TOWARD A NEW MYTHOLOGY OF EVE:
WOMEN, MEN AND FRIENDSHIP IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AS SEEN
THROUGH SARAH PERRY’S *THE ESSEX SERPENT*

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By

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TOWARD A NEW MYTHOLOGY OF EVE:
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ABSTRACT

Sarah Perry’s *The Essex Serpent* (2017) is centered on friendship in all of its various forms in Victorian England. The epigraph to the novel comes from 16th century philosopher Michel de Montaigne’s essay “On Friendship.” Perry disputes Michel de Montaigne’s assertion that men and women cannot be friends. By doing so, Perry also subverts the standard tropes of the Victorian novel to rewrite the history of the “New Woman” and relations between men and women.

Specifically, this thesis looks at: 1) the problem of heterosexual friendships in Western culture, 2) the importance of narrative—specifically the novel—to Western culture, 3) the role of the novel in the Victorian era and how women and friendships are treated in novels such as *Jude the Obscure* and *Daniel Deronda*, 4) how Perry challenges the notion that friendship between men and women requires a special taxonomy, and finally, 5) how Perry’s novel leads us to reexamine the role of Eve in Western culture.

Based on a thorough, yet non-exhaustive review of related scholarly literature and a close reading of the novel, this paper helps show that literary treatments of Eve by biblical interpreters, philosophers and poets, such as Saint Augustine and John Milton, have been used to undermine Western concepts of women and their suitability for friendship. This thesis discusses how the Western foundational myth of a male Creator that creates via *logos*, or the word, rather than a
female Creator that gives birth, has doomed women to inferiority. Unless our society can engage in a wide reexamination of Eve and restore her to, what biblical scholar Phyllis Trible considers to have been, God’s “crowning glory,” we will not effectively reset relations between men and women. Even for those who are not religious, the mythology of Adam, Eve and the fall from grace is ingrained in our collective psyche.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of why Western journalists, authors, playwrights, bloggers, philosophers, psychologists and scientists repeatedly ask, “Can men and women be friends?” By providing a detailed analysis of The Essex Serpent, this thesis hopes to “flip” the question to examine: “Why can’t men and women be friends?” By asking the question differently perhaps we can encourage further explorations of how women are treated in Western mythology. In this way, scholars may be able to change the discourse that has emerged in this country around #MeToo, #TimesUp and the recent Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination hearings.

Future analyses might broaden this discussion to include an analysis of how other biblical women have been treated in popular culture, to include the Virgin Mary. These analyses might also include a more exhaustive analysis of how friendships between men and women have evolved in narratives across historical eras. By re-examining the original texts and understanding how they have been interpreted within historical context, we can begin the process of adapting that narrative for our current context.
I enrolled in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program at Georgetown University to fill self-perceived gaps in my education. It was undertaken at the recommendation of Judith House, my friend, colleague and long-suffering reader/editor. When I received a Bachelor of Arts in 1984, I was solely focused on coursework that would advance a career in defense policy. I denied myself the richness of all that the arts and letters have to offer. In 2016, my first class with Dr. Francis Ambrosio began with a powerful, simple, yet—to me—incomprehensible statement: “You cannot understand Western literature unless you know Scripture.” Unbeknownst to me at the time, this would begin a personal journey of self-discovery, after a 35-year absence from an academic classroom. As I struggled to remember the rules of grammar and proper citation, I re-learned the art of reading for pure pleasure. Taking Frank’s advice to heart, I sought courses on the Bible and theology and literature to understand his assertion.

