2019

Trees in/as trauma

Emily Mae Grzywacz

Iowa State University

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Trees in/as trauma

by

Emily Grzywacz

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Susan Yager, Major Professor
Brianna Burke
David Zimmerman

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all who have supported and believed in me: family, peers, and mentors. Mom, thank you for reading books with me, watching films, and generally engaging in stimulating conversation that inspired my work, especially my chapter on *Beloved*. Further, thank you for accompanying me to the MLA conference in Chicago where I presented my research on *Beloved*. I dedicate that chapter to you.
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In addition, I would like to thank my friends and colleagues, without whom this thesis would not have been possible.
ABSTRACT

Although it is often overlooked, the tree is an essential element in works of literature from the Old English era to the present day. With an ecocritical rooting, I argue that when a tree experiences trauma in a text—through felling, lightning strike, or incorporation in human violence—its physical appearance maintains that trauma while simultaneously serving as symbol and reminder. Drawing on the idea of pain developed by Elaine Scarry, this thesis argues that trees are subjected to, and become physical representations of, trauma—that is, of physical or psychological injury, whether individual, collective, or environmental. In three works of English and American literature, I show how this trauma is compounded, encompassing the suffering of both humans and nature due to violence, scientific progress, and environmental depletion. I begin with an analysis of the tree in The Dream of the Rood, an Old English poem exploring the experience of the cross on which Christ was crucified, a rare first-person point of view that establishes a non-human voice through personification. This tree urges readers of the poem to listen not only to its story about Christ, but also to its testimony of the trauma it experienced and continues to experience at the hands of man who are responsible not only for the death of Christ, but the continued subjugation of peoples and the environment. The reader’s experience of non-human nature having sentience and the ability to express human sins against the natural world creates a sense of horror, which challenges traditional ideas of humankind and forces humans to acknowledge the violence committed against the environment. For these reasons, this text can and should be categorized as ecohorror.
From there, I examine Mary Shelley’s famous Romantic novel, *Frankenstein*. Although the corruption of nature is often discussed in this work, I focus specifically on the image of the blasted stump. The stump renders pictorially the experiences of Victor Frankenstein while also highlighting the severe and continuous trauma of nature at the hands of humankind, specifically through scientific progress. I conclude with a contemporary American piece, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. In this novel, the tree echoes the trauma of the protagonist, Sethe, of the African American population, and of the environment. In illustrating how the tree is utilized in literature in similar ways across time and space, these works show the deeply intertwined suffering of humans and nature that manifests in a compounded trauma.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: MY MAGNOLIA

Every spring, the magnolia tree in the yard of my childhood home bursts into bloom, its white and pale-pink blossoms painting a beautiful vitality and showering our little house with petals in every gust of wind. The naïveté and self-centered nature of childhood led me to conclude that the magnolia bloomed for me, since my birthday occurred at blooming time, in April. From then on, that tree—in my mind at least—was my tree, my magnolia despite the fact that it stood in its place before my birth and will continue to do so following my death, unbothered by my existence in any capacity as long as I refrain from harming it. Regardless of the one-sided nature of the relationship, I formed an attachment to the tree, discovering new aspects to ponder and appreciate over the years such as its stature, the shape of its leaves, and the twists of its trunk. I realized that trees generally, not only my magnolia, are fascinating figures rooted into our lives and the earth yet are rarely given sustained attention in life or in literature. In the latter, they may be written off as mere scenery or a backdrop to anthropocentric narrative.

This observation and interest spurred my academic research on trees and their use, and abuse, by humans. Literature mirrors and creates culture. Therefore, through the study of trees and their appearance and role in literature, we can better comprehend human consideration of, and interaction with, trees and the environment more generally. Further, such analysis might acknowledge trends and predict how humans will interact with trees and the environment in the future, a pressing issue with the rise of climate change and various forms of environmental depletion. According to NASA, “eighteen of the 19 warmest years on record have occurred since 2001” and “carbon dioxide levels in the air are at their highest in 650,000 years” (Shaftel). Considering how humans have conceptualized trees as a living
organism and symbol in Western history can inform attempts to implement efforts to restore a greener earth. Unlike invisible aspects such as oxygen and carbon dioxide, trees are tangible environmental figures more likely to attract human attention and more susceptible to human intervention. Perhaps this ability to intervene in the lives of trees, along with the trees’ ability to outlive humans without such intervention, partially explains humans’ fascination with trees as both organism and symbol throughout history and across space.

Trees are bountiful, with leaves, fruits, and nuts that nourish both animals and humans. Further, the bodies of trees such as trunks, branches, and canopies provide shelter and serve as tools. Doubtless because trees and forests could provide food, warmth, and shelter, early cultures and mythologies featured the tree of bounty (Hooke 4). Beyond the bounty provided by the tree, Miranda Jane Green, British archaeologist and expert on Celtic mythology, asserts that “the symbolism of trees is complex: their roots and branches evoke an image of a link between sky and Underworld; their longevity represented continuity and wisdom; the seasonal behavior of deciduous trees gave rise to the cyclical symbolism, an allegory of life, death and rebirth” (50). Many religions view the tree as divine or as a conduit of divine power. As explained by Della Hooke, author of Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore, and Landscape, “the tree of life is probably the most ancient and seemingly universal symbol” and “some early European traditions envisaged a World Tree, called in Norse mythology askr Yggdrasill” (3). This ancient concept of the tree and its role in human life has persisted to the common era. As discussed in the ethnographies collected in Laura Rival’s The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism, trees symbolize various concepts in several contemporary cultures. As she points out, “the physical presence of a tree is not that of an artefact; a tree is a living organism” (2). Although
trees are living, their status is ambiguous; many humans struggle with conceptualizing trees as truly living as they do or even as animals do. In the ethnographies collected by Rival, trees are used symbolically to depict the ambiguous concept of life; she adds that “trees are ideal supports for such symbolic purpose precisely because their status as living organisms is ambiguous” (3).

Trees’ connection to humans can also be seen through the language that connects the two. For example, in the English language there is a “widespread symbolic correspondence between tree parts and body parts” (Rival 9). Words such as *stump, trunk,* and *limb* can be attributed to both humans and trees. In relation to a human being, a stump usually refers to the part of the body that remains following an amputation of some kind. In reference to trees, a *stump*—something that appears prominently in *Frankenstein* and in *Beloved*—is the portion of trunk remaining rooted in the ground after a tree is felled or damaged. Human torsos are also described as *trunks,* and of course *limbs* are also common to trees and humans. This mirroring language shows a similarity not only of trees’ and humans’ bodies but also of their physical trauma, since the same terms can be used to describe the bodily losses they endure.

Non-anatomic language also connects trees and humans. For example, when family trees are mapped, as in a genealogical chart, ancestral relations visually take on the form of a deciduous tree. Such maps conveniently denote two biological parents, four grandparents, and so on, creating branches that sprout from other branches, increasingly resembling the shape of a tree. Such maps might also connote the stability of trees in relation to a family’s history. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, the familial relationship of humans and ancestral legacy of trees are closely related in *Beloved.* In this novel, generational
relationships and the collective ancestry of groups of people, particularly the African American community, are prominent.

Like the appearance of trees, the personification of trees and objects constructed from trees appears in many texts in different times and cultures. The tendency of humans to relate themselves to trees by means of language encourages the personification of such features or their consideration in human terms. Both *The Dream of the Rood* and *Beloved* include personification of items constructed of wood; in *The Dream of the Rood* the rood, that is, the cross in Jesus’s crucifixion, is personified, while in *Beloved* 124, the house in which the haunting of Beloved takes place, is described through personification. Although these features, a cross and a house, are wooden, constructed from dead trees, their personification prompts the reader to consider their once-living state. Indeed, “the idea that wood and wooden objects are ‘alive’ because trees are living organisms is extremely widespread” (Rival 22). In certain cultures, wooden objects serve as a sort of second life for a tree, one that can be as enduring as trees themselves (22). Through their personification, the rood and 124 live this kind of second life. *The Dream of the Rood* also personifies the rood while it is still a living tree.

Although *Rood* is an overtly Christian poem, and *Frankenstein* and *Beloved* were written in a culture still influenced by Christianity, the personification of nature was seen in religions older than Christianity, both animistic and totemistic (Rival 4). Some church leaders felt the need to distance Christian practices from paganism by removing such personification (Moore 58). Despite these efforts, the personification of nature, especially “Mother Nature” or “Dame Nature,” persisted in English as well as in other languages and cultures. A survey of “conceptions of nature from the ancient Greeks and Romans up through the time of the
Romantics… show[s] that personifying nature is one of the most employed means of exploring the relationship” between humans and nonhuman nature (Moore 44). More contemporary personification is used as a rhetorical tool in addition to a stylistic one in order to “respond to—provide an alternative worldview to—the anthropocentric paradigm” (Moore 3). Ecocentric personification ties rhetoric and ecology by persuading an audience that all living things are connected (10). However, all humans personify nature, often unconsciously (14). When children say that the tree outside their window is smiling up at the sun, they are not—unless possessing capabilities far surpassing those of typical children—making a conscious effort to articulate the interconnectedness of trees and humankind. On the contrary, personifying nature feels natural.

