


Possibilities of Habit-Change in *The Essex Serpent*: A Semiotic Analysis of Cora Seaborne

Onur Eyüp BÖLE 

İstanbul University, Turkey

Abstract: This article offers a semiotic approach to Sarah Perry's 2016 novel *The Essex Serpent*. In the light of Teresa de Lauretis's study of interpretants in relation to female subjectivity, it becomes evident that Perry in her protagonist Cora Seaborne reformulates female experience as an active and immanent force in socio-cultural processes of semiotic production. This article analyses this force in terms of de Lauretis's *habit-change*, which defines subjectivity as a nexus between the norms that produce it and the change on which the very possibility of semiotic production depends. The full development of Perry's protagonist in these terms brings about an awareness about this in-betweenness, which produces a non-binary and non-hierarchical ethical turn beyond rigid categories that define the subject's relationship with the world. This ethical turn, this article demonstrates, is specifically important in that it situates female subjectivity *inside* history instead of marginalising it in an exclusive or antithetical manner, and that it offers a liberating space for all its participants (including the Victorian male characters).

Keywords:

Sarah Perry,
The Essex Serpent,
Semiotics,
Teresa de Lauretis,
Neo-Victorianism,
Historical fiction,
Feminist literature

Article History:

Received:
16 Jan. 2022

Accepted:
13 Apr. 2022

The Essex Serpent Romanında Alışkanlık Değişikliğinin Olanakları: Cora Seaborne'un Semiyotik Bir Analizi

Öz: Bu makale, Sarah Perry'nin 2016 tarihli *The Essex Serpent* (Essex Yılanı) romanına semiyotik bir yaklaşım sunmaktadır. Teresa de Lauretis'in kadın öznelliği bağlamında yorumlayanlar (interpretant) çalışmasının ışığında, Perry'nin ana karakteri Cora Seaborne ile kadın deneyimini semiyotik üretimin sosyo-kültürel süreçlerinde aktif ve içkin bir kuvvet olarak tekrar formüle ettiği görülmektedir. Bu makale bu kuvveti, de Lauretis'in öznelliği, kendisini üreten normlar ve bizzat semiyotik üretim olanağının dayandığı değişim arasında bir bağlantı noktası olarak tanımlayan alışkanlık değişikliği terimi bağlamında analiz etmektedir. Perry'nin ana karakterinin bu terminoloji içerisindeki tam gelişimi, böyle bir arada kalmışlığın farkındalığıyla birlikte öznenin dünyayla olan ilişkisini tanımlayan katı kategorilerin ötesinde, ikiliklere dayanmayan ve hiyerarşik olmayan bir etik dönüşümü üretmektedir. Bu çalışma, böylesi bir etik dönüşümün, kadın öznelliğini dışlayıcı veya tezatlarla dayalı bir tutumla marjinalleştirmek yerine tarihin *içerisinde* konumlandırması ve (erkek Viktoryen karakterler dahil) bütün katılımcılar için özgürleştirici bir alan sunması nedeniyle özellikle önemli olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Keywords:

Sarah Perry,
The Essex Serpent,
Semiyotik,
Teresa de Lauretis,
Neo-Viktoryenizm,
Tarihî roman,
Feminist edebiyat

Makale Geçmişi:

Geliş Tarihi:
16 Ocak 2022

Kabul Tarihi:
13 Nisan 2022

How to Cite: Böle, Onur Eyüp. "Possibilities of Habit-Change in *The Essex Serpent*: A Semiotic Analysis of Cora Seaborne." *IDEAS: Journal of English Literary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2022, pp. 73-87.



The question of signs and semiotic value holds a great significance in Sarah Perry's 2016 neo-Victorian novel *The Essex Serpent*. Signs are related to trauma, self-analysis, mystery, friendship, sexuality, deconstruction of reality, self-manifestation, science, and religion in the context of the 19th century. Set in 1893, the novel recounts the story of Cora Seaborne, a young woman who leaves London society life after the death of her abusive husband and takes up palaeontology in the fossil-laden marshes of Essex, in Colchester, where the 17th century Essex witch trials took place (Quinn). This, indeed, is indicative of the newly-formed necessity she feels to understand the material *signs* that the world has to offer as a substitute for her own stolen history, as she comes to realise that she *has been made* a woman since her marriage up until her husband's death. Moreover, she comes to be informed of the titular Essex Serpent before any scientific discovery, the elusive centre and empty signifier of the novel. Derived from a 17th-century legend, she finds out, it is believed that a mythical sea serpent has been unleashed by an earthquake across the coast of Aldwinter village shortly before Cora's arrival. A mysterious waver in the water, the death of a man on the shore, a missing boat, a lost child, and a sheep all contribute to the rise of the rumours. The Serpent thus becomes a mental sign of a collective litmus test which reveals the heterogeneous nature of the village as its meaning multiplies: All at once, the Serpent is a blasphemous superstition, a cherished pagan sign, an ominous sign of divine judgment, a Messianic sign of hope, a living fossil, the product of a collective delirium, depending on the interpreter. Thanks to the Serpent's absence-presence, in short, Cora finds the village of Aldwinter as an unstable ground of meaning, where she is able to shed the social markers enforced upon her and starts to build her own. Stripping her body off the constraints of Victorian fashion, Cora slowly learns to reestablish her identity on her own terms and invent a new form of relationship with people (and the world), in which jealousy, possessiveness, pre-established roles, and categorical definitions are replaced with spontaneity, liberty, fluidity, and non-hierarchical reciprocity. The most striking example of the main plot is her relationship with the village Reverend William Ransome, which cannot be easily explained in terms of platonic friendship or love affair since the meanings associated with such categories grow ambivalent in accordance with the change in their subjectivities through this encounter.