Immersing myself in every class that Dr. Tod Linafelt has to offer, I learned to read the Bible in its own context—as literature, not through the lens of religion. Because I was raised with no faith tradition, I easily adapted to reading the Bible as if it is a novel. I learned what Frank Kermode calls looking for the “secrets” of the text—the subtle background that sits beneath the surface of every literary work. Along the way I was fortunate enough to take Dr. Elizabeth Zelensky’s course, *Russian History through Literature and Film*. Here I was able to build a bridge between my first academic experience as a student of Soviet history and rediscover the wonders of *Anna Karenina* and the *Master and Margarita*—now through the lens of the wonders and dramas of human history as described in the Old Testament. The idea of literature as context for centuries of the human search for meaning sharpened as I studied
modern literature with Dr. Frederick Ruf who introduced me to the wonders of Virginia Woolf. Then I studied Islamic literature with Dr. Paul Heck who taught me how literature was indeed a path to transcendence. From them, I learned just how much our identity is tied to subtleties in world view.

It was not until I encountered Dr. William O’Brien that Frank Ambrosio’s comment would become deeply personal and insightfully impactful. Moving from the Old Testament to the New, I began to understand the power of Scripture as the foundational mythology of our western culture—in short, how much it shapes our communal worldview. In his Theology and Literature class, Bill O’Brien taught me how the gospels are at the heart of every work of western literature. Moving into Classics in the Catholic Tradition, I was exposed to the early Christian fathers, Julian of Norwich, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and many others who have struggled to give meaning to our human frailty in an unforgiving world. In this class, Bill made a comment as impactful as Frank’s from 2013. He simply asked, “These early Christians died for Jesus Christ. What would you die for?” I thought of many things that I might kill for but very few I would willingly die for beyond family. I suffered a profound sense of doubt about my place in the world and while Joseph Campbell’s hero may have a thousand faces, this lone hero had no quest.

How frail and unforgiving and lonely the world can be, was brought home during a personal crisis, wherein I discovered that religion is not confined to the Church—of which I am not a member. Religion, defined as a way to make sense of the world and our role in it—our fundamental belief system—can, in fact, be found in novels; and, novels can help shape a community. I found God in a hospital room, clutching a most unlikely source of divine
inspiration: Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, a novel I don’t even like but one that allowed me to create a connection with one of the cardiologists that would save my husband’s life.

From there I was taught, again by Bill, to explore how religion and faith are being tested and revised in modern novels, which brings me to this thesis and *The Essex Serpent*. Novels are a comfort and a challenge. Their authors use novels to question the world and the nature of human existence, testing their own beliefs and asking us to do the same. While I have no faith tradition, I realize that I have always had a foundational myth. As an avid novel reader, I have always been part of a religious community without even knowing it. Every Western novel has its beginnings—some many generations removed—in the Bible. It is the story of human creation, human struggle, human doubt, human faith, human mystery, of life and death. I do not doubt that many of the events depicted did indeed happen. But the stories are filtered through their authors—each driven by his or her own beliefs, doubts and questions. And in the end, the Bible was the very first novel, a work of biographical fiction.

I finished research for this thesis the same week that the Philadelphia Grand Jury report was released about sex abuses within the Catholic Church. By this time, as if St. Augustine was whispering “*tolle lege,*” every book, every novel, every article I read led me to Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuits. As my friend Cindy says, “the Jesuits are like a pit bull, once they sink their teeth into you, there is no letting go.” Like Augustine’s experience in the orchard, my conversion, while not complete, is settled. The Grand Jury report created a hole in my heart but reaffirmed my conclusion that it is time to rescue the Bible from centuries of religious interpretation, not only because the later books of the New Testament have been used to deny the validity of heterosexual friendships but because they have created societal norms that have long outlived their contextual utility. The evil that so-called “men of God” inflict on others is all part
of the human experience. It is not a sign that “God is dead,” as Nietzsche might have had us believe, but that our conceptions of God and how we believe need to be re-examined.

It is time to go back to first principles and understand how we can heal ourselves. This journey that began with Dante’s *Inferno* has led me to examine my own fears, sins, pride and brought me to the other side by examining how society’s sins play out through our modern novels. The MALS program has taken me on a journey of faith that resulted in reading *The Essex Serpent*, a very modern novel, as a challenge to our biblical foundations. For me personally, it has reinforced how one can find God in the midst of global tragedy; in our very humanness there is still beauty and love to be found. Art and literature are acts of creation, and in them God’s grace abounds. Just as Thomas Jefferson and Elizabeth Cady Stanton—minds far greater than mine—reinterpreted the Bible for their own spiritual satisfaction, so should we all. It is the story of human history and it belongs to all of us to guide us and inspire us, not to rule us.