All these historical and linguistic connections of human and tree inform my analysis of trees’ appearances in literature. Before I analyze three selected works, The Dream of the Rood, Frankenstein, and Beloved, the theoretical framework showing how each text presents trees as subject to and representative of human and environmental trauma must be explained. My argument brings ecocriticism, ecohorror, and posthumanism to Elaine Scarry’s theories of pain in The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. I expand on Scarry’s ideas regarding physical pain to include psychological pain and the pain experienced by the environment.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism as a literary term was introduced by William Rueckert in 1978 in the title of his article, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (105). Cherryl Glotfelty, cofounder of the Association for the Study in Literature and Environment (ASLE), defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Ecocriticism is often associated with “green studies,” which aims to
increase the amount of environmental work done in the academy more generally, not only through the analysis of literature (Moore 4). Glotfelty and Harold Fromm discuss, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, the questions ecocritics and theorists ask as means of understanding what ecocriticism is and does. Glotfelty and Fromm provide a relatively comprehensive list; however, a few of their items connect most clearly to this thesis and its goals. These questions are:

- What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel?
- How do metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?
- In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? (xix)

All these questions demonstrate increasing, focused attention on how natural features and the environment are manifested in culture and literature.

According to Greg Garrard, ecocriticism was not immediately accepted into literary studies, but those in the discipline persisted in an effort to defend non-human nature (62). Ecocriticism has also led to eco-social sub-fields such as ecofeminism, which is likely the most well-known of the ecocritical sub-fields. As discussed by Greta Gaard, “what makes an action or analysis ecofeminist is its intersectional approach to understanding and acting to correct eco-social and environmental problems” (69). She adds, “ecofeminism is unique for bridging human justice, interspecies justice, and human-environmental justice” (69). Extrapolating from Gaard suggests that women and the environment are both positioned as resources for consumption; thus, a holistic reimagining of the role of women and environment can save both from exploitation. Since its conception, “the encounter of ecocriticism with identity-based theories familiar in mainstream literary study—organized
primarily around race, disability, sexuality, and postcolonial subalternity—has multiplied” (63). My work here reflects this trend to incorporate ecocriticism with “identity-based theories.” For example, Chapter Four on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* explores the novel’s ecocritical components in tandem with race.

**Ecohorror**

Another offshoot rooted in ecocriticism, though not necessarily an eco-social one, is the approach of ecohorror. Ecohorror is a relatively new framework in the humanities that merges ecocritical and horror approaches to texts in order to form a complex way to view texts of all kinds, including film and literature. Although ecohorror as a term first appeared in the 1990s, its original definition has evolved (Rust and Soles 510). *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE, the publication sponsored by ASLE)* featured a special cluster on ecohorror in 2014 (vol. 21, issue 3). In it, Stephen A. Rust and Carter Soles expand on the traditional “revenge of nature” narrative, that is, a narrative that showcases the violent revenge nature takes on humankind as a result of human mistreatment of the environment and its features. Their definition includes “texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world, or in which horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness, represent ecological crises, or blur human/non-human distinctions more broadly” (509-510). This broader definition minimizes emphasis on demonic representations of the environment by prompting audiences to recognize their inherent connection to nature, rather than viewing humans and nature as a dyad of entities exploiting and committing violence against one another. Ecohorror challenges misconceptions and rigid partitions between human and non-human, a posthumanistic idea that will be discussed in Chapter Three on *Frankenstein*. Humankind is a vital element of the natural world, sprouted from it just as is a tree or any other natural feature. This inclusive view challenges humans to realize that their actions—
and lack of action—are deeply connected not only to nature’s well-being as a separate entity, but also to an inherent part of themselves. Such a realization can lead to both awe and horror. This fresh take on ecohorror will be used to anchor my analysis of the compounded traumas in tree bodies in *The Dream of the Rood, Frankenstein, and Beloved*. Further, I will argue that *The Dream of the Rood* can and should be categorized as an example of ecohorror.

**Posthumanism**

In *Posthumanism*, Neil Badmington described how the capacity for rational thought was long assumed to characterize humans and set them hierarchically above other beings (4). This idea of humanism was challenged in the twentieth century through the works of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (4). Marx wrote against “the humanist belief in a natural human essence which exists outside history, politics, and social relations” by creating a theoretical possibility “that radically different material conditions of existence produce incompatible subjectives” (Badmington 5). The work of Freud further problematizes the idea of humanism by “proposing that human activity is governed in part by unconscious motives” (5). Contributors such as Marx and Freud led to the development of posthumanistic thought, in which “the reign of Man is simultaneously being called into question by literature, politics, cinema, anthropology, feminism, and technology” (Badmington 9). Shelley’s *Frankenstein* directly reflects what Badmington discusses here, as it depicts “man breathing ‘himself’ to death, raising himself to ruins” (Badmington 10) through the character of Victor Frankenstein and the scientific acts he commits against nature by creating a monster (hereafter Frankenstein’s monster, rendered FM). A posthumanist lens is central to my discussion of *Frankenstein* in Chapter Three.
Pain/Trauma

My use of the word *trauma* is related to Elaine Scarry’s definition of pain found in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. This book covers three related subjects: the difficulty of expressing physical pain, political and perceptual issues that arise from that difficulty, and the nature of human creation (3). Although Scarry focuses almost exclusively on physical pain, I extend her ideas to include psychological pain, such as the psychological trauma Victor Frankenstein endures in *Frankenstein*. Both physical and psychological pain are difficult if not impossible to describe to one who is not in pain. As Scarry notes,

> When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. (3)

The language in this passage highlights how difficult it is to acknowledge another’s intangible pain. Both physical and psychological pain are intangible in this way, but trees can provide a visualization of the physical, psychological, and emotional pain—which I characterize as *trauma*—of characters and environmental features in *The Dream of the Rood, Frankenstein,* and *Beloved*. In these texts, trees bring “invisible geography” to “the visible surface” (3). In *The Dream of the Rood*, the trauma of Christ during his crucifixion, of the rood during that event, and of the greater environment is represented in a single artifact, the rood. In *Frankenstein*, the psychological trauma of Victor Frankenstein, FM, and the greater environment is figured in the blasted stump. Lastly, the trauma of Sethe, her family, the African American population, and the environment is manifested in several trees in the
novel, such as the tree-like scar on Sethe’s back, the stump where Sethe first meets the ghost of Beloved, and the trees surrounding the Clearing. A melding of ecocriticism, ecohorror, and posthumanism with Scarry’s ideas of pain reveals how the trees of *The Dream of the Rood, Frankenstein,* and *Beloved* are subjected to and represent trauma, whether of characters, collective groups, or the environment.
CHAPTER 2. “WE CROSSES WENT ON WEEPING”:
THE DREAM OF THE ROOD AS AN ECOHORROR TEXT

Let the trees of the forest sing,
Let them sing for joy before the LORD
—1 Chronicles 16:33

Crown of thorns, nailed hands and feet, death: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is a story known to believers and non-believers alike. The image of the cross, symbolizing Christ’s sacrifice for the world, became an emblem of Christianity. The Dream of the Rood, a poem found in the Vercelli manuscript of the late tenth century, tells another part of the crucifixion story. This Old English poem depicts the cross that bore the crucified body of Christ, using a first-person perspective to express the rood’s experience and emotions. The poem highlights the entire life of the tree, not attributing its whole worth to its direct interaction with Christ at the moment of crucifixion. Further, the poem grants the cross a voice of its own by means of personification, allowing the tree to explain its life, its utilization in the crucifixion, and the traumas mankind inflicted upon it and its kind.

“Listen!” the cross exclaims, demanding the attention of mankind through human speech. (This technique of literary personification is also seen in the Old English poem known as “The Husband’s Message,” in which a bit of wood sends a message from lover to beloved.) The incorporation of voice in Rood is vital. Because the rood was present at, and participated in, the crucifixion, the first-person perspective provides the audience with intimate details of Christ’s crucifixion. Christ’s suffering is compounded with the personal trauma of the cross and the trauma of the natural world more generally. The cross itself becomes, simultaneously, a symbol of human sin and of salvation. In this chapter, I argue that Rood
emerges as an ecohorror text through its use of personification and discussion of the human impact on the natural environment.

