

# THE OBLIGATION TO TEAR THROUGH THE VEIL: AN ANALYSIS AND TRANSFORMATION OF MANKIND'S INSUFFICIENT COMPLACENCY THROUGH THE NOVELS OF JENNY OFFILL

MAGGIE TOOLE

“When we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, not that it is a pragmatic necessity for us to have it, but that it is a *moral imperative* that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble. And I suspect we are already there.” —Joan Didion, “On Morality”

“*Life equals structure plus activity.*” —Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation*

## I. The Trap of Transcendent Wholeness

Ask yourself: “*Do you ever take on the burdens of others?*”; author Jenny Offill believes the future of humanity may depend on it (*Weather* 58).<sup>1</sup> Offill’s novels *Dept. Of Speculation* and *Weather*, published in 2014 and 2020, respectively, illustrate the fundamentally divided essence of our world. Both are fragmentary and revelatory novels that ask their readers to care for something or someone that exists outside of themselves. Set in the political and social turmoil of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, *Dept. of Speculation* and *Weather* examine if mankind can continue to endure in the face of man-made binaries that now feel totalizing and out of control. Through the scope of two nuclear families, Offill endeavors to offer a possible solution to the end of the world due to climate change. In *Dept. of Speculation*, she writes, “*I thought about the predicament that our civilization finds itself in and about the violence and poverty that makes this planet a hell for so many of its inhabitants. Toward the end I permitted myself a personal statement of what it was like to fall in love*” (*Dept.* 89). This dichotomy of violence and love is representative of the necessary reconciliation Offill suggests through her texts. To not only include, but to foreground “what it is like to fall in love” in juxtaposition with violence and hell is Offill’s goal; to expand one’s compassion and care to the point where love does not pale in comparison to violence. This difficult undertaking forces man to face the

---

<sup>1</sup> If no author is given for an internal citation, the citation is from Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* or *Weather* as indicated, edition stated in this paper’s “Works Cited.”

fragility of his existence and accept his ability to be conquered by nature to evade an ultimately catastrophic eventuality in the form of climate demise.

America is associated with immense innovation which generates mass destruction, leading to an increased uncertainty about the viability of mankind's future. Human life is formed and marred by the fallacy of a binary world; everything in our lives is organized in opposition. Offill concludes *Weather* with: "the core delusion is that I am here and you are there," a belief that underlies and justifies centuries of violence and sublimation present in the foundation of modern society (*Weather* 201). This statement demonstrates the ideas of French scholar Hélène Cixous. In her essay "Sorties," Cixous further defines the binary relationship as one that incites a hierarchical reality: "The movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose. Death is always at work...We see that 'victory' always comes down to the same thing: Things get hierarchical" (Cixous 147). The need to organize existence into the simplistic relationship of A or B—me or you—propagates invalid justifications for our actions. Oppositional coupling promotes the fallacy that in order for one person to possess something, someone else must be deprived of it. This is the core delusion that Offill attempts to resolve in her novels through an examination of the othering effects of a binary worldview with a specific focus on women and motherhood. *Dept. of Speculation* and *Weather* are each narrated by a woman who has found herself in a traditional nuclear family, a wife to a husband and mother to a child. Offill displays how the nuclear family acts as a site of alienation for women due to its compatibility with the overarching patriarchal and familial structures of our society. Through the female narrators of her texts, Offill breaks down the global issue of climate change. She illustrates how the driving force of "I" set in opposition to "you" begins with the foundational separation of the human animal from the animal kingdom. This separation anticipates the isolating societal division of gender and motherhood, and our inclination as humans to blame the destruction of the climate and decimation of resources on outside forces. By framing this issue in the individual body and home, Offill not only makes it more palatable, but demonstrates the inescapability of the human desire to colonize the world on every scale.

The narrator of *Dept. of Speculation* acts as a pseudo-precursor for Lizzie, the narrator of *Weather*. Never referred to by a name, but occasionally as "the wife," she prefigures Lizzie in their shared roles in society as wife and mother. The wife catches a glimpse of the eventuality of climate demise on the news, foreshadowing its overt presence in *Weather*: "the time lapse shows a field of plants perishing, a mother and child blown away by a wave of red light. Something distant and imperfectly understood is to blame for this. The odds against it are encouraging. Astronomical even" (*Dept.* 48). That which is "distant and imperfectly understood" could refer to the subjective modern definition of man and mankind as illustrated in Michel

Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Foucault defines three epistemes, or configurations of knowledge, that encompass periods of time from the sixteenth century to today. Foucault analyzes how man is defined in, and by, the modern world. He hypothesizes that if the structural arrangements of the modern world were to change,

were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at this moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble... then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea. (Foucault 387)

The red wave of light depicted in the newscast offers the possibility to dismantle the structural arrangements that define the modern world. The current fundamental definition of mankind is reliant upon oppositional relationships. The desire to define through opposition is what Offill attempts to reconstruct through the razing opportunity of climate change. She specifically takes on motherhood, as it is understood “mother and child blown away by a wave” (*Dept.* 48). Women are fundamentally othered in their evolutionary and necessary role as mothers, creating a dangerous end for the modern world. The role of wife and mother is stuck in the confines of the sublimating structures of the society, necessitating the redemptive possibility of the climate crisis as depicted by the red wave of light.

The existence of the wife in *Dept. of Speculation* lays the foundation for the greater interrogation of the structures of the natural world and womanhood in *Weather*. Though both texts are extremely nuanced in their unrelenting critique of our developed world, Offill is not sparing in her attempts to make space for unalienated existence. The novels frame the climate crisis as a possible turning point that humans do not readily embrace, and they instead become disoriented by the looming change. She equates this disorientation to being lost in the woods: “if you think you are lost: beware bending the map. Don't say maybe it was a pond, not a lake; maybe the stream flowed east, not west. Leave a trail as you go. Try to mark trees” (*Weather* 199). In her approach to the impending natural collapse, Offill entreats the reader to trust the natural world rather than bend it to human will, and to look back to Charles Darwin and the original theory of *The Origin of Species*. Darwin asserts that “as all the living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Cambrian epoch, we may feel certain that the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world” (Darwin 395). This statement came long before the advent and destruction of the atomic bomb, before the truly disastrous capabilities of the human species threatened the stability of the planet's future. Though it is unlikely that Darwin could have imagined the conditions that have brought mankind to the brink of collapse

that we now face, he warned against the fleeting “wishes and efforts of man,” advising that evolutionary authority remain in the natural world (Darwin 70). Such a warning indicates the need to remove subjective man-made structures of existence and to try to mark the trees instead.