I have never considered myself a feminist. Far from it, so writing this thesis comes as much a surprise to me as anyone. I refused to wear a “pussy hat,” or join in the Women’s March and am the only person I know who cannot actually use the hashtag “#MeToo.” However, as I watched the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearings, I realized it is time for us to reexamine our concepts of who we are and how we have changed. “Boys will be boys” communicates across our community in destructive ways, because the implicit end of this saying is: “…and girls don’t matter.” It is time for all of us to step up and take ownership of the story we are in and take control of the ending. Thanks to this program, I now realize that I am part of a bigger picture and I am, as Margaret Silf notes, “an event who happens to others.” I may not be a feminist but
I am a human and one day I will die, and hopefully the interval will be spent making sure that girls, do indeed matter. #TimesUp.
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Similarly, I owe a debt of gratitude to Anne Ridder who kept the dream of Liberal Studies alive in all of her advisees and students.

To my many friends, colleagues, mentors and family, I thank you for your patience reading the many drafts, listening to me drone on endlessly about Tolstoy, my biblical discoveries, and my preoccupation these many months.

I also would like to thank Dick and Betty Duke, who patiently made me understand that analyzing novels is a valid methodological approach.

To Bill O’Brien, I owe a debt of gratitude that extends well beyond what one owes an advisor, a mentor, or a friend. I owe him gratitude for putting me on the path to spiritual insight.

To James (Chip) F. Buckley II, my husband and best friend, I owe far more than gratitude: “If you pressed me to say why I [love] him, I can say no more than because he [is] he, and I [am] I.”

Linda H. Buckley

Washington, D.C.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Sister Helen M. Scarry, R.J.M, my spiritual advisor, role model and muse. She embodies the spirit of a true daughter of Eve: brilliant, always questioning, always wondering, always believing and endlessly searching for knowledge. In short, she is the feminine spirit, with all its complexities, contradictions and wonders. Her presence in my life is the ultimate affirmation of God’s grace.

This thesis is also dedicated to the memory of Margaret Mary Moore, wife of my dear colleague Stephen Moore, and to the memory of my mother, Kam S. Hor:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
And holy is His name.

—Luke 1:46-49, NRSV
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF FRIENDSHIP

Why has friendship become so peripheral to the modern novel, short story, poetry, theater and essay?

— Ronald A. Sharp

Can Heterosexual Men and Women be Friends?

In 2017, the #MeToo movement exploded in social media. What started as a grassroots way to reach victims of sexual abuse in underprivileged areas has turned into a public referendum on equality between the sexes in all forms. It has gone from a conversation about sexual assault and Harvey Weinstein to a conversation about male behavior towards women; from social media to public debate over the recent confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. According to Rebecca Solnit, a contributing editor at Harper’s Magazine,

It feels like this time there is no going back because this time around a lot of men get it, they are horrified by the scale and ugliness but the patriarchy is not going to give up without a battle…I think there has been a shift that is less law and legislation than shifts in consciousness and visibilities, and that will have consequences.

Underlying this conversation is the age-old question: Can men and women be friends? In 1989 this question was popularized in the movie When Harry Met Sally. The film concluded that there could not be friendship between men and women that would not become romantic. In July 2017, Brigid Delaney posed this question once again in the Guardian. Quoting essayist William Deresiewicz, the author notes that not until the 1960s, when the sexes mixed freely on equal terms, could “platonic friendships become an ordinary part of life.” According to Delaney,

popular culture has just started to portray friendships between men and women, but she posits that there are no good models for this type of relationship.\(^3\) In the midst of this turmoil and public debate in Western society, an example of such a portrayal quietly took the literary world by storm.