This article argues that this new paradigm corresponds to the term *habit-change* in Teresa de Lauretis's semiotic theory of female experience, which provides a materialistic

account of the processes by which “women continue to become woman” as subjects, both a product *and* an active agent *within* these processes (de Lauretis 185). It is a Peircean take on feminist theory, and as such, it focuses on actual practices and experiences of women, instead of resorting to the rhetoric of marginality. Accordingly, this article is divided into four sections. The first section offers de Lauretis’s semiotic theory of female experience as the theoretical framework of this article. It elaborates on the triadic model of interpretants she borrows from Peirce. The remaining three sections apply this framework to analyse Cora’s character development in semiotic terms. Each of these sections offers a close reading of a semiotic process that Cora enters as they correspond to each respective interpretant in de Lauretis’s formula: Firstly, Cora’s encounter with her own reflection in the mirror on the day of her husband’s funeral, later the association of Cora’s scientific pursuit with the mental image of her childhood, and finally, Cora’s definition of her relationship with William as a contronym through the word *cleave*. Each state of the process of semiosis, as this article discusses, produces a habit-changing quality and/or is produced by it. The Cora’s final form of attachment with William (both cleft together and cleft apart) is the most developed case of habit-change, which in de Lauretis’s terminology describes the temporary division of the subject vis-à-vis a semiotic process, like two legs of a compass, one provisionally anchored to the meaning produced in the process according to a habit, and the other adjustable and mobile. Furthermore, since the ground of meaning itself is not stable, the status of each relationship or encounter is subject to change alongside the labels that define them. This final interpretant, this article argues, forms the basis of the ethical statement of the novel: To mutually establish common-yet-temporary anchor points that enhance the individual’s creative powers and potential to change. The semiotic network Perry builds through this process is as liberating for men as for women, as will be evident in William’s reciprocal development with Cora which will be analysed in the final section.

Indeed, Perry’s text abounds in such anchor points which especially multiply and alter the meanings of love and friendship with respect to sexuality and class. For a novel haunted by collective fear, diseases, injuries, and traumas, it does not leave out a single character without offering an alternative zone of comfort which feels at once more graceful and liberated than the conventional categories of order they eventually seek. This arises from the complexity of Perry’s characters, which allows them to realise the fluidity and ambivalence of the value systems around them. The rigorous effort to define subjectivity as an ever-changing product and an active agent on a spectrum of an assemblage of signs (rather than rigid categories of opposition) frees the subject from feelings of disappointment, resentment, fear of failure, coercive behaviour, and expectations which derive their justification from habit rather than the specificity of a given semiotic encounter. It also lets the subject realise the experiential value of each encounter and direct its habit-changing effect elsewhere if desired and needed, with an awakened sense of the self and the interconnectivity of the semiotic processes in which the subject participates. The ease with which this happens in *The Essex Serpent* may seem

too natural for the modern reader's mistaken expectations moulded by "notions of a prudish era enslaved by religion and incomprehensible manners," as Perry herself puts it (317), and as such, the entire text is *habit-changing*. This article limits its analysis to the protagonist Cora and her double in William; however, the theoretical framework it provides for the text and the perspective issuing thereof can be applied to other characters and themes of the novel.