Before analyzing the poem, I will outline its structure. *Rood* is an early example of a medieval dream-vision. The initial speaker of the poem, mirroring the language later uttered by the rood itself, demands that the audience “Listen!” to a dream about the “Saviour’s tree” (Raffel line 25). In the dreamer’s vision, the tree is at one moment beautiful and the next drenched with blood. Once the frame is established, the dreamer details the words of the rood itself. The tree begins its tale with the moment when it was cut down, pulled “out of the earth” (30). The rood explains how men used it for punishing criminals, an act the rood describes as humiliating. Then the rood explains how Christ embraced the rood as a victorious warrior. Unlike Christ, the rood is deeply fearful but dares not bow or hurt those who are crucifying Christ. After Christ’s death, both humans and nature mourn, and the cross is discarded and lost until the faithful rescue it, adorning it with “silver and gold” (77). The rood, in anguish, bemoans the actions of evil men even while relishing its new role as a glorious—if not *the* most glorious—symbol for humans because “the Father of glory has honored” the rood (90). The rood urges the dreamer to tell others of this dream, disclosing the rood’s sacred status to the world. The poem ends with the dreamer describing his eagerness to do as the cross demands. The dreamer states that his “hope in life / Is now that” he shall revere the “cross of triumph more than other / Men” (126-29). The dreamer hopes the cross will “fetch” him “out of exile” and bring him to the glory of God and heaven (138).

**Ecocriticism and *The Dream of the Rood***

Because ecohorror is a branch of ecocriticism, it is important to understand how an ecocritical frame enriches the reading of this poem. According to Mae Kilker, “ecocritical theory can help us better understand the relationship between the Anglo-Saxons and their
environment, in particular that between Old English texts and the material world of Anglo-Saxon England” (310). Texts such as *Rood* can illustrate the environmental attitudes and behavior of the Anglo-Saxons. Further, the religious aspects of the poem relate to its environmental elements. As Kilker explains, “any attempt to understand ‘nature’ in an Anglo-Saxon text must also take into consideration both the physical reality of the ecological world in which it was created as well as the cultural and spiritual context shaping it” (311). If we understand *Rood*'s “spiritual context,” we can more fully understand the concept of nature in the text, since spirituality and religion affect how people view and interact with natural features and the environment. Further, according to Kilker, “conceptualizing early medieval England as an ecosemiosphere enables us to avoid an artificial nature-culture divide and to read Old English texts as part of an interdependent ecological and cultural system” (312). Considering medieval England as an ecosemiosphere paints a more complete picture of the status of nature at the time, since natural features such as trees are both ecological/biological and symbolic. Looking to the Christian tradition and Christian texts thus informs the ecocritical reading of *Rood*.

As Hooke mentions in *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore, and Landscape*, “the replacement of the tree by the cross in the New Testament was to continue both in reality and in a literary context. The replacement of real sacred trees by a Christian cross seems to have been a deliberate way of replacing the old non-Christian beliefs” (28). As discussed in the previous chapter, in certain cultures and modes of belief, trees were worshipped or seen as directly related to human life. Given that many Christian leaders wanted to separate their religion from older, pagan belief systems, it is unsurprising that Christianity shifted focus from a living tree to a cross. The tree thus becomes a way to praise
God, not something to be praised. Bryan L. Moore, author of *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*, mentions that “the early Christian theologians held that one should not worship nature in itself” but adds that “nature is, following Romans 1:20, a means of knowing and praising the Creator” (58).

Romans 1:20 urges believers to consider the creations of God as a way to know him:

> For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse. (KJV, Romans 1.20)

This idea is present in *Rood*. The tree is never praised as an organic being, but only through its association with the son of God at the crucifixion. The other trees in the forest where the rood was uprooted are not granted the same privilege, not seen as sacred.

**Personification of the Rood**

Because of its focus on a non-human—even a non-animal—*character*, a tree, *Rood* encourages an ecocritical approach. A speaking tree brings the environment, its elements, and its connection with humankind to the forefront, rather than having these serve as mere scenery or a tool for anthropocentric narrative. Just as easily, the poem could have focused on Christ’s experience or on those who witnessed the crucifixion. This mode of personification, the granting of voice, is supplemented by the dreamer’s description of the rood in human terms. At the beginning of the poem, the dreamer describes the cross as “a tree of victory and splendor” (Raffel 13). The Old English equivalents of these attributes are *sige*, victory in battle, and *syllic*, which can be read as marvelous or extraordinary (13).

These strong words are often reserved for remarkable *people*. The attribution of traditionally human characteristics to the non-human is a theme throughout this thesis. For example, the house called 124 in *Beloved*—discussed in Chapter Four—is described as possessing the
human emotion of spite. The fact the tree in *Rood* is one “of victory” suggests that the tree as well as Christ overcame an adversary, the enemies of God. The tree held true through the violence of Christ’s death, remaining as a symbol of his sacrifice for humans’ sins. The cross is also described in human terms through the mention of clothing, adding to the personification of nature in *Rood*. The rood is “clothed, adorned” (Raffel 15); the Old English term is *wēdum*, “weeds.” This description by the dreamer occurs at his first encounter with the rood. Later, the dreamer mentions that “its garments changed” (Raffel 21). Normally, natural objects are described as being draped with cloth, not “clothed” or wearing “garments.” Through such language in Raffel’s translation as well as the original text, the dreamer personifies the rood.

The rood is not only described in human terms but, as noted above, is also granted the ability to speak. Especially notable is the line, “þæt wæs geara iu, (ic þæt gyta geman), / þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende, / astyred of stefne minum…” (It was long ago / [but I won’t forget] / When they came to the forest and cut me down, / Pulled me out of the earth) (Raffel 28-30). The word *stefne* can mean stem/stump, but also voice. The dual possibility of *stefne* is particularly interesting in a poem such as *Rood*, where a tree literally speaks through the dream-state of the dreamer. This voice is horrifying for the audience of the poem because it challenges the boundaries between human and nonhuman. These boundaries, as will be further discussed in Chapter Three, are comforting in several respects. Many humans, if asked, would likely consider themselves to be the only beings capable of rational thought, a self-positioning that would justify their actions that harm other living beings and the environment. If a being is not capable of rational thought, then they are not entitled to the same pursuit of life as a human—which is, of course, debatable. More specifically, trees
cannot speak, and humankind is thus able to ignore the damage it inflicts on trees and the natural environment as a whole. When this particular tree, the rood, is granted a voice, the horror is twofold. First, a tree having a voice contradicts the idea of trees put in place in contrast to human beings. Through speaking, even within a dream vision, the rood forces the readers of the poem to re-conceptualize comforting boundaries and definitions, thus making them feel naïve and insecure regarding their place in the world. Secondly, through the speech of the rood, we can read the sins of mankind as expanded from those related to the death of Christ to those against the natural world. The voice of the rood forces humans to re-conceptualize their status and thus to rethink the actions committed through the justification of that status. The ending of ignorance is often horrific, leading one to realize their horrendous actions, ones that have always been present, but never fully acknowledged until the moment of recognition. To cite a contemporary, if by no means literary, example, we might consider the modern meat industry. Factory farms that raise, for example, cattle for slaughter and consumption as beef attempt to conceal the details of the slaughtering process. Even when animals are killed in what is considered a humane way, humans are generally horrified to see a living, breathing cow in one moment be turned into their evening meal in the next. The realization of the gory truth leads to horror, and sometimes to change, such as a shift to a vegetarian diet. Similarly, Victor Frankenstein is horrified by his actions when he realizes just what he has done in committing a sin against sacred nature. Though he cannot unmake FM, he refuses to make a female companion at FM’s request. In Rood, the shocking reality that a tree has a voice makes recognition of having wreaked environmental damage all the more powerful.
**Trauma of the Rood**

The tree in *Rood* reflects on *all* its past traumas, not just the trauma of bearing the body of Christ. It describes how men “came to the forest and cut me down, / Pulled me out of the earth” (Raffel 29-30). Here, the tree emphasizes how the trauma began with a corruption of the natural and a separation from earth, from the natural. The poem could have simply discussed the tree’s utilization as punishment, particularly the punishment of Christ, but the tree tells a story of multiple, compounded traumas. The tree is traumatized by the death of Christ but also by its separation from the earth and incorporation in the deeds of humankind.

Following the trauma of the separation, the rood is further traumatized through its forced use on the hill where it was erected to bear criminals. The rood discussed how “Cruel things came to [it] there / On that hill” (Raffel 50-51). The trauma of the tree through its forced involvement of human sin will be discussed further in Chapter Four and its analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a novel published centuries after the Old English era. The rood explains how man “made me a mocking show, forced me to hold their / thieves” (31). The rood describes this experience as humiliating.