In June 2016, a little-known author published *The Essex Serpent*\(^4\) in the United Kingdom. It was an instant bestseller; named the Waterstones Book of the Year, it was both shortlisted and longlisted for a number of prestigious literary prizes to include the Costa Novel of the Year, the Dylan Thomas International Prize, and the Walter Scott Prize. It became a *Sunday Times* bestseller and was named the winner of the British Book Awards Book of the Year for 2017. Published in the United States in June 2017, it was named an NPR and *Kirkus Review* Best Book of 2017, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, and a *Washington Post* Notable Work of Fiction.\(^5\)

Set in Victorian England, the novel follows the story of widow Cora Seaborne and her circle of friends, in particular her friendship with married vicar Will Ransome. Cora herself is not your standard Victorian heroine. As author Sarah Perry noted in an interview with *Washington Independent Review of Books*, her goal in writing *The Essex Serpent* is as follows:

I would like readers to go away with an enriched and enriching sense of the variety and complexity of human intimacy—including connections that seem at first glance to be unhelpful, unsanctioned, or transgressive. I would also dearly love it if I could upend some of the very mistaken notions in common currency about what Victorian women were like. They were not fragile creatures silently hemming handkerchiefs in gilded cages, but, by the end of the 19th century, were active in politics, social

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reform, the sciences, medicine, the arts, early feminism, prison reform, engineering, and math.⁶

In this novel, Perry sets out to reverse hundreds of years of popular Western culture where friendships between men and women were lightly treated, if even acknowledged. In The Essex Serpent, Will and Cora’s friendship is the central focus of the novel. So, perhaps rather than ask: “can men and women be friends?” Perry challenges us to ask: “why can’t men and women be friends?”

The Problem of Friendship.

To support Delaney’s claim, the scholarly literature on friendship between men and women offers several answers to English Professor Ronald A. Sharp’s question which opens this chapter. University of Virginia Associate Professor Victor Luftig wrote one of the very few analyses of friendship as portrayed in popular culture. He notes in Seeing Together: Friendship Between the Sexes in English Writing, from Mill to Woolf, that there is no “ending” to a friendship to provide dramatic tension, hence friendship is not a generally-interesting topic for the novelist or reader. Friendship as a narrative device is typically a “temporary stage on the way to something the story is more essentially about.”⁷

According to Luftig, narrative theorists have established that novels end in either marriage or death, “so consistently that it may be said to have hampered Western societies’ ability to tell stories directed towards any other ends.”⁸ Even non-scholarly works support this. Author Joyce Carol Oates agrees that there have not been good models in popular culture. In her

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⁸ Ibid., 13.
short story, “Love. Friendship,” one of the main characters bemoans a friendship that she and her husband share with a troubled young man,

What is friendship, that it should have such power? Everyone knows about love. Romantic love, married love, adulterous love, happy love affairs, unhappy ones. Everyone knows about love, no one knows about friendship... With friendship there’s no formal beginning, so there can’t be a formal ending. Everything happens and then nothing happens. But nothing comes to an end... There’s no moment of consummation. There’s no abandonment, no ecstasy.  

Luftig’s work points to a larger problem in Western culture: there is no good taxonomy for friendship. He notes that friendship is “scarcely nameable as a thing unto itself.” Psychologist Beverly Fehr notes: “Everyone knows what friendship is, until asked to define it.” Although friendship is a commonly accepted word and concept, when asked to define friendship between men and women we default to either many words or essays to describe it, or as Luftig notes, “Contemporary phrasings, like their predecessors in earlier times, define male/female friendship according to what it is not.” When it comes to friendship between men and women, in Western society we seem compelled to caveat this relationship with phrases such as “just friends,” “platonic,” or “friends with benefits.” When discussing a friend of the opposite sex, there is usually an assumption of romantic interest and we are often forced to explain the relationship in terms that make the relationship less valuable than a romantic one.

This is problematic for Western society because, as Sharp notes, “Our language of friendship and our conceptions of it affect the way in which we actually experience friendship.”