In these novels, Offill tackles the alienating structures of society through the experiences of her individual characters. Sylvia, Lizzie’s former professor turned public speaker, presents a potential solution to the binary condition of existence. She tours the country, lecturing on climate change for an unspecified foundation. Sylvia offers is a dystopian approach, an identification and presentation of the problem at hand without readily offering a resolution; an inadequate solution that evokes the totalizing fear of her audience. Humans have evolved to be obsessed with maintenance of known routines of modernization. These routines perpetuate greater problems while casting a veil of forward motion at the expense of survival. Offill illustrates this idea through the questions that are sent to Sylvia or asked live when she is touring:

Q: What are the best ways to prepare my children for the coming chaos?

A: You can teach them to sew, to farm, to build. Techniques for calming a fearful mind might be the most useful though. (*Weather* 93)

Such an answer may appear contrite or even defeatist, but in reality, Sylvia presents an actual solution that people simply do not want to hear. Fear of a dystopian existence assumes that we are not already living in one and pushes back against the idea that “we’re living in unprecedented times” (*Weather* 36). Sylvia is Offill’s initial attempt at a solution for mankind’s collective crisis because she bravely asks the question: what is a precedent reality?

The impending dystopia Sylvia offers contrasts with the amalgamating effect of the mediated woman according to Sherry Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture.” In her critique of gender essentialism, Ortner states “woman is being identified with, or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to man, who is identified with culture” (Ortner 25). She then presents possible ways that “femaleness” can be read within a civilization. One is as a mediating force, “performing some kind of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture” (Ortner 25). Through Sylvia, Offill subverts the synthesizing role of women, which is foundationally reliant on the division of the gender binary. At the onset of *Weather*, Sylvia presents the intellectual response to the climate crisis—an ultimately ineffective practice—writing that, “people are really sick of being lectured about the glaciers” (*Weather* 73). The melting glaciers are an example of the global scale that individuals can rarely tolerate. Though the intellectual approach is necessary, Offill demonstrates through the audience questions and responses that people want to stay local. Offill uses Sylvia’s role as a public figure and trusted source of factual

knowledge to illustrate the inefficacy of reliance on such methods. The presentation of a possible dystopia requires a solution; however, the credible offerings of Sylvia's lecture series and podcast fail to motivate the masses.

Offill's core delusion is a multifaceted examination of our current existence and the binary foundation of self versus other which necessitates the use of psychoanalytic theory. Historically, psychoanalytic theory has subscribed to the idea that young children are stripped of their innate wholeness through their discovery of the self as separate from others and will attempt to rectify the discomfort that this loss creates from that point on. Individuals' attempt to return to this innate wholeness by way of transcendent sublimity. In both novels, Offill relies on the sublime as defined by Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature," which is predicated on the spiritual quality of one's conference with the natural world. In the apocalyptic news report of *Dept. of Speculation*, the anchor states: "everything that has eyes will cease to see" (*Dept.* 47). When explaining natural transcendence, Emerson employs what he refers to as the "transparent eye-ball," a state which allows one to exist as nothing and to see all as a part and particle of God (Emerson 12). The credible man on the wife's screen could be speaking literally about an end to living creatures while he refers to an impending disaster. However, an Emersonian reading specifically suggests the looming impossibility of transcendent wholeness through nature in the face of the climate crisis.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud proposed that what drives life is the ability to create death and destruction, a goal which humans quickly meet at the hand and expense of the natural world (Freud 111). If modern society accepts the Freudian idea that humans as a species and global entity are the proprietors of the world's end, then there is nowhere to turn for redemptive action—we are destined for destruction. In *Dept. of Speculation*, Offill writes, "the Manicheans believed the world was filled with imprisoned light, fragments of a God who destroyed himself because he no longer wished to exist. This light could be found trapped inside man and animals and plants, and the Manichean mission was to try to release it" (*Dept.* 23). An example of Thanatos, the Freudian drive to destroy in concert with creation, this Manichean belief can be extended to illustrate the demagogue-like position of human beings in the natural world. The human race is destroying itself not because it no longer wants to exist as the Manichean god did, but by way of nonessential innovation in pursuit of forward motion. Offill's novels do not accept the Freudian treatment of instinct as a viable approach to the crisis of the known world. Founded in the delusion that "I am here and you are there," Offill presents a possible solution to this impending crisis—a refiguring of the fundamental American structure of the nuclear family (*Weather* 201). In *Dept. of Speculation*, she quotes "advice for wives circa 1896: *The indiscriminate reading of novels is one of the most injurious habits to which a married woman can be subject... it produces an indifference in performance of domestic duties. And contempt for ordinary realities*" (*Dept.* 49). There is an

innate irony in the inclusion of this quote and the fact that both of Offill's narrators are interested in writing. Furthermore, wives already exist in a false view for there is no true ordinary reality. This quote illustrates the structural refusal to grant women the option of instinct and the urge to instruct their every leisure and thought. Offill refutes the Freudian claim that instinctual drive has led us to the precipice of despair, and instead blames societally constructed hierarchical beliefs. In this approach, the world is no longer filled with imprisoned light but simple light, an elucidating entity that need not be reliant on a destructive beginning. Offill's restructuring requires the abandonment of binary opposition bred on the most essential level by the "clear and sharp lines of demarcation" between I and you (Freud 26).

French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan claims that we are forever severed from "the state of nature" by our entrance into what he calls the symbolic order<sup>2</sup> (*Essays* X). According to Lacan, severance occurs through the acquisition of language and the subsequent distinction of mother and child, indicating that in the absence of language there is potential for an individual to remain in "the Real"<sup>3</sup> and maintain a sense of wholeness. As science continues to uncover the nuances of the animal mind and behavior, one must question to which strict definition of language Lacan adheres. In congruence with the effects of Lacan's mirror stage, which lead to the discovery of the self as differentiated from the other in the mirror, mirror tests administered to certain species of animals indicate a recognition and understanding of themselves in the reflection (Andersen). In his article "Do Animals Have Feelings? A Journey into The Animal Mind," Ross Andersen outlines a series of scientific studies that are discovering how nature may have more than one method of making a conscious brain (Andersen 9). The absence of language, as defined by Lacan, in animals can be strategically read as an indication of their wholeness. Coupled with their varying levels of conscious thinking, many animals demonstrate how a living being can exist in an unalienated form, offering a potential guide back to "the Real", which contradicts Lacan's theory that such a return cannot occur because "the Real is impossible" (*Essays*).