All the rood’s personal trauma before Christ came to the cross was compounded once he arrived, suffered, and died on it. Throughout the poem, the language compares the rood to Christ. In Raffel line 41, the poet refers to Christ as “weary-limbed,” an adjective that can be attributed to a human or a tree. The species-neutral term *limb* reflects the ongoing tendency in English to connect human and tree bodies, as discussed in the introduction. In addition, in the line stating that the rood and Christ were “both reviled, we two together” (Raffel 48), Raffel is translating the Old English dual pronoun *unc*. *Unc*, meaning “us two,” shows the tight bond between two figures. In this instance, Christ and the rood are one just as the rood
explains throughout the dream. Since they are one, their pains and trauma are also one. For example:

    They pierced me with vicious nails. I bear the scars
    Of malicious gashes. But I dared not injure any of them.
    We were both reviled, we two together. I was drenched
    with the blood that gushed
    From that hero’s side as His holy spirit swept to Heaven.
    Cruel things came to me there
    on that hill. (Raffel 46-51)

In this scene, the cross and Christ are intertwined. The son of God is subjected to violence and so too is the tree; they were both bysmeroden, that is, reviled. This word is quite fitting, encapsulating the abuse the two bodies, both human and tree, endured.

    Although the tree maintains these attributes, the dreamer learns of the past the tree experienced which led to its eventual victory. He sees “through the gold…the stains / Of its ancient agony when blood spilled out” (18-19). Later, “its garments changed, / And its color; for a moment it was moist with blood, / Dripping and stained” (21-23). In this moment, the trauma of the tree is visual and can be communicated even without the voice the poem grants. In this image, the story of Christ is visceral. Catholics believe that the sacrament of the Eucharist provides followers with the body and blood of Christ, such that the sacrifice of Christ is renewed every time the rite is repeated. In the moment of the dreamer’s interaction with the tree, a similar event occurs. The trauma of the past echoes into the present. Further, just as Christians believe the stories of Christ to be true, the tree itself in Rood is associated with truth. P. B. Taylor explains how “there is a precedent in the Old English poetic corpus
for the ‘truth’ / ‘tree’ pun” (194). The truth of the past is visually represented and brought to the present in the image of the rood dripping with blood.

**The Dream of the Rood as Ecohorror**

*The Dream of the Rood* can and should be read as an example of ecohorror through its use of personification and its implications concerning humans’ damaging influence on the natural environment. As discussed in the introduction, ecohorror’s definition has been expanded over the years, moving away from the traditional idea of an avenging nature. *Rood* expresses the torment of nature and the world at the hands of man, directly neglecting the direction of God to nurture the world and all organisms upon it. Trauma was inflicted not only on the rood, but on all the trees within this poem. The accompanying crosses and trees of the forest weep along with the rood, as is seen in the line “Yet after His followers’ voices drifted / Away, we crosses went on weeping” (Raffel 70-71). This line also suggests how trauma of trees and nature may continue while humans literally move on with their lives. Trees are rooted where they stand, unable to leave their physical context and perhaps unable to escape past traumas, while the actions of humans continue to affect trees both spiritually and environmentally. Further, “the Old Testament is much discussed as a source for Western beliefs about human dominion over—and despoliation of—nature” (Moore 55). This foundational text ensures that practices of subjugation remain strong and persistent. In contradiction, “the essence of much early Christian thought states that not taking care of the earth is like not taking care of another; it includes nonhuman nature among the neighbors that Jesus commanded his followers to love as themselves” (Moore 58). This is a promising and hopeful view despite the horrific truth regarding the rood, the trees, and the environment at the hands of humankind.
Reading *Rood* as ecohorror expands the ideas of pain first posed by Scarry. Through acknowledging the horror in the rood and the environment’s pain, pain is granted a voice much as the rood itself is granted a voice. Through this, humans can acknowledge the pain in a nonhuman being, a feat perhaps even more challenging than acknowledging the pain/trauma in another human.
CHAPTER 3. “NOTHING REMAINED BUT A BLASTED STUMP”: AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGE OF THE BLASTED STUMP IN FRANKENSTEIN

Green skin, prominent brow, towering stature, created with electricity: this image of Frankenstein’s monster saturates anglophone culture from Hollywood films to Halloween candy wrappers. Even those who have never read Mary Shelley’s novel, Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, are familiar with the story, its main themes, and the image of the monstrous creation, neither wholly human nor non-human, the uncanny concoction of Victor Frankenstein’s design. A much less prominent, but nonetheless significant, image in Frankenstein is that of the blasted tree stump recalled from Victor Frankenstein’s adolescence: “I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump” (24). In this chapter, I read this blasted stump as a compounded point of trauma that mirrors both the turmoil of Victor Frankenstein’s life and his more generalized transgressions against the natural world through science, or at least through scientific activity without conscious regard for the role or well-being of nature. Although the trees—both alive and blasted—in Frankenstein are not granted the same direct voice as the cross in The Dream of the Rood, the trees point to, even participate in, Frankenstein’s trauma while showcasing the trauma the environment also endures.

Frankenstein is an epistolary novel composed of letters between Captain Robert Walton and his sister, Margaret Walton Saville. Walton is on an expedition to the North Pole where he hopes to extend the boundaries of the known world. Far in the north, Walton’s crew notices a dogsled driven by an enormous figure. Soon after, the crew saves a man—Victor Frankenstein—who pursues the dogsled driver. Noticing that Walton is beset by obsessions
similar to those that afflicted him, Frankenstein tells Walton his story, beginning with his childhood. When Frankenstein is young, his family takes in an orphan, Elizabeth. After his mother dies of scarlet fever, Frankenstein buries himself in quasi-scientific experiments. In college, he develops his scientific pursuits, eventually constructing a humanoid being from human body parts. Frankenstein finds the living creature to be hideous and, repulsed, flees the scene, later falling ill from this traumatic experience. During his recovery, Frankenstein learns of his brother’s murder and later sees his creature near the crime scene. Despite believing that his creature, rather than a servant, Justine, is responsible for the crime, he does not intervene in her conviction and execution. Suffering from extreme guilt, Frankenstein flees to the mountains where he encounters his creation, which pleads with Frankenstein to listen to its tale. FM describes its first days of life and its discovery that people were afraid of FM. FM found shelter adjacent to a cottage and learned to speak by listening to the inhabitants. Ultimately rejected by the family, FM murdered Frankenstein’s brother. FM then requests that Frankenstein build him a female companion, with which FM will retreat to the wilderness. Frankenstein begins to create the female, but fearing that the pair would reproduce, tears apart the work he has done. Angry, FM suggests that it will be with Frankenstein on the night of his marriage to Elizabeth.

When Frankenstein’s friend, Clerval, is found dead, Frankenstein is imprisoned for the murder and suffers a breakdown. Once he is acquitted, Frankenstein marries Elizabeth, but in fulfillment of the threat, FM strangles Elizabeth and hastens Frankenstein’s father’s death from grief. Seeking revenge, Frankenstein pursues FM toward the North Pole. At the end of Frankenstein’s narrative, Walton resumes his letter. Walton’s ship is trapped in ice and his crew urges him to turn back. Frankenstein condemns them as cowards, but Walton
decides to listen to his men. Frankenstein dies shortly thereafter, advising Walton to shun ambition. FM is found mourning Frankenstein’s death and vows to kill itself to spare humankind.

As Timothy Morton astutely observed, “*Frankenstein* does not necessarily make one think about ecology, unless one is a rather odd ecological thinker (such as myself)” (144). Morton adds that in “*Frankenstein* we encounter a novel whose ecological resonance is so obvious that ironically hardly anyone tackles it directly; and a novel, the very same one, whose ecological resonance is so uncanny in relation to standard beliefs about Nature that hardly anyone tackles it directly” (145). That is, *Frankenstein* may not seem like an ecological or environmental narrative unless a reader is already primed to look for such elements and connections. As discussed in the introduction, traditional ideas of nature and of humankind are structured through the implementation of boundaries. For instance, westerners often assume, if unconsciously, that humankind *is not* nature, and everything apart from civilization *is* nature and thus, may regard environmental issues as less relevant to humankind, to themselves. Ecocriticism and ecohorror challenge the rigid partitions between humankind and nature, and so does *Frankenstein*.

The image of Frankenstein’s creation itself sparks discussion of the boundaries between human and non-human. A rock, a tree, and a dog are all clearly categorized as non-human. What is important about a novel like *Frankenstein* is how it “might make one consider how we treat other life forms; about what constitutes a human as opposed to a non-human” (Morton 144). If boundaries are less concrete and more permeable, as in *Frankenstein*, the treatment of nature becomes relevant for humankind. FM is created with human body parts manipulated in a novel way. Thus, the story of destruction and human-
driven reconstruction takes place. Are humans the sum of their parts? The existence of FM challenges *Frankenstein*’s audience to consider these existential topics, using the in-between structure of FM as a steppingstone to considering naturally-occurring, non-human nature as well as nature as a whole.