De Lauretis's Semiotic Theory of Female Experience

Accordingly, the application of semiotics in this article derives mainly from the work of Teresa de Lauretis. Her theory of semiotics diverges both from its use in contemporary psychoanalytic criticism which she finds insufficient to account for the actual subjective experience beyond linguistic terms, and in neo-pragmatist analyses (à la Umberto Eco) which deliberately, and with a clear opposition to psychoanalysis, excludes "the very area in which human physicality comes to be represented, signified, assumed in the relations of meaning, and thus productive of subjectivity—the area delineated and sketched out by the work of Freud" (171). In other words, *the semiotic* in the former discipline remains to be a mystical field beyond subjective experience in the symbolic order because, according to her, despite the feminist revisions of Lacan and attempts to recover the feminine, female subjectivity (and desire) still exists as a lack, a symptom of male subjectivity determined by transhistorical phallic discourse. The only remaining option, therefore, is to revel in the unsaid and the implied, forever detached from the living experience which is reduced to theoretical fissures and ambiguities within Saussurean semiology. The particular target she opposes here is Julia Kristeva's revision of the Lacanian triptych of *the Imaginary*, *the Symbolic*, and *the Real*. According to Kristeva, there is an interval state called *the Semiotic* which is pre-signifying and pre-linguistic, not quite in the imaginary register or the realm of *the Real*, but does not merely refer to the unity implicated in *the Imaginary*; it is also "on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death" (Kristeva 28). It is neither the imaginary unity nor the symbolic order, it is an interval where the subject is both generated and negated through abjection. In this semiotic register, Kristeva explores the body of the mother with the term *chora* (from the Greek *khôra*), which she borrows from Jacques Derrida (29). According to Derrida, *chora* is an ambiguous interval between being and nonbeing, a receptacle that is not beyond but beneath being, a realm outside the city proper and signification (92). For de Lauretis, such a definition of the Semiotic – as a pre-linguistic and rather mystical ground of epistemology that cannot be reclaimed by language – does not account for actual experiences of women as historical subjects, which cannot be reduced to maternity and abjection alone (172). On the other hand, the neo-pragmatist applications of semiotics founded on Peircean semiotics avoid the risk of mysticism and idealism, yet in doing so, it establishes "the lower" and "the upper" semiotic domains which analyze immediate physical mechanisms (i.e., stimuli) on one side of the spectrum, and cultural systems (e.g., modes of production, socio-economic relations) on the other (de Lauretis 171). This approach, albeit materialistic and much

closer to de Lauretis's theory, thus reinforces "a dichotomous idea of body and mind, matter and intellect, physis and reason" by excluding human subjectivity as a psychological, sociological and physiological agent at the intersection of these domains, since putting it into logico-mathematical formulae without falling back to determinism and essentialism is not an easy task (de Lauretis 171).

As a solution to such a dilemma, she turns to the late works of Peirce in order to revise the study of interpretants, namely the relationship between an object and its sign. In Peircean semiotics, to be precise, a sign only partially represents its object, and this partial relationship itself is an interpretant, a more developed sign than the former and a necessary one for the process of meaning-making and semiotic production (de Lauretis 179). Moreover, this relation is not one of arbitrariness but *habit*, and it first and foremost requires a subject (or an active agent in a general sense). It is important to note that de Lauretis's rendering of the subject within this framework is radically different from Lacanian psychoanalysis: Not subject to the truth of the unconscious beyond the illusion of the conscious and the symbolic order that triumphs over it and alienates it through language, and not a split vehicle of enunciation (sutured between signifiers) whose enunciation does not belong to itself, the subject is a *momentarily* fixed position with respect to the interpretant it produces according to habit, and necessarily an agent of *habit-change* (de Lauretis 180). In other words, according to de Lauretis's pragmatic approach, the conscious and the unconscious do not belong to different semiotic orders or a binary hierarchy but respectively correspond to instinct and reason as a spectrum within the same semiotic process which is inseparable from subjectivity *and* social practices, reciprocally (re)producing each other. Once again, such spectrum is derived from Peirce's own revision of the ternary stage of interpretants within semiotic production with respect to subjective experience, starting from an individual's direct encounter with the sign of an object, to the point of subjective reposition as a self-analysing agent able to produce habit-changing interpretants:

1. "The first proper significate effect of a sign is a *feeling* produced by it." This is the *emotional* interpretant. Although its "foundation of truth" may be slight at times, often this remains the only effect produced by a sign such as, for example, the performance of a piece of music. 2. When a further significate effect is produced, however, is it "through the mediation of the emotional interpretant"; and this second type of meaning effect he calls the *energetic* interpretant, for it involves an "effort," which may be a muscular exertion but is more usually a mental effort, "an exertion upon the Inner World." 3. The third and final type of meaning effect that may be produced by the sign, through the mediation of the former two, is "a *habit-change*": "a modification of a person's tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experiences or from previous exertions." This is the "ultimate" interpretant of the sign, the effect of meaning on which the process of semiosis, in the instance considered, comes to rest. "The real and living logical conclusion is that habit," Peirce states, and designates the third type of significate effect, the *logical* interpretant. (de Lauretis 175)