In *Dept. of Speculation* and *Weather*, Offill pushes back against the general tendency to segregate humans and animals. The narrator in *Dept. of Speculation* asks: "are animals lonely? Other animals, I mean" (*Dept.* 8). Lizzie's son in *Weather* points out this discrepancy: "NO ANIMALS ALLOWED, the sign outside the restaurant reads. 'But we are animals, right?' 'Don't be a stickler,' I tell him," illustrating a degree of agreement with her son (*Weather* 35). It is important to note that our closeness to animals is more overtly noticed by women and children in the novels. According to Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," this phenomenon is not unexpected. She proposes the idea that children, especially

---

<sup>2</sup> The symbolic order refers to the social world ordered by law and convention that children enter through the acquisition of language. According to Lacan, the symbolic is possible because of the child's acceptance of the structural frameworks and subsequent restrictions of society (Felluga).

<sup>3</sup> A state where there is no desire only need. Lacan believes that humans are closest to this state as infants (Felluga).

infants are essentially animals, “easily considered to be a part of nature” (Ortner 17). She describes infants as “barely human” and notes the presence of initiation rites of children entering fully into the sway of culture (Ortner 17). Ortner’s claims are not unlike those of Lacan’s “Real,” a time of fullness in which humans are closest to this state of nature. Lacan’s definition is predicated on the biological needs of incapable infants and young children and does not rely on a physical togetherness with the natural world. According to Offill, we as humans are animals and the innate understanding of this fact allows her female narrators to push back against the assumed subordination of nature through culture by letting animal tendencies emerge in their behavior, whether it be by flapping their hands like a bird or describing themselves as squirrely (*DoS* 169, *Weather* 39).

Darwin’s biological theory of evolution becomes a vessel for Offill’s pointed critique of the ironic human animal. In *Dept. Of Speculation*, the husband cheats on the wife in the years following the birth of their first and only child. Through the fragmentary style of these books, the reader witnesses the wife’s disjointed attempt to reconcile his actions with a primitive biological drive: “most mammals don’t raise their offspring together, but humans do” (*Dept.* 99). Beginning with the animal, she moves on to note that such separation exists in human groups as well:

In many tribal cultures children are considered self-sufficient at or near the age of six. For all practical purposes, this means if they were lost overnight in the wild they might not perish. Of course in modern industrial societies, children tend to be protected much longer. But there’s evidence that the age six still resonates with men. (*Dept.* 100)

Though perhaps the irony of such rationalization is not obvious, Offill continues to narrow her scope in moving from the animal, to the human, to the chemical to state that “all of this has to do with chemicals in the brain allegedly. An amphetamine-like mix, far more compelling than the soothing attachment one. Or so evolutionarily biologists say” (*Dept.* 109). This pseudo-justification of her husband’s infidelity by way of inevitable evolutionary and biological needs points to the ironic relationship of humans to the natural world. As a species we eagerly use biology as a scapegoat for our undesirable actions, but do not trust it as a dictating force beyond this trivial use.

Offill expands the human relationship to animals outside the ironic scope of scapegoated infidelity to illustrate the possible familiarity between her narrators and the animal world. The Andersen article exploring animal cognition goes on to discuss pain. He describes human pain as taking on an existential dimension because it is coupled with the knowledge of looming death and loss. He compares this to the pain experienced by fish, less cognitively acute when pulled from the depths too quickly. The “barometric trauma fills its bloodstream with tissue-burning acid, it’s on-deck thrashing might be a silent scream, born of the fish’s belief that it has entered a

permanent state of extreme suffering” (Andersen 14). The narrator of *Dept. of Speculation* describes a similar phenomenon: “you think that the mental anguish you are experiencing is a permanent condition, but for the vast majority of people it is only a temporary state” (*Dept.* 7). Read in the context of the hierarchical animal kingdom, perhaps we as humans are in the self-ascribed majority, able to recognize the existential nature of our experience while it is occurring. However, the narrator goes on to ask, “But what if I’m special? What if I’m in the *minority*?” (*Dept.* 7). To be “special” by this definition is to be closer to the animal experience, an idea that many might find regressive and unrefined. Throughout these novels, Offill ascribes animal imagery to her female narrators, signifying their animalistic instinct despite being placed in what is incorrectly conceived of as the minority. Their kinship with animals earns them a place squarely in the majority of living creatures along with 8.7 billion different species of animals on earth (Bale).

The female narrators of Offill’s texts appear to be teetering on the edge of the larger societal separation of man and animal and have an instinctive desire to maintain the linking connection of evolution. Lizzie states that she is afraid of the dentist, a seemingly common character attribute that actually points to her resistance to artificial selection. She is instructed by a frequent patron of the library where she works to “take care of her teeth” and yet she still spends much of the text avoiding the dentist out of fear. When she finally seeks dental care, she cites her “monkey mind” as the driving force, indicating a kind of survival instinct that is fulfilled by her new crowns (*Weather* 120). According to Ann Gibbons in a study published in *Science* in 2012, human teeth and jaws are not adequately evolved to thrive on the diet of our modern industrial society, a dissonance that leads to a multitude of dental problems. Darwin describes this effect in *The Origin of Species*: “[nature] can act on every internal organ, on every shade of constitutional difference, on the whole machinery of life. Man selects only for his own good; Nature only for that of the being which she tends” (Darwin 69). The advent of modern dental practices as well as the multiplicity of issues surrounding oral development and maintenance has created a \$124 billion dental industry in the United States that addresses an essentially man-made problem (Echevarria). Unlike nature, man fails to select for every difference and often fixates on the needs of the discreet individual rather than the entire machinery of the societal ecosystem.

Offill grounds her argument in the foregrounding of natural evolution and adaptation in the bodies and homes of her characters by using their human existence as a canvas for greater social commentary. Lizzie’s body acts as a personification of the world by way of her teeth and her diagnosis with osteoarthritis. She and her husband joke about the potential diagnosis just as many make light of climate issues in an act of helplessness. Upon receiving the news, she researches and discovers that “[o]steoarthritis develops slowly and the pain it causes worsens over time” (*Weather* 42). The degradation causes Lizzie to limp, though she is often described as ignoring the pain

to accomplish something else. As a personification of our world, the arthritis in Lizzie's joints depicts what society is experiencing through the climate crisis, something that has developed slowly yet worsens over time despite man's willing ignorance.