**Posthumanism in *Frankenstein***

*Frankenstein* urges its audience to consider the posthuman. The word itself suggests a world beyond humankind altogether, or a world following the extinction of human inhabitants, but the idea of posthumanism is multifaceted and more complex than simple absence. As explained by Andy Mousley, the posthuman can refer to several differing ideas. One idea Mousley discusses relates most clearly to the story of *Frankenstein* and the seemingly posthuman creation within it. Mousley states that a “related contributor to a posthuman condition is the morphing of the human into its often-presumed ‘others’: the machine, the animal, the digital, the automated” (158). Mousley explains that “such morphing may occur either through the *importation* into the human body of… animal tissue” or by other means (158). This description brings to mind human-animal hybrids such as werewolves and human-machine hybrids such as cyborgs. *Frankenstein* extends this definition, asking us to consider a situation perhaps even more bizarre. FM is composed of human parts, but reused, altered, a patchwork of human corpses that creates something new and somehow other despite its human components. In a being like FM, the only non-human element is the materials that stitch its pieces together. In the novel, Walton ponders how “there was something so scaring and unearthly” in FM’s ugliness, pointing out the monster’s unnatural appearance (Shelley 187). The mere existence of such a being is unnatural, inflicting horror on the naturally-occurring world. Despite his hideous appearance, however, FM is towering in height and “capable of scaling the overhanging sides of Mont Saleve,”
advancing with “superhuman speed” (57, 76). In many ways, FM resembles the strongest, fastest, most elite of athletes who today might be categorized as posthuman. The word *superhuman*, suggesting abilities beyond what people can ordinarily do, points directly to the creature’s posthuman status. Again, the creature’s abilities are illustrated in posthuman terms when they are described as “more than mortal” (172). The creature is “more than mortal,” not merely *other* than mortal, showing its advancement beyond other beings. Thus, despite its “ghastly and distorted shape,” the creature is superior in seemingly all other ways, an elite, posthuman being (Shelley 172). Even FM itself is aware of its physical prowess in relation to humans when it boasts that it “was more agile than they [humans] and could subsist upon a coarser diet,” capable of bearing “the extremes of heat and cold with less injury” (96). FM lists the ways it is exemplary and better adapted to the harshest environments on Earth, and its intelligence makes it aware of its physical advantages. The creature urges Frankenstein to remember “thou hast made me more powerful than thyself” (77). The creator therefore is less than the created, causing an inversion of the typical God-creation or creator-created dynamic.

The posthuman being of Frankenstein’s creation is as elite intellectually as physically, for it acquires language and knowledge at a rapid pace. Frankenstein comments while working on his ill-fated female companion that “she… in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal” (Shelley 138). Frankenstein assumes his second creation will have such abilities because his original creation is so highly capable of thought and reason. In fact, at the end of Victor Frankenstein’s life, he describes his creation as “eloquent and persuasive; and once his words had even power over” his own heart (178). This accrediting of FM’s eloquence is all the more impressive considering that FM learns speech and even reading from observation only. FM secludes itself while watching a local family, the De
Laceys, for stimulation and knowledge. Through this observation and the De Laceys’ education of their guest Safie, the creature acquires both language and manners, eventually increasing its ability to read the books it found, including John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Further, the creature also learns from the De Lacey family “to admire their virtues, and to deprecate the vices of mankind” (102), that is, FM acquires moral instruction even as it absorbs facts and skills. The astounding pace with which FM acquired these skills and morals also indicates its posthuman status. Further, FM has no familial ties of any kind: no mother, no siblings, no close friends. The only person in FM’s life that could provide him with instruction, guidance, and love is Victor, who serves the dual role of father and God. Victor, however, never provides these resources. On the contrary, he only shuns, berates, and hates FM. The only comfort FM finds is through the family it observes, but the relationship is unidirectional. Once FM finds the courage to approach them, their reaction is a violent rejection. Thus, no one FM interacts with offers a means of achieving success. FM’s ability to gain knowledge as it does is posthuman, impossible for any human under the same circumstances.

**Frankenstein’s Monster and Victor Frankenstein’s Relations to Trees**

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley positions trees as places of refuge and rest, especially for FM. In Chapter Four, I discuss how the woods of the southern U.S. shelter African Americans escaping enslavement and persecution in *Beloved*. Similarly, FM requires seclusion from mainstream society because of its status and differing appearance even though FM is no different from human beings—however advanced—in terms of intellect and moral understanding.

In one scene, FM describes how it had to “conceal” itself “under the shade of a cypress” because of an approaching girl (Shelley 115). The girl slips and falls into a gushing
stream where she would have drowned if not for FM’s intervention. FM saves the girl and does all it can to “restore animation” (115). The inclusion of a cypress tree is particularly important in this scene. As explained by Ernst and Johanna Lehner, the cypress is a symbol of the immortal soul and eternal death. Further, “cypresses were planted around cemeteries and at the head of the graves. Its branches were carried by mourners at funerals as a symbol of irrevocable death, because the cypress tree, once cut, will never flourish and grow again” (57). Without this historical and biological background, the detail regarding the cypress tree may seem insignificant or disposable. But with this background information, the connection of FM with the irrevocable death of the cypress tree is made clear. The depiction of the cypress points to the deaths caused by FM or, perhaps the transgression against nature that is FM. Once that transgression is committed, the impact of scientific intervention on the natural world cannot be reversed; like the cypress, nature cannot regenerate following such a perversion. All chance for a natural future is blasted.

Though FM initially values the woods and trees, finding itself “unsympathized with,” FM, later wishes to “tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction” and then enjoy “the ruin” (Shelley 111). In addition, near the conclusion of the novel, FM sometimes “left marks in writing on the barks of the trees” for Victor to find and follow (174). In these instances, trees are transformed from a source of refuge and sanctuary to one that can be abused and violated. Just as individuals and society treated FM unjustly, FM unjustly abuses trees and the natural environment. In these moments, clarity arises regarding the mental state of FM and the trauma of its life is manifested through FM’s thoughts and actions. Like any creature, FM could endure only so much. All chances of prosperity are blasted as FM inflicts on the woods and the external world the turmoil and trauma of its mind.
Trees are also deeply associated with the body and mind of Victor Frankenstein. The description of trees other than the blasted stump shows how trees reflect Frankenstein’s physical and mental state. First, he finds himself completely immersed in his work:

Winter, spring, and summer, passed away during my labors; but I did not watch the blossom or the expanding leaves—sights which before always yielded me supreme delight, so deeply was I engrossed in my occupation. The leaves of that year had withered before my work drew near to a close. (Shelley 38)

In this passage, the word “withered” connects the leaves and Frankenstein. Frankenstein falls into dreadful illness, becomes withered, after creating FM. Frankenstein himself discusses the passing of the seasons and their relation to his own patterns of activity. As discussed in the introduction, the cyclical pattern of deciduous trees through the seasons has often been compared to human life cycles. Once Frankenstein begins to recover from the trauma of facing his creature, he notices again the beauty of nature, specifically the trees. At this point, he “perceive[s] that the fallen leaves had disappeared, and that the young buds were shooting forth from the trees” shading his window (43-4). Frankenstein is fully aware of times when “happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing” on him “the most delightful sensations” (51). He mentions that “the sight of the awful and majestic in nature had indeed always the effect of solemnizing” his mind and making him “forget the passing cares of life” (75). Conversely, when Frankenstein engrosses himself in his work to the point of unhealthiness, the trees too are withered. As trees wither when deprived of sunlight and moisture, Frankenstein withers both physically and mentally by the trauma associated with his act of creation. Descriptions of the changing trees make explicit the connection between Victor Frankenstein and nature. The trees reflect both the body and mind of Frankenstein.
Victor Frankenstein and the Blasted Stump

Frankenstein notices, even identifies with, trees in the novel, but he does so especially with the blasted stump near his childhood home. He never forgets the early memory of the lightning-struck oak: “I beheld a stream of fire… and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump…. I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed” (Shelley 24). The tree, “utterly destroyed,” endures a fate that will also befall the creator of FM. Indeed, Frankenstein’s work destroys or overwrites the traditional story of creation. When Frankenstein creates his monster, he uses electricity to animate the patchwork being; electricity in the form of lightning had destroyed the oak of his youth.

In *The Dream of the Rood* and *Beloved*, a tree is cut down by humans. In *Frankenstein*, however, the tree is struck by a natural force and reduced to its “blasted” condition. Because Frankenstein uses electricity to animate his creation, the blasted stump foreshadows how that natural energy will be manipulated, as denoted in the novel’s subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*. In Greek mythology, Prometheus created man from clay. He also stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity, which led to civilization and scientific progress. Like Prometheus with Zeus, Frankenstein surpasses the bounds set by the divine through use of a natural element. In a scene when Frankenstein speaks with his creation, he exclaims, “wretched devil! you reproach me with your creation; come on then, that I may extinguish the spark which I so negligently bestowed” (77). Here, *spark* is both metaphorical and literal. Later, FM reiterates this idea when it asks, “cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?” (110). Victor channels the natural phenomenon of lightning into a transforming energy used to create unnatural life.
When Frankenstein returns home after the murder of his brother, lightning strikes illuminate the figure Frankenstein believes to be his creation: “in the gloom a figure…stole from behind a clump of trees” (Shelley 56). He then assumes, correctly, that the creature, not Justine, is responsible for his brother’s murder. FM is later described as running with the “swiftness of lightning,” again pointing to his animation through electricity (166). Also, at the conclusion of *Frankenstein*, FM declares that it “shall ascend” its “funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames” (191). In this scene, the allusion to hellfire is clear, especially since the flames are described as torturing. Since FM is the embodiment of sin against nature and has itself committed murder, the end of FM’s life mirrors what may come in the afterlife.