The significance of this analysis for de Lauretis is that it offers a materialistic basis of the processes by which “women continue to become woman,” or the *speaking I* continues to say *am a woman* as though by instinct, through muscular or mental effort *and* by reason at each semiotic encounter, which in each instance is effected by habit made up of past experiences, current beliefs, desires and dispositions that in turn mobilise new habits or habit-changes through actions and signs by which women participate in the semiotic production of social practices (185). Here it should be noted that de Lauretis does not refer to habit as a negative or positive term; it simply *is*. Likewise, she considers sexuality as *work* in the literal Marxist sense (185). That sexuality can be a means of, control, alienation, commodification and exploitation, and that habit is closely related to dominant ideologies does not concern her as much as the fact that there is nothing essential about them and they are subject to change. There is not a transcendent truth, that is to say, to which the conscious subject is never sufficient to attain. *Becoming-woman* in her terminology, accordingly, has no essential connotation in itself but corresponds to heterogeneous (oppressive as well as liberating) practices that women experience within a social reality which is the only reality. The main point she makes within this frame is that there is no one way to *become woman*, and *feminisms* have always invented new signs, habit-changes, self-analysing and theoretical practices while remaining within social reality, which in turn continues to change through this *labour* - hence her objection to the tendency of Lacanian psychoanalysis to define woman as a lack, a transgression within a transcendent phallic discourse or an antithesis to the Symbolic.

The Emotional Significate Effect: The Laughter of Liberty

One question remains, however: Is there any term, or criteria by which it is possible to assign a positive value to each of these ethically-neutral terms? De Lauretis does not answer this question, neither does she intend to do so. The answer obviously depends on women’s subjective experiences and historical conditions, and de Lauretis’s theory does not imply that one habit (or a habit-change) is better or worse than another, or a certain way of becoming-woman is more ideal or incorrect than another. The scope of the question in this article, accordingly, is limited to the ethical foundation Sarah Perry creates in her own text for her characters and the analysis of the semiotic production she weaves around it. In this respect, this article claims that the critical word in *The Essex Serpent* that serves as a portal by means of which it is possible to explore the ethical value of signs is *liberty*. Following de Lauretis’s terminology, if the semiotic processes by which the speaking *I* says *am a woman* produces emotional, energetic or logical interpretants that contradict the sense of liberty, the text obliterates them and produces new signs which propel the characters to move toward habit-changing practices. This is indeed a rather hard and dangerous task: Offering liberty as an ontological ground of subjectivity within socio-cultural semiotic production brings along the risk of destructive consequences both for one’s self and others due to possible loss of identity and attachment that comfort zones and stable social relations may offer. Perry does not

overlook such a risk, as is evident in various instances in the novel and the character development of her protagonist, as we shall see.

Interestingly enough, the first use of the word *liberty* in the novel appears in relation to labour in a negative sense. It is used by Martha, who is initially hired by Cora's husband as an assistant to Cora but soon becomes her closest companion and secretly falls in love with her – even though their physical proximity throughout the novel is undeniably homoerotic. Coming from a lower-class background herself, Martha is a militant Marxist who gives much weight to equality in her decisions. Accordingly, when the wealthy doctor Spencer shows signs of interest in her, she considers him an *enemy* because he “had the liberty to train in medicine as a kind of hobby” but not the slightest information on the dehumanising conditions of lower-class London and the class question in general which gives him the privilege to pick a profession as a hobby in the first place (80). *The Essex Serpent*, in this respect, is in parallel with de Lauretis's association of sexuality with labour: In the context of sexuality, too, liberty can result in abuse, alienation and apathy when allocated to a certain sex or an individual and not experienced collectively. However, the greatest accomplishment of the novel in this context is to establish a sense of security on the basis of liberty, to generate alternative forms of fluid relationships and comfort zones, that is to say, without compromising liberty. In these habit-changing formations, mutual responsibility and attachment do exist as much as, if not more, than conventional relationships with rigid gender roles, but these are founded on the basis of liberty (instead of pre-established norms of society), and under the condition that these formations must be either transformed or terminated if liberty succumbs to obligation. In the example of Spencer, Martha sees good intentions in the enemy and leads him to channel his feelings for her toward the housing crisis in lower-class London: Spencer, in return, uses his wealth and influence to reinforce policies that remove moral constraints on workers without depriving them of their right to shelter, which raises his class awareness with respect to liberty and makes him a more considerate and brave person in his private life as well.

In accordance with the basis of liberty as a positive signifier of ethics, therefore, Cora's journey from London to Essex signifies a journey from obligation to liberty, her muscular and mental effort, or *the energetic interpretant* in de Lauretis's terminology. Furthermore, her stay in Essex as depicted in the text is itself a journey towards *becoming-woman* on the basis of liberty, and learning to re-establish her relationship with the world on this basis – that is, *the logical interpretant* which involves self-analysis and habit-change.