In addition to being an example of humans' inadequacy in the realm of selective evolution, Lizzie's dental failings and weak bones exemplify embodied faults in the text. These faults appear most vividly in *Weather*, where Offill suggests that we do not want to give up or rectify our human failures. As with Lizzie's teeth, Offill grounds this idea in the body, specifically the body of Lizzie's brother, Henry, a recovering drug addict. The 12-step program delineated in addiction recovery asks that the individual admit and give up their faults. Step number five requires those in recovery admit "to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs" (*AA Big Book*). As a society and species, we are addicted to a multitude of harmful substances and practices, whether it be oil, the commercial development of land, or callous consumption. To admit our faults as a society, and furthermore as a species, is to acknowledge them, and to acknowledge them creates a possible call to action. From this informed position, we must either integrate our own fragility and destructive nature, or risk being completely subsumed by it. People do not take the risk. As a society we accept faults as traits that make us innately human; we even praise them as a facet of the human condition, and for this reason we continually fall short in the face of necessary change.

Human entitlement in society and in the world compensates for the faults that man will not admit. While still on her tour, "Sylvia tells the audience that the only reason we think humans are the height of evolution is that we have chosen to privilege certain things above other things" (*Weather* 47). She presents the idea that if we were to privilege something like smell rather than conscious thought, then dogs would be the height of evolution since "the only thing we are demonstrably better at than other animals is sweating and throwing" (*Weather* 47). This idea, coupled with the millennial requirement that everyone "check their privilege," allows Offill to indicate society's inconsistent respect for the construct of entitlement. Immediately following this presentation by Sylvia, a professor at the school where Lizzie works is given a "check your privilege" card that states, "You've received this card because your privilege is showing. Your words/actions are making others feel uncomfortable. Check your privilege," followed by a list of statuses and identities that are privileged in our society such as socioeconomic stability, heterosexuality and whiteness. When asked what the card is, Lizzie thinks, "the future?" (*Weather* 49). This card, one iteration of a practice that is prevalent in modern society, demonstrates that as a group we can recognize and respect the power of systemic advantage in the realm of culture with tangible language and mass-produced cards. However, the tepid response to Sylvia's proposal that privilege is a constructed hierarchy in the natural world is rejected by her audience, illustrating another ironic structure at play in

Offill's texts. On a larger scale, the fear of a dystopian future in *Weather* highlights the way in which we idealize the natural world as a type of utopian entity, yet do not treat it as such. As a species, we go to nature to abdicate responsibility, perhaps in pursuit of the Emersonian sublime, but it acts as a band aid for the larger societal inability to widen one's circle of care beyond oneself or even to simply expand one's understanding.

Mankind's reliance on the constructed structures of binary and hierarchical privilege is illustrated in the unproductive solutions in *Weather*. This inability to remedy self-made problems is demonstrated on the global scale by the Gore-Tex wearing investors that Sylvia attempts to attract to her foundation. The foundation "wants to rewild half of the earth. But these men are not interested in such things. De-extinction is a better route, they think. Already they are exploring the genetic engineering that would be necessary" (*Weather* 38). Sylvia, as Offill's tepid emblem of unalienated existence, seeks to advance mankind's possible salvation through increased access to and integration with the natural world. The harmful quality of the men's interest can be found in the etymological root of their goal of "de-extinction". The use of "de" indicates a reversal, doing the opposite of an action. Their plan to bring back the woolly mammoth and saber tooth tigers sits squarely in a binary discourse. Sylvia's desire to "rewild," however, denotes a constructive action as "re" is etymologically defined as "back to the original place" ("Re-"). Though "re" can be associated with an undoing action, it is rarely used in a binary construct, instead indicating that something is new or happening again. Sylvia and the Gore-Tex clad investors both propose an attempt to engage with the natural world from which we as humans continually remove ourselves, yet the difference in the language used expresses the tendency toward binary violence.

The need to remember and rewild is bolstered by Lizzie's question to one of the men. When faced with the idea of an intentional erasure of our linear history, Lizzie responds, "but wait, that sounds bad to me. Doesn't that mean if we end up somewhere we don't want to be, we can't retrace our steps?" (*Weather* 38). Lizzie describes an eventuality that mankind seems to be quickly approaching. Her desire to trace the past is grounded in Darwin's evolutionary theory and, specifically, his claim that "I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled" (Darwin 395). The investors suggest a future of special, man-made creations that thwart the natural process of production and extinction. The question of rewilding versus de-extinction is simply a question of adaptation versus regression. The potential investors represent the Freudian idea that civilization is founded on the sublimation of instinct, that it is "an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development" and "what makes it possible for higher physical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life" (Freud 74). A "renunciation of instincts" means that

a return to a wilder earth by retracing our lineal steps is a form of reversion. The possibility to return to the less refined state of nature from whence we came is viewed as a regression rather than continued adaptation. However, adaptation is historic, and a removal of history threatens our ability to adequately adapt. For Offill, adaptation is not the opposite of regression—they are two sides of the same coin. Nonetheless, for both to function productively, civilization must escape the sublimation of powerful and animalistic instincts as we need them to survive. Driven by the innate human desire to conquer the past rather than accept that we evolve from it, we face the potential end of humanity, but now with woolly mammoths along for the ride.

The prospect of “de-extinction” based on the industrial desire for upward mobility and innovation is presented as a bastardized version of Sylvia’s rewilding. Offill directly refers to the destructive nature of artificial selection multiple times. She plants it squarely in the animal kingdom as described by Darwin, illustrating the shared tendencies of humans and animals. Offill cites the death sentence of non-native sparrows specifically brought to an area to kill insects:

*A. Because the insects were killing so many trees that the sparrows were needed to destroy the insects.*

*Q. Did the sparrows save the trees?*

*A. Yes, the trees were saved.*

*Q. In the wintertime when there are no insects and snow is on the ground, does not the sparrow have a hard time?*

*A. Yes, he has a very hard time, and many die of hunger. (Dept. 21-22)*

This quote demonstrates that humans are aware of the potential destruction of artificial selection. Darwin warned against man’s tampering with selection in such a way: “How short his time, and consequently how poor will be his results, compared with those accumulated by Nature during whole geological periods!” (Darwin 70). Offill’s analysis of mankind does not put much space between the human world and these sparrows. Again, looking at the failure of human teeth to adequately withstand a modern diet without outside intervention is just one example of the way in which an inessential need can usurp a biological foundation.