The word “blasted,” as an adjective, can mean “balefully or perniciously blown or breathed upon; stricken by meteoric or supernatural agency, as parching wind, lightning, an alleged malignant planet, the wrath and curse of heaven; blighted” (OED, *blasted*). In many ways, this blasted stump signifies Victor Frankenstein’s sin against nature and God. Frankenstein refers to the earth as “sacred,” which is ironic since his scientific advancements contradict this idea (Shelley 171). He usurps the place of divinity in the act of creation. Yet Victor describes the earth as sacred, and views nature as connected to God and thus worthy of respect. His creation of an unnatural monster, however, is not “sacred” but rather an abomination. While the Judeo-Christian God is the only creator recognized in *Rood*, in *Frankenstein* a human scientist seizes the ability to create and manipulate sentient life. Frankenstein refers to himself as the creator throughout the novel. Notably, before and during the time Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, the word *blasted* as an adjective acted as a
synonym for cursed or damned. The horror of the narrative is crystallized by distortion of both the natural world and the “natural,” or expected, role of God.

Mary Shelley includes blasted trees in other works as well. For example, in The Last Man, Shelley describes “two melancholy and blasted trees, where once a forest waved. We are left to mourn, and pine, and die” (921). In this passage, blasted is used both to describe wasted trees and to create an association with melancholy and with environmental destruction. Much like the cypress tree discussed earlier, in The Last Man hope for future is blasted, with no chance of return. The word blasted also appears several times in Frankenstein in relation to Victor. Frankenstein himself uses the word when describing his life and its misery, stating that “all was blasted; instead of that serenity of conscience… I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe,” and “I have myself been blasted in these hopes” (Shelley 69, 186). He also uses the word to describe how any possibilities are utterly destroyed, just as the blasted stump was never to recover. When meeting Elizabeth after an absence, Frankenstein notices that she has lost some of her “heavenly vivacity,” yet her “gentleness, and soft looks of compassion, made her a more fit companion for one blasted and miserable” as he (160). Here, Frankenstein insinuates that he is blasted, but she is still pure, having had no part in the unnatural project of creating FM. FM itself describes Frankenstein as blasted when it says, “blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine” (191). Though Frankenstein is miserable, the torment of having one’s very life be a sin against nature is far more agonizing. Finally, Frankenstein compares himself directly to the blasted stump from his youth when he says, “but I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul; and I felt then
that I should survive to exhibit, what I shall soon cease to be—a miserable spectacle of
wrecked humanity, pitiable to others, and abhorrent to myself” (133).

The blasted stump exposes Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as an ecological narrative.
Victor Frankenstein is as ruined, and as doomed, as a lightning-struck tree. Near the end of
his life, Frankenstein advises Walton to “seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition,
even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and
discoveries” (Shelley 186). Frankenstein—though perhaps not fully understanding why—
realizes that endeavors in science can lead to destruction through the corruption of nature.
FM embodies sin against the sacred status and role of nature. Further, the blasted stump
represents the compounded trauma of Frankenstein, FM, and the wider world due to
Frankenstein’s reckless scientific pursuits. The blasted stump thus symbolizes the depths of
Frankenstein’s psychological anguish and points to the collective trauma of humans and
nature.
CHAPTER 4. ECHOING TRAUMA BETWEEN BODY AND PLACE IN BELOVED

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
—Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit”

Littered with trauma, the life of Sethe, the protagonist in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, is painful. A freed slave, Sethe and her family inhabit 124, a house set apart from the forests of the American landscape. These forests nevertheless contain agonizing connotations for Sethe that are both personal and shared collectively by slaves of the southern United States. The forests and land echo the traumatizing events of slavery because they too are subjected to domination. For instance, Kimberly N. Ruffin, in analyzing the work of William Stanley Braithwaite and Maud Cuney-Hare, discusses how being made complicit in the killing of the innocent has a negative impact on trees, something suggested in Chapter Two with the cross in The Dream of the Rood. Ruffin contemplates how “the tree serves as a witness to the pursuit, kidnapping, and lynching of victims” and is forced thereafter to hold and be haunted by the trauma (15). The trees in Beloved reflect the embedded trauma of the African American community. The bodies of humans and trees, both positioned as resources by American colonization and empire, are subjected to slavery, displacement, and environmental depletion, echoing the subjugation of the other and sharing a joint trauma of body and place.

Before analyzing the novel, I will outline the general narrative. Beloved is about Sethe and her daughter Denver following Sethe’s escape from slavery in the American south.

124 equals the difference between the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the date of Beloved’s first publication in 1987.
Their home, 124, is haunted. They believe 124 is haunted by the ghost of Sethe’s other daughter. Because of the haunting, Denver is shy and has no friends. Sethe’s sons, Howard and Buglar, run away from home. “Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)” (Morrison 3). Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, dies in the home soon after. When one of the fellow slaves from Sweet Home—the plantation where Sethe was enslaved—Paul D, arrives at 124, he attempts to drive out the spirit. One day, when the three return from an outing, they find a young woman sitting on a stump in front of 124. This woman called herself Beloved. Paul D is suspicious of Beloved and her motives, while Sethe and Denver welcome her with open arms. Later, Paul D and Beloved have a sexual encounter. Feeling guilty, Paul D attempts to tell Sethe, but instead says that he wants to impregnate Sethe, and tells friends of his plans to start a family with her. When a man named Stamp Paid reveals Sethe’s tumultuous past, she tells Paul D her distressing tale. After she had escaped from Sweet Home and reached her mother-in-law’s home, Sethe’s slave master found her. Fearing her children would be forcibly returned to a life of slavery, Sethe attempted to kill her children, succeeding in killing her unnamed infant daughter. Sethe comes to believe that Beloved is the very daughter she murdered years before. That daughter’s tombstone read only “Beloved.” Beloved begins to consume Sethe’s life. Denver seeks help from the women of the community, who come to 124 and exorcise Beloved.

Before I discuss Beloved in relation to ecohorror specifically, I want to note that due to its gravitas, Beloved—like The Dream of the Rood and Frankenstein—has been critically examined and read extensively. It has prompted research related to race, gender, motherhood,
slavery, and post-colonialism. *Beloved*’s unique and powerful portrayal of the environment and the characters connected to that environment attracts, in particular, ecocritical and ecofeminist scholars. For instance, Lorie Watkins Fulton, a scholar of southern literature, studies the trees in *Beloved*. While some scholars pay particular attention to the tree-like scar on Sethe’s back, Fulton reminds us of the importance of several other trees in the narrative (189). Sethe’s tree is inextricably connected to those other trees in the text. For instance, I will discuss Brother the tree from Paul D’s slavery, the stump where the ghost of Beloved first visits the grounds of 124, and the trees surrounding the Clearing where Baby Suggs preaches. Building on this research, I connect bodies—both human and tree—in *Beloved* through joint trauma.

As discussed in the introduction, my reading of these three texts is rooted in ecohorror, a framework in the environmental humanities merging ecocritical and horror approaches to texts including both film and literature. Ecohorror (which rejects the traditional revenge-of-nature narrative) anchors my analysis of the echoing traumas through both human and non-human bodies—specifically tree bodies—in *Beloved* and the connections of those bodies to place. It is not simply that the environment in *Beloved* and the trees upon it strike vengefully against mankind because of mistreatment; rather, any dividing line between human and environmental bodies is blurred, creating a more complex connection between humans and environment, which leads to shared trauma. Similarly, the rood in Chapter Two shares its trauma with Christ, and the body of Frankenstein’s monster, discussed in Chapter Three, is itself a blurring of boundaries as a posthuman being.

The joint trauma of body and place in *Beloved* reverberates within the walls of 124, the house that serves as the setting for much of the novel and, I argue, is an important
The structure of 124 is literally composed of the corpses of trauma-scarred trees, bringing the echo of the woods into the space of the home. The apparition of a ghostly presence within its walls shakes the assumption that Sethe has escaped her past and the woods that once provided refuge, as 124 does in the novel’s present. In ecohorror, exclusion of the natural world from the “civilized” is impossible; the two bleed together in ways that are not wholly recognized. So too do the natural and civilized worlds—never truly separate to begin with—in *Beloved*.