At this point, it might be helpful to turn to the primary sign which produces in Cora *the emotional interpretant* that initiates this process, namely Cora's own reflection in the mirror on the day of her husband's funeral. “Dressed as the day demanded,” she has pearl-drop earrings, a veil and a black plume of feathers on a “black hat that did not suit her,” and a black dress which reveals the scar on her neck shaped like a silver leaf on a candlestick

“which her husband had pressed into her flesh as though he were sinking his signet ring into a pool of wax,” the same scar which she had grown fond of until that moment (16). However, the discrepancy between the image of what a *mourning widow* ought to look like and who she feels she is as a real person arouses a sudden sense of estrangement, which leads her to say “oh, he made me – yes” (17). The image in the mirror, in other words, is but an extension of her deceased husband for whom, until this point, she has paid all the services expected of a wife, which has included her construction as a woman. It belongs not to the woman *she has become*, but the woman her husband moulded out of the teenage girl she used to be, the child with “untidy clothes” and unbraided hair” of whom the broken sculpture in the mirror was later trained to be ashamed (17). The unnerving – and certainly habit-changing – effect of such an encounter which shakes off her stupor results from this: She comes to realise that inasmuch as she is overcome with a sense of relief while she is not supposed to, what grief she may feel is not exactly directed towards her husband’s death but this image in the mirror as a defence mechanism against self-loathing.

Though not well-developed at this stage of the novel, such double movement of Cora’s estrangement from her image and the fixation of her image on her subjectivity plays a critical role in providing a basis on which Cora later feels, thinks, and acts through more developed signs. Furthermore, the fluid relationships she later establishes with others and alternative forms of attachments the text multiplies are informed by this ambivalent experience she goes through vis-à-vis her image. Rather than shame or a total detachment, she feels compassionate towards her, understanding that it is okay to at least partially feel what this image would feel and that the sense of relief is at least partially a sign of the desires this image has been conditioned to repress. Like the scar on her neck and the speech impediment she has acquired and learned to hide over the years, the image still belongs to her, on the condition that she does not let it define or put pre-established brands on her anymore, such as the title widow which indicates that her husband continues to *make* this image even in his death. Above all else, it is the moment of realisation that *the widow in the mirror* has already gone through systematic techniques of discipline and control, and *punishment* one might expect for slipping into liberty, with which she had grown unfamiliar. Cora thus needs this image to remember that she is now entitled to liberty, free to laugh at authority, norms and power relations since she has already faced the most dehumanising consequences she can imagine of the acts of free self-expression which she is ready to demonstrate. Far from a metaphor, the laughter of liberty is a literal sign which, in a matter of minutes following the estrangement from and partial reconciliation with her image, sticks to her face from this point on and becomes a defining trait of hers for the rest of the novel. This laughter, moreover, signifies the closing of a chapter in her life which apparently began with another laughter, as a naïve response of teenage Cora to her husband’s sinister joke at an early stage of their marriage when he defined her as an object of his *kintsukoroi* fetish: “In Japan they’ll mend a broken pot with drops of molten gold. What a thing it would be: to have me break you, and mend your

wounds with gold" (17). The rest, she concludes, was a battle that her husband singlehandedly fought on her body "bound by whalebone, pierced with ivory, pinned by the hair with tortoiseshell" (18). The incompatibility of the laughter she reclaims, in other words, does not only involve the image of the mourning widow in the mirror, but the woman his husband has made in her entirety and, by extension, the image of the typical Victorian society woman. Stripping off her dresses and accessories, accordingly, she moves to Essex in gender-neutral clothes solely selected for function and comfort as it suits her long walks and fossil search, marking the beginning of her *muscular and mental effort* (i.e., energetic interpretant) produced by the previous emotional interpretant as explained.

The Energetic Interpretant: Grubbing about the Mud

There is an important exchange in the novel between Cora and Reverend William shortly after Cora's arrival in Aldwinter, in which William tells Cora that she is "always laughing; it's contagious, like a yawn," and adds that she is "not what we expected" (95). Apart from supporting the analysis offered so far through William's observation of Cora's eccentric appearance and laughter as well as the implication of the contagious effect of liberty, this passage further contributes to the semiotic development of Cora and the analysis of this article, due to Cora's unexpected response to William's remarks in which she defines her own improper laughter as an outward manifestation of her renunciation of religion, and her inner lack of grace (95). The interesting point of this conversation is that it does not set up two stock characters based on the stereotypical dichotomy of faith and reason or the so-called "Victorian crisis of faith" which has long since been confounded (Turner 13).