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10 Luftig, 1.
12 Luftig, 1.
14 Sharp, 7.
In Western society, to be named is to exist. According to American historian Cassandra Good, our emotions are shaped by “the language available to express them, simply naming an emotion can change or clarify the feeling itself.” She notes that because the terms love and friendship are too imprecise in the English language, this lack of taxonomy leads to confusion.\textsuperscript{15}

Stating that the theme of the novel is the blurred distinction between love and friendship, Perry notes that in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century we have become more puritanical where “friendships outside of that [monogamous partnership], tend to be slightly frowned upon.”\textsuperscript{16} Her goal was to,

...write about as many different kinds of friendship and love as I could find. Ones which blur the boundaries between romantic love and friendship, seeing sexual desire as something cathartic and benevolent, even when it’s not connected to any kind of romantic attachment. I still maintain that Cora and Will are basically friends but that their friendship is capacious and different and subject to change—as human relationships are.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{The Victorian Novel: Some Unfinished Business.}

An exploration of modern-day friendship between men and women cannot really be understood if not set in the context of its origins. A time of tremendous change, the 19th century saw the rise of science, archaeology, industrialization and the printing press. In terms of friendship, this era saw the rise of heterosocial relations where the sexes mingled more frequently; by the 1850s, a feminist movement arose with demands for divorce and reform of marital property laws, access to education and employment and the right to vote. By the 1890s, women in the workforce were a reality and the “New Woman” emerged who was well-read,

\textsuperscript{15} Cassandra Good, \textit{Founding Friendships: Friendships between Men and Women in the Early American Republic}, 60.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}
intelligent and independent. Not only did women demand equality but they used novels to explore the boundaries of their freedom. Outnumbering male authors, women used novels to debate and promote social change. According to Duke University English Professor Nancy Armstrong, “the modern individual was first and foremost a woman” who came into being through “written representations of the self [in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic fiction],” which in turn created the modern woman as an “economic and psychological reality.”

Not limited to female authors, the new woman dominated literature at the end of the century to include Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1879) and Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895). These novels explored themes of pre-marital sex, sex and pregnancy out of wedlock, and economic independence for women.

Perceived as a threat to the order of society, the movement died out by the turn of the century.

By setting a novel in this timeframe, there is an opportunity to provide an alternative ending to the feminist movement which could shed light on the present. It is an opportunity to “map out an alternative, female historical landscape which often constitutes a radical rewriting of traditional, male-centered historical narrative,” to include changing our current narrative.

According to Perry,

I really wanted to write a version of the 19th century that, if you blinked, looked a little like ours. I wanted to write a version of the Victorian age that wasn’t a theme park of peasoupers and street urchins. The more I looked, the more I found that not a great deal has changed—an ineffectual parliament, the power of big business and

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the insecurity around housing. And contemporary Conservatism going back to this idea that morality and poverty are in some way linked.\textsuperscript{22}

In an interview Perry confirmed that “[p]art of my desire to subvert the Victorian novel was to put in some of your usual hoary old tropes and then subvert them.”\textsuperscript{23} One of the tropes that Perry subverts is that friendship can only lead to marriage, a trope prevalent in both Victorian and modern novels. According to Perry, “These days, friendship has been somewhat demoted to having a status and importance far below romantic and primarily sexual relationships.”\textsuperscript{24}

**The Essex Serpent: The Backstory**

The epigraph of the novel comes from Michel de Montaigne’s essay, “On Friendship.”

The choice of epigraph is an interesting one: “If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I.” It is interesting for two reasons. First, because Perry essentially declares that friendship may not need a taxonomy. She states that her two main characters Cora and Will, “insist that they are friends because they are.” Although there is a sexual attraction between them, Perry insists that is not the sole factor. If it were, this would demand “they taxonomise their intimacy into something which is no longer a friendship.”\textsuperscript{25}

But, secondly, earlier in that same essay Montaigne states,

...women are in truth not normally capable of responding to such familiarity and mutual confidence as sustain that holy bond of friendship, nor do their souls seem firm enough to withstand the clasp of a knot so lasting and so tightly drawn. And indeed if it were not for that, if it were possible to fashion such a relationship, willing and free, in which not only the souls had this full enjoyment but in which


\textsuperscript{23} Sarah Perry, Interview by Sally Campbell.

