dark forces of greed and destruction that should not be left unchecked. As her husband, enticed by her fantasy of limitlessness, says, “give us a lifetime and Mrs. Pemberton and I will cut down every tree, not just in Brazil but in the world” (346). She is a devil intent on the original sin of devastating the land, destroying not just the southern Appalachian paradise but the whole planet: “The world is ripe, and we’ll pluck it like an apple from a tree” (340). Serena is like Melville’s satanic captain, who has lost “the low, enjoying power” to connect with the natural world and can only follow an unnatural, destructive “path to [his] fixed purpose [which] is laid with iron rails, whereon [his] soul is grooved to run” (Melville [1851] 1972, 266). With her persistence in turning the original wonderland of the US into a wasteland, Serena not only reverses the myth of the Garden of Eden traditionally associated with the American Dream; she also brings doom on herself by wanting all the world and all the power for herself.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

D. H. Lawrence sees the sinking of the Pequod in *Moby-Dick* as “the doom of our white day,” a tragedy brought about by “this ghastly maniacal hunt which is our doom and our suicide” ([1923] 1971, 169). In a similar vein, Harrison laments the inherently antilife “rage for possession” of the US capitalists who appropriated everything, to the extent that “America became not the *caput mundi* of poetic freedom but the *caput mortuum* of modernity—capitalism turned into the death’s head” (1992, 231-32). In *The Great Gatsby*, Dan Cody launches the protagonist on a maniacal search that ends with the dream turning into a physical and spiritual wasteland. As noted above, Fitzgerald’s novel was partly inspired by Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the poem that, as McIntire says, proposes “that physical and spiritual nourishment linked to the natural world is not guaranteed even though we depend on it for our very survival” (2015a). Rash’s portrait of Serena leaves no doubt that her fixation on limitlessness leads only to boundless

violence and the destruction of the limited resources of our planet that she insists on “plucking” from us. Like Faustus and Ahab, she makes the fatal mistake of confusing natural limits—earth, ecosystems, and so on—and cultural ones—such as empathy and self-restraint—with restrictions. It is no wonder, then, that she becomes as spiritually dry as Eliot’s wastelanders. As her husband says, “it’s not her nature to make outward shows of emotion” (149).⁸

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⁸ The research for this article was funded by the research network “Rede de Lingua e Literatura Inglesa e Identidade III” (ED431D2017/17, Xunta de Galicia) and the research group “Discourse and Identity” (ED341C, 2019/001, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela).

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Received 7 January 2020

Revised version accepted 13 June 2020

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