Indeed, the passage takes place prior to Reverend William's church service in All Saints' Church in the village of Aldwinter, where Cora accompanies him in order to examine the image of a serpent on a pew allegedly carved in the 17th century. William wants to destroy the carving not so much because it is a pagan symbol, but because it gives the community substance to their irrational fear of the mythical sea serpent. On the other hand, Cora is enthusiastic about the possibility that the subject of rumours may be a surviving ichthyosaur long thought to be extinct. However, the driving force of the passage is not the dichotomy between faith and reason, but once again liberty: Just as de Lauretis replaces the unconscious and the conscious with instinct and reason as a spectrum separated by the degree of semiotic development rather than two opposite registers, Cora at once disposes of the possibility of such a dichotomy by asserting that she has given religion up not in the name of reason, not because belief and reason are mutually exclusive (admitting that she does not even know the difference between the two), or even because she is a rational person. Instead, she has chosen to do so for the sake of her liberty "to think the thoughts that come, to send them where I want them to go, not to let them run along tracks someone else set, leading only *this way* or *that*. . . . And sometimes I'm afraid I'll be punished for it, but I know punishment, I've learned how to stand it" (96). Furthermore, the reason she has chosen to take up palaeontology, she reveals, is that it

reminds her of the image of herself as a child grubbing about the mud, which is the only image of liberty she can remember before her marriage. Amateur palaeontology as a scientific pursuit, that is to say, signifies an act of *becoming-child* in order to become a woman on her own terms from scratch, without the intervention of the norms of private and public institutions (i.e., marriage and religion), in the absence of which she tries to find a sense of community with pre-historic evolutionary relatives and a liberating foundation of ethics by which she can act.

We should note that neither *becoming-child* nor *becoming-woman from scratch* at this stage of semiotic development implies a conscious blueprint that Cora follows. The realisation, or making sense of her actions as such comes much later as a logical or final interpretant which is discussed in the following section. The image of herself as a child instantly appears as an energetic interpretant produced as a response to William's interested approach. If we turn to de Lauretis's formula that signs are *both* causes and effects which simultaneously enter conscious and unconscious processes, it is evidently a significant effect on the level of consciousness; as a probable cause, however, it is not conscious. Neither should it be hastily associated with her changed appearance and confused with a denial of sex or construction of a universal subjectivity, which is itself gendered (Slatman 200). That is not because a woman's claim to universality or even masculinity has a negative value in itself. For instance, if we take the term *becoming* in a Deleuzian sense, which is akin to de Lauretis's habit-change, a woman's (and anyone's) *becoming-woman* occurs in each act which does not conform to norms because "all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman" (Deleuze and Guattari 277). *Becoming-child* is the radical end of this transformation, as it amounts to freeing one's self from all biological and social signifiers to the point of imperceptibility (279). Having thus defined the term becoming independently of imitation, a woman's claim to masculinity can in fact be marked as an act of becoming-woman as long as it destabilises masculinity itself, without incorporating the subject into power relations as a perpetrator of oppression. In Perry's text too, confusion about her image with masculinity has an emasculating effect which more often than not produces a strange sense of comfort, ease and liberty for male characters. However, it is because of *the lack of intent* that the energetic interpretant of Cora as a child grubbing about the mud requires further development. It is not her intention to destabilise masculinity, neither is *becoming-child* an intentional effort. At this stage of the novel, she is too self-absorbed to realise any other passion or feeling even in herself (and less in others) apart from the sense of liberty that comes from forgetting that she is a woman (59). As much as she is wary of institutions and normative categories, she is yet to figure out a way to establish interpersonal relationships beyond them, which intensifies her self-absorption. Therefore, *grubbing about the mud* becomes her comfort zone. However, as the spontaneity of childhood gives way to the assumption of a researcher in her current role with respect to *mud*, it seeps as a habit into social interactions which in turn become an object of study for her, rather than

opportunities that help her explore her vulnerabilities and powers to develop her subjectivity and establish new bonds.