To reach a point where we can no longer retrace our steps and no longer link our development to the surrounding natural world will lead to the final cataclysm that Darwin believed would never come. Such a point assumes an eradication of past failures and successes in a world where “there won’t be any more talk of what has been lost, only of what has been gained” (*Weather* 38). This language removes human development from the evolutionary landscape entirely, transitioning instead to a transactional discourse that is more in line with modern American values. Lizzie describes a potential investor as “calculating all the large and small ways I am trying to prevent the future” (*Weather* 39). Of course, Lizzie is not trying to prevent the

future, but instead is reticent to accept the decisively oppositional nature of the world these men want to engineer. Prevention does not have to be the opposite of allowance; we should instead be able to exist in the space between. A future that prizes de-extinction above rewilding cements a binary existence; one where that which is not gained is lost and those who do not subscribe to this mentality must be against it. Fear of a dystopian existence is grounded in a fear of cultural regression, a world that must be more reliant on infrastructure than nature. Through the lens of Ortner's exploration of women as nature and men as culture, a degree of misogyny is added to the obstinacy that drives arguably unnecessary scientific innovation at the expense of humanitarian salvation. Ortner explains the "pan-cultural devaluation of woman" as a result of her identification with nature (Ortner 11-12). Societal treatment of the natural world and women is violently symbiotic. To erase the past allows us to be willfully blind to human-inflicted carnage, and to march on clinging to destructive and repetitive ideals touted under the pretense of modernization.

Sylvia ultimately leaves the foundation, telling Lizzie, "there's no hope anymore, only witness, she thinks" (*Weather* 133). As the emblem of an intellectual and theoretical approach to the problem at hand, Sylvia's despairing realization indicates that psychoanalytic and absolute theories are ineffective on their own. Ideas put forth by Lacan, Freud and Emerson are insufficient and ultimately dangerous according to Offill's novels, as their individualist and cleaving foundations perpetuate a state of witness. Having highlighted the prevalence, and inadequacy, of binary relationships between humans and the natural world, Offill asserts her remedy for stagnant circles of care in the body of the mother. Through her narrators, Offill takes on the looming question of human witness: how did we get here? She attempts to break this question out of its sublimating structures to achieve a redemptive end. Her novels ask, how did we get to the point where the end of the world is visible? How does one rationalize bringing children into a destructive and withering ecosystem? Through *Weather*, she expands these questions to ask where do we go next?

## II. The Redemptive Potential of Existential Life

*Dept. of Speculation* ends with the possibility for transcendent wholeness through the narrator's reunion with nature. Unfortunately, the narrator ostensibly must give up her passion to write to sustain her marriage and family. However, the end of the novel suggests the possibility of transcendence in the margins of their life in the country. The final moments of *Dept. of Speculation* strike a balance implicit in achieving transcendence without giving up marriage, motherhood, or the ability to write.

'It has oblique leaves' you say. 'See?' I let you tuck it in my pocket. The yellow bus pulls up. The doors open and she is there, holding something made of paper and string. It is art, he thinks. Science

maybe. The snow is coming down again. Soft wet flakes land on your face. My eyes sting from the wind. Our daughter hands us her crumpled papers, takes off running. You stop and wait for me. We watch as she gets smaller. No one young knows the name of anything. (*Dept.* 177)

In this final moment, Offill ebbs between possible transcendence and the anchor of familial duty, displaying a degree of transitionality in the narrator's existence. The oblique leaf is in keeping with the liminal space of the sublime as defined by Mary Arensberg's introduction to *The American Sublime*: "sub limen, under the threshold, links etymologically with notions of threshold, lintel, boundary, margin, ground, and oblique" (Arensberg 19). Offill relies on the multiple meanings of the word to weave sublimity into the sublimated world of the wife. The daughter counterbalances the leaves when she hands her parents the "art" made of paper and strings. Earlier in the text, the wife's agent describes marriage as something "held together inside with chewing gum wire and string," an image actualized in the child's art (*Dept.* 93). Still, Offill offsets the structural presence of marriage with the snow beginning again, illustrating the repeated possibility of a blank page for the narrator. The final line of the novel, "no one young knows the name of anything," suggests that there is still a chance to be untamed and passionate (*Dept.* 177). The world is not devoid of hope. The presence of the wife's family and her role as a mother creates a tangential communion with nature, yet the final use of "you" and "I" rather than "husband" and "wife" affirms the possibility of some form of reification by way of the natural world. Perhaps the physical book, *Dept. of Speculation*, could be the successful product of the narrator's desire to write. The wife's truncated transcendence is predicated on the requirement that one cannot achieve true wholeness without abandoning their ordinary lives. The presence of her family and her current obligation ultimately holds her back.

In *Weather*, the narrator faces the end of nature as it is known due to the climate crisis and is therefore forced to question how one even begins to seek wholeness when natural transcendence may not be possible. Both novels seek the possibility of wholeness without deserting everything else, because such a requirement is inhibitory, if not preventative, not only to the individual but to the future of humanity. The narrator of *Dept. of Speculation* could not achieve natural sublimity and stay with her family. In *Weather*, Offill pushes further, asserting that motherhood and the dedication it requires should not, and cannot, stop transcendence.

In both novels, Offill employs the mothers as the vessel of ineffective and unnecessary alienation and attempts to show how a transformation of the role is necessary. The female narrators appear to have a subconscious awareness of motherhood as a trap of deficient existence. In *Dept. of Speculation*, the wife says of her daughter, "I would give it up for her, everything...if she would lie quietly with

me, if I could bury my face in her hair, yes, then yes, uncle” (*Dept.* 45). This colloquial version of “uncle,” as it is commonly used in wrestling or play fighting, indicates submission to an opponent. In this context, it suggests the wife’s awareness that her role as a mother is embroiled in a degree of conflict. To say uncle is to “tap out” of life to maintain her desired closeness with her child. The wife possesses an awareness of the debilitating void that motherhood creates due to its status in larger socioeconomic and gendered structures of the world.