**Beloved Characters’ Relations to Trees**

Just as in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* when FM and Victor Frankenstein are associated with trees by the narrator, so too are the characters in *Beloved*. The difference, however, resides in communal and generational connections. While, for instance, Victor Frankenstein has no familial or racially-charged relation to woods or trees, Sethe and the other African American characters in *Beloved* do. Ironically, Sethe resides within the haunted 124 as an attempt to remove herself from the haunted American wilderness. As described by Dianne D. Glave:

> Wilderness evoked both fear and comfort for African Americans. The woods, forests, and swamps were natural places where blacks were hunted and mauld or lynched and hung from trees. Even when these terrible experiences were over, horror and sometimes ambivalence remained. But the wilderness was also a refuge, a place to live long-term, or as a place of transition for runaways between plantation and freedom. (59-60)

Sethe, as a former slave, has complex connections to trees and forests, both positive and negative. Just as bodies are linked with houses in the text, so too are they with trees, sometimes quite literally due to racialized violence. The wilderness’ interaction with African
American populations is multifaceted, not confined to positive or negative experience alone, and viewed as both positive and negative simultaneously. Individual African Americans in *Beloved* typically lean to one extreme or the other based on personal experiences with the wilderness. For instance, Sethe harbors more negative associations with trees and forests than does Paul D—her romantic interest and another former slave—because of her personal, horrifying experiences. Sethe escaped her former slave life through the woods, nearly dying and giving birth to her daughter, Denver, along the way before her return to “civilization.” For Sethe, the escape in the woods was a traumatizing event. Sethe’s painful associations with forests are seemingly too much to bear, leading to her separation and seclusion within 124. But the trees follow her, embedded in the structure of the house and on her own back.

The real scars on Sethe’s back are from her time as a slave. These scars, a product of whipping, are described as tree-like. Specifically, they resemble “a chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves” (Morrison 18). This scar reminds Sethe of a specific moment in which she was assaulted, and her breast milk, created to nourish her children, is stolen. This perversion of the natural, God-granted right of Sethe and her people follows her, affecting the relationships she holds with Denver and later, with Beloved. The tree imprinted on her body accompanies her wherever she goes and serves as both a literal and emotional marker of personal past trauma compounded with general racialized violence and the trauma of the forests collapsed into one symbol and instance of sin. Here, the historical and world-wide tradition of viewing trees as not only organic beings but symbols is exemplified.

Paul D’s own experiences with trees are punctuated when he describes how the “‘tree’ lying next to him didn’t compare to real, living trees” when he refers to Sethe’s tree scar (Morrison 26). Trees are inherently good in the eyes of Paul D, framed by his own
experiences. They provided refuge from the sun and from those chasing after him. Paul D reflects affectionately on trees “because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did” (25). Paul D even has positive memories of a tree rooted in the land in which he was enslaved. This tree “he called Brother, and sat under it” (25). Through experiences such as these, Paul D is primed to have a much more positive association with trees than does Sethe. Yet despite his general affinity for trees, the “tree” on Sethe’s back disgusts Paul D, suggesting that trees are transformed by their connection to violence.

Just as trees serve as sanctuary for FM in *Frankenstein*—which FM then abuses by turning trees and the woods into a place of violence—in Beloved’s apparition scene, trees act as a place of rest and sanctuary for the human, and once human, characters. Exhausted from the feat of rebirth, Beloved finds rest when she “leaned against a mulberry tree” (Morrison 60). Although a baby typically finds rest against the mother following delivery, Beloved finds that same support and sanctuary from the tree while she is “sopping wet and breathing shallow” (60). The fact that Beloved leans against a mulberry tree may hold significance related to the collective black community. The fruit of most varieties of mulberry trees is black when ripe. In North America, the white variety is considered an invasive exotic. This fact regarding the mulberry tree reflects the interconnectedness of human and tree. Just as the white varieties of the mulberry tree are invasive, so too are the white people of North America, travelling over from Europe and taking over the land and its people. As with the cypress tree in *Frankenstein*, discussed in Chapter Three, the tree species here carries specific meaning.
After a night of rest and recuperation from the rebirth, Beloved urges herself to trek through the woods in the direction of 124. While walking, Beloved passes “a giant temple of boxwood” (Morrison 60). Denver, Beloved’s sister, constructed this temple, another instance of tree as sanctuary, particularly when considering the word temple, a dwelling place of a divinity used for worship. This strongly spiritual sense reflects how Paul D feels about trees and mirrors the Clearing, a place among the trees where Denver’s grandmother, Baby Suggs, held spiritual services for black people of the community. Beloved, tired from her journey through the woods, “sat down on the first handy place—a stump not far from the steps of 124,” yet another instance of tree as a place of rest (Morrison 60). Beloved, a ghost whose past includes a violent murder, chooses to sit on a stump. The fact that she rests on a stump and not on, for example, a naturally fallen tree, holds significance. Just as Beloved’s life was cut short due to violence, so too was the life of the tree outside 124. The violence of humans towards one another and the environment are depicted in this instant as simultaneous and deeply connected. In fact, just pages earlier in the novel, Baby Suggs describes how “cutting trees for a living” is a “sin” (57). The word sin here holds particular significance. As a noun, it refers to transgression of divine law and offence against God. As a verb, sin is the very act of transgression. Thus, what harms the trees also harms God. Further, Baby Suggs includes trees within the religious realm of Godly beings. For a human to hurt them is to hurt God and ultimately, humankind. So, the remains of a sliced tree, a stump, is a point of sin, just as the land of 124 in general is a point of sin because of the murder of Beloved: both lives were cut short at the hands of humankind.

This connection of nature and God is similar to one discussed in Chapter Three when Victor Frankenstein describes the earth as sacred. Thus, the unnatural creation of FM, a
monster not made by God but by man, is a sin against sacred nature. *Frankenstein* too uses the image of a stump to showcase the sin of man, for although the stump in *Frankenstein* is naturally “blasted” by lightning, it foreshadows Victor Frankenstein’s appropriation of a natural force, electricity, to create an abomination, a sin.

**Personification of 124**

Before 124, the house inhabited by Sethe and her family, is put to rest at the conclusion of the novel, Sethe attempts to displace herself from the echoed instances of trauma within its “spiteful” walls, only to find pain in the materialization of Beloved, the spectral character for which *Beloved* is named (Morrison 3). In the first lines of *Beloved*, Morrison sets an ominous tone regarding 124. The house, 124, expresses “spite” towards humans; such feelings of contempt or ill-will associated with an inanimate object make Morrison’s word choice here interesting and strange. The attribution of such a powerful feeling signals 124’s uniqueness, its ability to hold feelings and desires. Morrison describes 124 not only as “spiteful” but also as “lonely and rebuked” (16). Thus 124 feels as if it has been censured, condemned, or repressed, leading to its “spiteful” nature; such an emotion mirrors those of black southerners, and the ghost of Beloved, due to their having been condemned and repressed. The emotions held by 124 are sensed by those who interact with it, especially those who call it home.

Denver’s attitude toward and relationship with 124 is appropriately highlighted when she “approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits” (Morrison 35). Again, the house is granted human attributes and emotions by Denver, who acknowledges and respects them. Specifically in referring to 124 as a “person,” Denver recognizes the inherent rights of 124,
just as she believes her mother and former slaves have rights due to their inherent personhood.

All characters who interact with 124 sense its emotions, but none more than Sethe. At any given point in the novel, the emotions of 124 and those of Sethe are intertwined. Baby Suggs states that “not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (Morrison 6). Similarly, 124 is packed with grief, but with the grief of the land and of the living Sethe. This house is where her mother-in-law died, she killed her own baby, and her sons deserted her. Sethe is constantly reminded of the past through 124, leading to emotional pain “because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost” and “her brain was not interested in the future” but was “loaded with the past and hungry for more” (Morrison 69, 83). A constantly recycling past traps Sethe in 124. More specifically, the past physically manifests itself through the ghost of Beloved, Sethe’s daughter whom she had mercifully killed in a moment of fear that her children would be subjected to the same trauma as she. 124 not only holds human emotion, but also is able to act through those emotions, manifesting Beloved and thus interacting with the world around it. 124 is granted agency through its haunting and can echo Sethe’s pain and trauma through the materialization of Beloved. This agency furthers Denver’s recognition of 124’s inherent personhood.