What the passage that takes place in the church of All Saints' does is to initiate a process through which she moves from such solitary and instinctive effort towards formulation and sharing of her thoughts – or more developed signs – as a tool towards self-analysis, without judgment and gender roles. In other words, it is *the mental effort* of grubbing about the mud which follows this passage, mostly through letters than meeting in person. Much of the information about Cora's past is provided by her correspondence with William, entwined with her feelings and their relations to the seemingly opposing views of the two. In William's character, Perry creates Cora's double with whom she can experience the spontaneity of childhood which interestingly feeds off deep intellectual and personal conversations, as though they can read each other's minds. In William's remark that *she is not what they expected*, for instance, Cora can see beyond the reference to her improper laughter and sense the implication that *they* refers to William himself and his own expectation of a typical frail widow who would arrive in Aldwinter with nothing to do but ruminate on popular fads such as naturalism to fill in time. Not because she feels any better than such stereotype, but because he can in turn sense that there is something more and will not judge whatever that may be makes her shy and comfortable at once, which urges her to speak and conclude William is not what she expected (96). Indeed, William comes off eccentric as a cleric. He is a proponent of the Enlightenment, an avid reader of natural sciences, with a loose naturalistic theology in his practical life. In her notes, Perry writes: "An obscure book by an anonymous Essex rector, *Man's Age in the World According to Holy Scripture and Science* (1865), suggests a clergy that did not see faith and reason as mutually exclusive. It amuses me to think of it on William Ransome's shelves (317)". That William does not see faith and reason as mutually exclusive, however, is not as significant as his receptivity to Cora's *unexpectedness*, and the tongue-in-cheek challenges she asserts against religion and his profession. Put differently, he enjoys the liberty of losing his authority, either as a man or a rector. The effect of this joy on his religious views is *habit-changing*, to say the least. Every blow on it he receives from Cora *expands* its scope: He comes to decide that there is no absolute truth, that there are more ways to love than language can formulate, and that if God exists, *then* everything is permitted. In a letter, he writes:

Cora, I was content. I had come to the end of everything new – I had no more surprises in store, and I never sought any. I was serving my purpose. And there you were – and from your hair which is never tidy to your man's clothes, I've never liked the look of you (do you mind?). But I seem to have learned you by heart, seemed at once to know you, had immediate liberty to say everything to you I could never have said elsewhere – and all this is to me the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"! Ought I to be ashamed, or troubled? I am not. I refuse to be.

How do you like that, you rank atheist, you apostate? You have driven me to God.

With love – and with prayer, whether you like it or not,
WILL[,] (195)

The primary difference between Cora and William, however, is that William's loss of authority and gender roles is strictly limited to Cora, who is the source of his sense of liberty (hence his hasty illusion of change as can be seen in his letter), whereas Cora's renunciation of femininity is general and finds a channel of further self-exploration in William. The latter, as discussed, requires yet further semiotic development. William's authority in another area, namely his role as a father, will temporarily cost him the sense of liberty Cora offers, which is crucial for the completion of the semiotic process which continues to make Cora and to be made by her, as we will see in the following section.

The Final Interpretant: The Ethics of *Cleaving*

On the level of energetic interpretants, the most dramatic textual evidence of Cora's lack of intent to disrupt institutional order and, more importantly, the need to continue on her *becoming-woman* with yet another habit-change ironically, is what Martha later calls "The Laughing Incident" (150). It occurs during her visit to the school where Joanna, William's daughter studies, in order to show her fossils and introduce simple principles of scientific inquiry to them, hoping that they may learn to interpret the Serpent as she does (i.e., not a mythical creature but a living fossil). In the classroom also sits Naomi Banks, the former best friend of Joanna who is upset about Cora's visit because Joanna has lost interest in her after meeting Cora (whom Joanna starts idolising right away) and her scientific methods. Missing the paganistic rituals they shared on the shore right before Cora's arrival, and needing her friend to speak of the sexual abuse she was subjected to not long ago, Naomi suppresses her personal thoughts and starts to imagine Cora as a witch that walks among the desks, with the Serpent waiting for her at the door. The mental image of Cora as a witch, all of a sudden, initiates a fit of laughter which spreads to all other schoolchildren, disrupting the order of the classroom for minutes on end.

The immediate significant effect of this collective laughter on Cora, as though looking at her own renewed laughing image for the first time, is a shame and a sense of failure. In fact, if we recall, the last time the text had her before the mirror, what Cora saw was her image as a laughing young girl getting slain in her naivety, following estrangement and grief; the actual laughter which shook off her stupor brought with it a sense of liberty so powerful that she did not even see it in the mirror. On this occasion, the image of the collective laughter arouses in her not a sense of estrangement caused by the difference between who she is and who she ought to be, but a need for detachment because it is *not* whom she ought to be. This instance reveals that for Cora, the repeated experience of liberty followed by repeated acts of detachment has turned it into a habit, and as such, it stops producing the effect of liberty. Further still, rather than leading to self-analysis, this habit has become a shield against her own emotions in instances which involve the risk of attaching signifiers to her, as evidenced by her discomfort with William's changing feelings for her shortly before this incident. Since any relationship

other than strictly defined friendship amounts to fetters for her at this point, her discomfort arises from the old habits of shame, sense of incompetence and pain associated with the familiar, which supplants the thrill of the unknown and her genuine feelings, as in the case of The Laughing Incident. Still unable to see an alternative beyond permanent fixation and total break, she selects the latter and decides to return to London. To make matters worse, she leaves Aldwinter on bad terms with William, after she invites her close surgeon friend Luke Garrett to have Joanna under hypnosis and diagnose the possible reason behind the laughter unbeknownst to William, who walks into the scene and snatches Luke's body away from her daughter by physical force. This, for the first time, reminds Cora of her husband.