In *Weather*, Lizzie explicitly refers to motherhood as existing in the differentiated world. In the meditation class that Lizzie attends, a woman who she refers to as “the most enlightened woman” laments returning to the differentiated world from what she refers to as “the melted ego world” (*Weather* 23). The class is taught by Margot, who is described as “a shrink. Also a Buddhist” (*Weather* 15). Lizzie thinks of the woman: “she was very pregnant, six months maybe. Oh, don’t worry...a differentiated world is coming for your ass” (*Weather* 24). She equates motherhood to fundamental differentiation, illustrating her belief that motherhood is a cleaving state and presupposing the need for transformation to achieve transcendent wholeness. In Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he describes this differentiation as the “oceanic feeling,” his approach to the creation of self and other that occurs in the early years of life. This descriptor was coined by a friend of Freud, who told him “it is a feeling that he would like to call a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic’” (Freud 24). Freud acknowledges the insufficiency of psychoanalytic theory in defining concepts such as the oceanic feeling by stating that the idea does not correspond with the “fabric of our psychology” (Freud 26). Instead, the oceanic feeling traverses the strict boundaries of theory to enter the realm of spirituality by way of a direct and purposeful attempt at connection with the natural world. Freud’s note of the absent link between psychology and the spiritual feeling of being whole acts as an early indication of the necessary collaboration of science and spiritualism: strict transcendentalism will not work.

Offill demonstrates the ways in which her female narrators are sacrificed as mothers due to the confines of psychoanalytic theory. The narrator of *Dept. of Speculation* admits to never wanting to be a wife or mother, for she wanted to work and be what she describes as an “art monster,” something that is “always elsewhere” rather than omnipresent like the maternal figure (*Dept.* 66). Still, she finds herself an unsure mother to a difficult baby: “the baby’s eyes were dark, almost black, and when I nursed her in the middle of the night, she’d stare at me with a stunned, shipwrecked look as if my body were the island she’d washed up on” (*Dept.* 23). The act of nursing coupled with the ship imagery evokes Freud’s description of the oceanic feeling. He describes it as the feeling that an infant possesses before it realizes there are other people in the world, a limitless wholeness akin to floating in the vast ocean. He specifically references nursing, stating, “an infant at the breast

does not yet distinguish his ego from the external world as a source of sensations flowing in upon him” (Freud 27). The description of the child as “shipwrecked” on the body of her mother indicates a pseudo restoration of wholeness. Furthermore, it illustrates the violence implicit in the larger structural and societal mechanisms that determine the relationship between mother and child, and the need for destruction for them to be together.

Later in the novel a friend informs the wife and husband that: “*the invention of the ship is also the invention of the shipwreck*” (*Dept.* 27). Maintaining the idea that the baby is shipwrecked on the shores of her mother, then the child is the ship that prefigures its own destruction. This imagery serves as an early iteration of Offill’s demonstrations of the potential cruelty of having children in a world that is not only on the brink of a climate disaster but is also predicated on the divorce of the self from the whole. The mother is necessary, but she is also that from which the child is alienated, and through that act she is further alienated from herself, as if in an unintentionally self-inflicted cycle. The ship-inventing-the-shipwreck imagery is deeply binary and grounded in the principal and existential question of the conditions of isolation and loneliness: Can one be a whole self without alienating other people? Can the ship exist without creating a destructive alternative? Is it possible to simply exist?

Though Lizzie does not take to the natural world for refuge as the wife before her, Sylvia does when she abandons her role at the foundation and moves to the desert. “No more campaigning, no more fund-raising, no more obligatory notes of hope...all she wants now is to go somewhere quiet and dark” (*Weather* 140). Offill refers to this as an “escape plan,” an abdication of her burden of responsibility onto the natural world. Sylvia is no longer capable of performing the entirety of Offill’s solution to the binary world. Like the narrator at the end of *Dept. of Speculation*, Sylvia takes to nature to achieve the degree of wholeness it offers. The Emersonian sublime is woefully impractical for it requires one to completely abandon their world. Sylvia is more successful than the narrator before her as she has no family and chooses the darkest part of America, hours from any city. Though she is unable to serve as the ultimate answer in her role as lecturer, Sylvia’s escape demonstrates a valuable facet of Offill’s argument. In her novels, Offill moves towards a spiritual solution, unburdened by the debilitating social structures informed by centuries of psychoanalytic theory. The innate spirituality of nature is most explicitly stated by Emerson: “in the wood, we return to reason and faith. There I feel nothing can befall me in life...which nature cannot repair” (Emerson 12). He is echoed in Freud’s claim that “we cannot fall out of this world” (Freud 25). Emerson’s requirement that one must commune with nature as it offers a spiritual entry point, and Sylvia’s decision to leave the scholarly world in exchange for a life in the dark quiet desert point to an existential solution rather than a theoretical one.

Offill's attempts at wholeness are presented in individual choices and actions to illustrate how the core delusion of disconnection drives pessimism and nihilism, enacting the ineffective survival instinct of every man for themselves. In the final moments of *Weather*, Lizzie can speak to Sylvia again. She calls Lizzie and listens to her talk about the mystics and the human potential to tear through the veiled layers of the world. Sylvia simply responds, "'of course, the world continues to end,'... then gets off the phone to water her garden" (*Weather* 198). This is a direct nod to Voltaire's *Candide*, which concludes with the idea that "we must cultivate our garden" (Voltaire 88). In the context of *Candide*, this recommendation is given in the "best of all possible worlds," a satirical moniker for a world filled with violence and despair (Voltaire 88). *Candide* is a response to the perfectionist ideology of the Enlightenment, a criticism of the blind acceptance that everything happens for a reason, and everything will be fine. Sylvia's response is not a terminal expression of despair but rather an acceptance of the historic nature of apocalyptic thinking.

There is nothing totalizing in Sylvia's stating that the world continues to end because of the verb "continue." Her expression is reliant on the absence of a structural reading that would set "continue" and "end" in opposition rather than conjunction. As with her desire to rewild half the earth, Sylvia relies on the need to accept that which we cannot change and the destruction we cannot undo and continue to evolve anyway. Darwin does not explicitly express evolution as progression but rather a symbiosis: "an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner" (Darwin 395). Darwin describes a nondestructive existence, an intertwined continuation of life rather than the segregated reality of the modern world. It is through this Darwinian reading of Offill's allusion to Voltaire that one can reconcile her attempt to widen one's circle of care while cultivating their own garden. Though these sentiments may seem contradictory, they are not. Our world pushes back against the idea of "the best of all possible worlds" just as *Candide*'s did, fighting the paralyzing effects of people's desire for absolute environmental perfectionism. Offill's novels, when read together, show that our current climate crisis has the potential to be a moment of clarity and mutual consideration rather than a delineating prediction of the future and simplification of the past.