**Displacement and Reclamation**

The trees and forests held complex connotations for African American people during and after slavery, as slaves hid in the woods from those hunting them, sometimes escaping and at other times being captured. In addition to slavery and murder, the oppressors of black Americans displaced the slaves; this was key to their dominion, resulting in additional complex connections to land. Abducted from their homeland and brought to the foreign
terrain of early America, black slaves were submerged in displacement, forced to work this new land and in the homes upon it. They were also displaced from their African-rooted religion and forced to assimilate to Christianity, which preached salvation. Despite her assumptions, the key to Sethe’s reclamation does not reside within her own body, but in the merging of bodies on a community level, leading to reclamation of those bodies and the land on which they live. Baby Suggs reclaims bodies and land simultaneously, connecting the members of the black community to one another and to the greater forest through her preaching. Baby Suggs redefines the space within the woods as church and sanctuary, also reclaiming the community’s spirituality from its oppressors. In *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage*, Dianne D. Glave states: “as African Americans converted to Christianity, they interpreted other icons and rituals of their African ancestors, who treated earth shrines and groves as sacred. Some African Americans have described their religious conversions against the backdrop of nature” (51).

In Chapter Two, the tree-turned-cross becomes a religious icon. This integration of the spiritual and natural worlds is precisely what Baby Suggs reflects every Saturday afternoon, leading her community to the Clearing within the woods. Even the word “Clearing” is capitalized in the novel, a proper noun associated with religion, like the capitalization of Christ, God, and Church.

Just as in a traditional church, Baby Suggs’ congregation awaits the direction of the spiritual leader. The blurring of boundaries between human and non-human bodies—a key component of ecohorror, as discussed earlier—occurs when Baby Suggs “sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees” (Morrison 102). As the people wait “among the trees,” their bodies and the land are merged as a single congregation (102). Baby Suggs
stresses this connection and love of the bodies within the Clearing when she proclaims in a powerful speech:

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands!...This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. (103-4)

In a mixed religious ceremony, Baby Suggs preaches that the community love their flesh, flesh not loved by their oppressors. Glave states that “such an environmental-spiritual fusion under the trees was flexible as it changed from its spiritual roots in Africa and took on a different meaning from the blended African and Protestant influences in a new freedom” (56). This unique fusion also facilitates the concept of “human beings as part of a larger natural workforce that includes nonhuman nature” (Ruffin 27). After all, African Americans, trees, and place endured subjugation, became natural products to be utilized through colonization. Two of the “general qualities of African American environmental politics” as described by Mart A. Stewart are “the pursuit of collective rights [and] the tendency to see community in broad terms that include both humans and non-humans” (20). Baby Suggs’ language blurs the distinction of separate human and tree bodies. She states that the oppressors “only use, tie, bind, chop off” (Morrison 104). Since the bodies of slaves and trees were both subjugated and exploited as resources, the language used describes the assault on all of them. Both people and trees may be tied, bound, and chopped. The same mirrored language is discussed in the introduction about anatomical terms. Through the leadership of
Baby Suggs, the connection and reclamation of bodies—their own, one another’s, and the bodies of the trees—provide a freedom wholly unique. They reclaim, reestablishing and repurposing it for themselves, not relying on God to do it for them.

As Kimberly N. Ruffin explains, “African Americans’ associations with environmentalism often reflect a history of limited ecological agency and policies that marginalized environmental others from desirable domains in the United States” (18).

Through the communal reclamation in the woods, Morrison flips the script, providing complete “ecological agency” for African Americans and the land, jointly, as a new form of slave narrative. Ruffin urges that part of America’s necessary work must be listening to uncelebrated ecological narratives from the past to help us with the present. These voices…simultaneously express diverse ecological experiences and expand from the conceptual frame of American environmentalism to an ecological frame informed… by work and enslavement. (26)

In Ruffin’s view, America as it currently stands must listen to narratives of all kinds to assist with looming concerns. Morrison brings to light a typically “uncelebrated ecological narrative” (Ruffin 26) that reminds us of several traumas still relevant to the United States, raising racial issues that require mending. As presented by Morrison, the violence of slavery echoes through bodies, but the inclusion of non-human or tree bodies mirrors not only the trauma due to slavery, but also the larger systemic violence against persons and places.

Through this analysis, a new reading of Beloved as an environmental slave narrative is created. The merging of human and non-human bodies creates joint trauma, but also serves as an opportunity for joint reclamation, expanding Scarry’s ideas of pain as an individual experience. At the conclusion of the narrative, Sethe’s life is still littered with trauma, as are
the lives of other bodies in the pages of *Beloved*: Sethe’s family, African Americans, and trees. However, the weight is lifted by transforming points of sin into points of communal reclamation.
Elaine Scarry states that, within “the vast expanse of literary texts,” we occasionally find works that are “not just incidentally but centrally and uninterruptedly about the nature of bodily pain” (10). In addition, she asserts that “physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story” (3). These three texts, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Frankenstein*, and *Beloved*, provide a voice for the expression of trauma (both physical and psychological pain), getting us one step nearer to understanding the intricacies of trauma and the effects it has on another person, being, or environment. As Scarry explains:

> When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. (3)

The trees in the three texts examined here bring invisible trauma to the “visible surface of the earth” (3). Further, they extend the visibility of trauma through physical representations of psychological pain, the trauma of beings as a collective, and trauma affecting the environment. These works fully submerge the reader into the trauma of the characters and the world, evoking a reaction of horror on the part of the reader, not in a malevolent sense, but with the aim of sparking understanding.

Scarry asks “how is it that one person can be in the presence of another person in pain and not know it— not know it to the point where he himself inflicts it, and goes on inflicting it?” An answer may be at least partially found in *The Dream of the Rood*, *Frankenstein*, and *Beloved* (12). As seen in these works, pain or trauma is inflicted for several reasons, and one
reason is that those creating the trauma imagine firm boundaries between themselves and others. In *The Dream of the Rood*, Christ’s executors inflict trauma on the rood and on the environment as they cut down a healthy tree for their purposes. Such men would never dream that they are subjecting the rood to trauma, since they would not consider trees as feeling, as being able to experience trauma. Only through the rood’s personification and its speech on its own behalf can humans begin to realize that the boundaries they believed to be solid are in fact *permeable* and may not be boundaries at all. This realization is what elicits a feeling of horror for what they have done. In *Frankenstein*, trauma is inflicted on both FM and the environment. Frankenstein abuses FM because he considers it to be an abomination, unworthy of the mercy and care that would be the birthright of a natural being. In *Beloved*, trauma is inflicted on Sethe, the African American population, and the environment by white slaveholding Americans. Because slaveholders assumed the existence of a boundary—or better, a gulf—between themselves and slaves or black people more generally, Sethe and her family are considered subhuman. Such a devaluing justifies thoughtless, traumatizing actions against individuals and groups. I expand this sense of devaluation to include Americans’ view of the environment, an assumption that it is merely something to utilize, not something living that can experience trauma. Through analyzing varying forms and objects of trauma, that of human beings, of communities, and of the environment, the boundaries between these entities begin to disappear. Thus, Christ and the rood are seen as one in *The Dream of the Rood*, when flesh and wood are reviled together. Through his language as well as his acts, Victor Frankenstein is identified with, if not identical to, the blasted stump. Sethe and the tree scar on her back are indivisibly one in *Beloved*. The pain of each of these figures merges with and becomes the pain of another. All these texts, while showcasing trauma, explore the
assumed boundaries between one kind of being and another. All three works urge the world to listen to their message, a message to think critically about these boundaries and to consider the experience of the other. If boundaries between, for example, the reader and another person, another group, another being, are diminished, then such others are suddenly understood to experience traumatic pain, a reaction which creates the sense of horror.

The messages of these three works inform a reconsideration of my childhood friend, my magnolia. Through humans’ assumption of boundaries, and their subsequent ignoring or mistreatment of other beings, trees like my magnolia are subjected to trauma. Though my magnolia lives on, many trees on the same property do not. One tree was felled to pave a driveway, another was cut down and disposed of to make room for a garden, and a third was gradually hacked to pieces because of the hazard it posed to humans and their property. This yard, my yard, lost trees due to human habits of exploitation; in miniature, it reveals the depletion of nature at the expense of anthropocentric innovation and progress. We can no longer afford a purely humanistic view of the world, with humans assuming themselves to be the pinnacle of existence; the world and everything on it is not theirs—not ours—to utilize and traumatize as seems fitting. Further, since such utilized beings are categorized as nonhuman, they are assumed not to experience trauma as humans do, or at all. This assumption, left unexamined, further justifies destructive actions. If cutting down several trees to pave a driveway hurts no one and adds to the value of the property, then we can easily imagine that there is nothing to lose and everything to gain. However, if we pause to consider that boundaries we set between us and others are flawed, are permeable, then the possibility arises that we are causing trauma to the natural world. This horrifying realization demands nothing less but that we re-conceptualize the world and our roles within it. Through
doing so, we can possibly reduce the world’s trauma, and our own. Thus, like the trees in *The Dream of the Rood, Frankenstein, and Beloved*, my magnolia too is in trauma, and unlike these, is a living entity and not the product of a literary imagination. Though horrifying, the realization that trauma, as represented in these works, exists in the living world provides an opportunity for change. As in *Beloved*, transforming points of sin into points of communal reclamation can lead to salvation from a horrifying future.
REFERENCES