A significant detail of her return to London, which reveals that her motive is to escape from trauma and pain, is that she does not turn back to her old house, but to Katherine Ambrose, her closest friend from upper-class London who has a strong sense of empathy throughout the novel – she is the first one, for instance, who senses that Cora does not feel sad for the death of her husband. Of Cora's return, she notes:

My dear, I know you grieve. I admit I was never sure what it was that first brought you to Michael, who always frightened me just a bit (do you mind my saying so?) but it was something. And the bond is broken, and you are left untethered – and now it seems you are severing all your ties! Cora, you cannot always keep yourself away from things that hurt you. We all wish that we could, but we cannot: to live at all is to be bruised. I don't know what has come between you and your friends, but I know that none of us was made to be alone. You told me once you forget you are a woman, and I understand it now – you think to be a woman is to be weak – you think ours is a sisterhood of suffering! Perhaps so, but doesn't it take greater strength to walk a mile in pain than seven miles in none? You are a woman, and must begin to live like one. By which I mean: have courage. (248)

Ambrose's remarks resonate very well with the purpose of de Lauretis's theory, the purpose of the journey Perry sets up for Cora and the main argument elaborated in this article: The answers to the questions of women cannot be limited to marginality, privacy, nature or politics of unspeakability. It takes courage to engage in actual, material, political and habit-changing processes by which *women continue to become woman*. This is not to say there is no room for solitary activity and work on the margins, in private, in nature, grubbing about the mud and exploring what there might be more than is speakable. However, one needs not choose between the two. Such is the function of Cora's temporary stay in London with her ties cut off: She ends up having to face her self-absorption which constrains *herself* above all else, and in turn, hurts her. She needs her *ties* to ensure her *liberty*, which is not mutually exclusive at all. By the end of this temporary solitude, she reformulates her own subjectivity as a nexus divided between the fixation of a sign and its habit-changing potential in de Lauretis's term. "To cleave to something is to cling to it with all your heart," she tells William later, "but to cleave something apart is to break it up" (279). This is her new and final mode of becoming, the definition of the ties she establishes with herself and the world. The most developed sign, namely the final and

logical interpretant of her image in the mirror is this: She is able to contain opposites at once (e.g., grief and relief, compassion and contempt, courage and fear), embrace her contradictions and mistakes, let them pass through her, change their qualities and let them change her. The single tie she establishes can be platonic and sexual, parental and childlike, dutiful and uncommitted, selfish and selfless, unidirectional and omnidirectional at once, fluid and reversible at each moment she attaches herself to it. Her reunion with William is a result of this transformation, but their sexual intimacy issuing thereof does not mark a shift by which one can claim a change in their friendship, or designate a signifier of their relationship. After the incident, they are not less platonic than they used to be, they are no more bound to one another: There is no innocence to lose, no guilt to expel. The quality of the tie thus *cleft* has changed indeed, but it has become ambivalent and exclusive. On William's part, it is not so much adultery as God's will, a divine experience which in fact *enhances* his love for others, including his wife.

Once again, the transformative power of a singular experience he readily finds in Cora and radiates outwards is the product of the processes by which Cora continues to become woman through complex practical, political and self-analytical processes without any specific first cause or a teleological path. As such, the act of cleaving becomes an ethical principle which applies to every semiotic production in which she participates as an active agent and an ever-changing product. This is evident in her letter to William which closes the novel: She uses the verb *cleave* not in relation to William but *territories*, to explain that she belongs to neither here nor there, but both at once. She is able to embrace her old house as much as and in the same way she embraces William, puts on "silk" as easily as she puts on her "man's coat," and enjoys solitude as well as company. For the first time since the day of her husband's death, she uses her last name: It appears that she is reconciled with her image in the mirror. Embracing her past selves and ready for the new ones, she *finally* has nothing to fear – and for this, she does not need to resort to the dialectic of punishment anymore. Her laughter has not diminished, but grown wiser: Not out of naivety or pure reaction, and certainly not caused by a coincidental event she had no control over (i.e., her husband's death), but as a consequence of her own laborious effort, her own making. Nothing summarises the finality of her semiotic production and the feeling that comes with it better than her closing remarks:

I am torn and I am mended – I want everything and need nothing – I love you
and I am content without you.

Even so, come quickly!

CORA SEABORNE

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