Sylvia's escape to the desert is an existential act, a necessary reification of her existence as an individual in the world. Though the presence of existential dread is often viewed negatively, Offill presents it as a pragmatic acceptance. The narrators of *Dept. of Speculation* and *Weather* both refer to a feeling of groundlessness, or being unanchored, that is akin to an existential experience. In *Dept. of Speculation*, Offill writes, "some nights in bed the wife can feel herself floating up towards the ceiling. Help me, she thinks, help me, but he sleeps and sleeps" (*Dept.* 108). This description

can be read through Rob Wilson's definition of the transcendent sublime in *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*, which "suggest[s] straining towards a limit: not so much sinking...but an imperious rising or elevating of self to some *limen* (threshold) of greater consciousness" (Wilson 169). According to Wilson's definition, the wife is potentially approaching a transcendent space, yet she wishes to return to the differentiated world below. In *Weather*, the relationship between the sublime and floating is further defined. Margot, the part-time Buddhist, notes the difference between falling and floating: "with practice, she says, one may learn to accept the feeling of groundlessness without existential fear" (*Weather* 121). The two novels present the possibility of an existential sublimity, the acceptance of one's scale in the greater natural world and the absence of fear regarding one's purpose in life. Such sublimity is existentialism without succumbing to a point of nihilistic complacency, instead embracing the joy in the practice of life. The pragmatism of Offill's solution is reliant on the absence of the fabricated idealism that plagues the modern world.

The perfectionist ideology of colonized civilization breeds a crisis of morality because it is reliant on the binary structure of "good" versus "bad." In her essay "On Morality," Joan Didion writes, "we have no way of knowing—what is 'right' and what is 'wrong,' what is 'good' and what 'evil.' I dwell so upon this because the most disturbing aspect of 'morality' seems to me the frequency with which that word now appears" (Didion 162). In this essay, Didion asks that we not attempt to impose our values onto another, that we do not conquer other people's sensibilities in pursuit of our own. This idea is in keeping with Sylvia watering her garden as the world continues to end, and Offill's ultimate call for expanded circles of care. To adopt a logical and self-aware mode of life is one way to care for others because it impedes the imposition of destruction by negating the need to moralize our every action.

Offill repeatedly exhibits the ways in which mankind falls short in the face of necessary action, but no example is more explicit than Sylvia's ultimate retreat into nature. Thwarted by the sublimating structures of modern civilization as stated by Freud, mankind is trapped in a structure that perpetuates its own insufficiency. Sylvia is aware of this inadequacy as it informs her despairing warning of our collective role as witnesses to the climate apocalypse. Offill puts the emblem of intellectual hope and survival in a woman without children and, though Sylvia teaches Lizzie, she is not able to fully articulate Offill's solution. At one point, Lizzie asks Sylvia about her son: "what I could do, how I could get him ready. It would be good if he had some skills, she said. And of course, no children" (*Weather* 189). A future with no children is not a functional future, as it indicates the end of the human race. However, Lizzie could not have gone to nature like Sylvia or the Buddha, who left his wife when his son was two days old. "He would never have attained enlightenment if he'd stayed, scholars say" (*Weather* 138). It is not possible for her as a mother, but this does not mean she cannot attempt to achieve an unalienated life where she is. The nuclear

family imposes and colonizes people's sensibilities under the guise of traditional family values and psychoanalytic theory. It is for this reason that Offill attempts, and seemingly succeeds, to flip the nuclear family structure to create something outside the bounds of patriarchal oppression. No one can exist in a non-violent way within the confines of the nuclear family—it is a debilitating and isolating structure for women.

Offill demonstrates the failures of the nuclear family by showing how the wife and Lizzie balance the simultaneity of daily life and a global crisis, essentially forcing them into a dichotomy of survival. To focus on your daily life is to not be in service of the world and to act in service of the world is to neglect your daily life. In *Weather*, Offill states, “Buddhists practice includes the notion that we have all been born many times before and that we have all been each other’s mothers and fathers and children and siblings. Therefore, we should treat each person we encounter as if they are our beloved” (*Weather* 157). This notion is why the nuclear family cannot be completely erased because we as humans need the tangible connection it provides. In her novels, Offill frames the climate crisis as a moment of potential restructuring, attempting to use the destabilization of apocalyptic fear as a means by which to evolve the alienated existence of women and, with them, families. She does not use the clichéd idea of a call to action, but rather a request of acceptance. Humans must accept their connection to the natural world and to each other; accept the idea that each person we encounter shares a spiritual link, as we occupy the same world. Most importantly, humans must grow comfortable with the existential reality that we do not have ultimate control. Lizzie acts as an example of this—though she struggles with the eye-opening realities of researching and writing about the climate disaster, she is not overcome by it. Sylvia warned Lizzie that her son Eli should not have children, but she does not accept this eventuality, instead deciding, “you can have a child. It will be small and cat-eyed. It will never know the taste of meat” (*Weather* 196). The child she describes is an amalgamation of possible survival adaptations and techniques that have been suggested by Sylvia and other academics while on tour. Rather than being overcome by the realities of mankind’s evolved future, Lizzie moves towards existential sublimity, a necessary step for the generations to come.

Offill’s preeminent challenge is the transformation of motherhood into an emblem of wholeness rather than remaining solely a provision to the nuclear family. Her novels ponder the presence and possibility of future generations while considering the environmental trajectory of the planet. To not have children, as Sylvia sardonically suggests, is the ultimate expression of mankind’s anguish: it is an acceptance that will eventually lead to human extinction. Offill does not accept this prospect and instead illustrates throughout her novels that children are in many ways the opportunity for unalienated life rather than the catalyst of it. Lizzie’s son Eli performs in a chorus concert at his school:

The last song is his favorite one, he has told me. I can see him gathering confidence as they move through the other, lesser numbers. Then all at once the kids close their eyes and begin to sway. Everyone leans forward trying to see. They sing that their lives are like a drop of water, no more, in an endless sea. Whatever they make will not stand; It will crumble to the ground before their very eyes. And all the money in the world could not buy them a moment more. (*Weather* 99)

In keeping with the possibility of an existential sublime, the children accept their roles as a drop in the vast ocean of civilization. As with the proximity of humans and animals, the children once again offer a clear understanding of our relationship to creation and to the natural world. This is not specifically in line with the ambient societal idea that “children are the future”—that the next generation will solve the problems of today. Instead Offill identifies the emotional and spiritual need for children as the reason why every existing generation cannot give up. As a global society, mankind is not in a position to determine when the sentiment of not having children is justified; just as no one can guarantee the future, no one can guarantee its absence. To resign to the idea that a fiery end is inevitable indulges human complacency and seals the fate of an unrecoverable planet.

Motherhood in *Dept. of Speculation* and *Weather* acts as a discerning guidepost for the forthcoming work of humanity, as there is nothing fiercer than a mother whose progeny is threatened. The narrator of *Dept. of Speculation*, who never wanted to be a mother, describes her primitive connection to her baby, “[t]he way she clasped her hand around my fingers. This was like medicine. For once, I didn’t have to think. The animal was ascendant” (*Dept.* 26). The power of motherhood is demonstrated in the animal kingdom, demonstrated historically, and demonstrated daily. The mother is an emblem of the steadfast need to survive for and through the care of other living things. It is for this reason that the mother is a necessary facet of a potentially redemptive future. Such redemption requires that women be released from the debilitating social and psychological structures of the nuclear family and the prescriptively subjugating roles it confers.

The traditional nuclear family conjures the image of the confined family home described by the wife in *Dept. of Speculation*: “the reason to have a home is to keep certain people in and everyone else out. A home has a perimeter. But sometimes our perimeter was breached by neighbors” (*Dept.* 18). The use of the words “perimeter” and “breach” evoke a militaristic idea of segregated protection that is strengthened by the unstable desire to keep certain people out. Presented early in *Dept. of Speculation*, this idea of separation is unwoven to conclude with the possibility of tending to one’s own garden. The Voltairean allusion acts as a redemption of the family home, simultaneously individual while also open to the expanded world. Offill does not feed into the gender essentialist idea of women and mothers as the sole providers of care, but rather she illustrates through her female

narrators how everyone must widen their circle of care to escape the destructive binary of me versus you and the isolating fortress that the family home has become.

Ask yourself again, “*Do you ever take on the burdens of others?*” (*Weather* 58). The answer is inarguably yes. There is an irony implicit in such a question, as it is posed in the novel as part of an enmeshment questionnaire because we do take on the burdens of others every day even if unintentionally. Even individuals who act selfishly and ignore the needs of those around them share the greater collective burdens of mankind, of which one of the most pressing is the effects of climate change. Offill’s novels compel us to recognize that we live in a civilization that shares a cultivated planet, yet we put arbitrary boundaries and delineations everywhere in our lives rather than embrace our shared world through acts of remembering and expiation. The core delusion that “I am here and you are there” conjures the fallacy that we must honor these arbitrary spaces between us, the difference between humans and animals, mothers and fathers, children and adults (*Weather* 201). Though framed by Offill as a mirage, these arbitrary spaces are the boundaries that structure our lives. Humans must accept that the binary structures of the civilized world are simply delusions, misbeliefs that the climate crisis not only presents the opportunity to change, but the necessity for it. To accept this belief is to contemplate dusk and acknowledge the vistas, to accept the beautiful and joyful potential for evolution in a realistic and existential life.

## WORKS CITED

- “Alcoholics Anonymous: The Big Book.” *American Addiction Centers*,  
[www.recovery.org/alcoholics-anonymous/big-book](http://www.recovery.org/alcoholics-anonymous/big-book).
- Andersen, Ross. “A Journey into the Animal Mind: What science can tell us about how other creatures experience the world.” *The Atlantic*, March 2019,  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/03/what-the-crow-knows/580726/>.
- Arensberg, Mary. “Introduction.” *The American Sublime*, SUNY Press, 1986.  
 EBSCOhost,  
[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e025xna&AN=7296&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e025xna&AN=7296&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- Bale, Rachael. “How Many Species Haven’t We Found Yet?” *National Geographic*, 26 Dec. 2019,  
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/newsletters/animals/article/how-many-species-have-not-found-december-26>. Accessed 10 Feb. 2021.
- Cixous, Hélène. “Hélène Cixous, from ‘Sorties’” *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, edited by Kate McGowan and Antony Easthope, 2nd ed., University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2004, pp. 146–56.

- Darwin, Charles, and Gillian Beer. *The Origin of Species*. Oxford University Press, 1996. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=12318&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=12318&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- “De-.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/search?q=de-](http://www.etymonline.com/search?q=de-). Accessed 26 Mar. 2021.
- Didion, Joan. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.
- “Dystopia.” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dystopia](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dystopia). Accessed 26 Mar. 2021.
- Echevarria, Gina, and Chia-Yi Hou. “An estimated 90% of adults in the US have fillings — here’s why we can’t just regrow our teeth.” *Business Insider Nederland*, 8 Apr. 2019, [www.businessinsider.nl/humans-cant-regrow-adult-teeth-evolution-mammals-2019-4?international=true&r=US](http://www.businessinsider.nl/humans-cant-regrow-adult-teeth-evolution-mammals-2019-4?international=true&r=US).
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature. Project Gutenberg*, 2009, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/29433/29433-h/29433-h.htm>.
- Felluga, Dino. “Modules on Lacan: On Psychosexual Development.” *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Purdue U, 31 Jan. 2011, <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html>
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1970.
- Freud, Sigmund, et al. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. 1930. W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Routledge, 2007.
- Offill, Jenny. *Dept. Of Speculation*. New York, Vintage Contemporaries, 2014.
- Offill, Jenny. *Weather*. New York, Vintage Contemporaries, 2021.
- Ortner, Sherry B. “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1972, pp. 5–31. Crossref, doi:10.2307/3177638.
- “Re-.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/word/re-?ref=etymonline\\_crossreference](http://www.etymonline.com/word/re-?ref=etymonline_crossreference). Accessed 26 Mar. 2021.
- Voltaire. *Candide and Other Stories*. Translated by Roger Pearson, Oxford University Press, 2008.

---

**MAGGIE TOOLE, Barnard College '22**, majored in English. She currently works for BooktheWriter assisting with regular group discussions with authors. Her fields of interest include theatre, film, and creative writing.