\textsuperscript{24} Sarah Perry Interview by Adriana Delgado.

\textsuperscript{25} *Ibid.*
the bodies too shared in the union — where the whole human being was involved — it is certain that the loving-friendship would be more full and more abundant. But there is no example yet of woman attaining to it and by the common agreement of the Ancient schools of philosophy she is excluded from it.\textsuperscript{26}

Either we are meant to conclude that Perry intended Cora Seaborne as an extraordinary woman, or perhaps, the choice of epigraph is a clue to what lies beneath the story of Cora and Will’s friendship. Cora is well-educated, but not especially talented, not especially attractive and is mostly argumentative. Even Will, who becomes her best friend and lover says, “I’ve never liked the look of you...”\textsuperscript{27} There is nothing particularly remarkable about her that would characterize her as extraordinary enough to attain the type of friendship of which Montaigne speaks. But Perry’s message may be to challenge the idea that it takes an extraordinary woman to have a friendship with a man. Again, perhaps she is challenging us, to ask: “Why can’t ordinary men and women be friends?”

*The Essex Serpent* disproves Luftig’s assertion that friendship as a theme provides limited narrative value. The novel itself has no conclusive ending. Starting with a dramatic opening, the novel does not come to a dramatic conclusion. There is no happy ending, there is no death or marriage, it ends on an inconclusive note with a letter from Cora to Will asking him to come see her. Despite this the novel was a commercial success in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Beautifully written, with intelligent discourse between the characters and a certain level of romantic tension between and amongst them, the novel defies scholarly logic. Perry achieves exactly what Luftig hoped, but thought might not be possible:

To tell a credible story about friendship, one that *remained* a story about friendship rather than succumbing to the usual narrative conventions, would be to make the

\textsuperscript{27} Sarah Perry, *The Essex Serpent*, 259.
most significant kind of case for the social viability of all idioms like “friendship” even for the idea’s being in some sense “natural,” or at least, a testing of the novels’ defining energies might help reveal most clearly the expectations and limits that made ‘friendship’ impossible to articulate, if impossible it was.\(^\text{28}\)

However, this literary achievement, which went relatively unnoticed in reviews, is probably not the reason for the success of the novel. One reviewer who did notice this, however, points to what may explain its success. Ron Charles, a literary critic for the \textit{Washington Post} notes,

\begin{quote}
By the end \textit{The Essex Serpent} identifies a mystery far greater than some creation “from the illuminated margins of a manuscript:” friendship. That’s a phenomenon we discount in romantic comedies and too often take for granted in real life. But in the fertile environment of this novel, Cora is determined to identify a species of \textit{devotion between men and women that doesn’t involve subjugation. She may be digging in the past, but she’s clearly looking to the future}.\(^\text{29}\) [Emphasis added]
\end{quote}

According to another literary critic, Robert Alter, “Literature is not just a self-referential closed circuit but is connected in meaningful and revelatory ways with the world of experience outside the text.”\(^\text{30}\) This thesis contends that \textit{The Essex Serpent} has struck a chord in the Western psyche, less for its remarkable achievement in making friendship between a man and a woman the narrative focus, than in its ability to challenge our world view. Friendship of the type portrayed by de Montaigne and in \textit{The Essex Serpent} requires equality.\(^\text{31}\) Clearly, the issue of equality is at the heart of the current upheaval in Western society. Women have the right to vote, women have equal access to education, women are gaining equal compensation. So why is the concept of friendship between men and women still a problem?

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{28} Luftig, 59.
\textsuperscript{31} Beverly Fehr, 151.
\end{flushleft}
As literary critic Frank Kermode notes, the heart of a novel is rarely just the story told on the surface.

Authors indeed, however, keenly aware of other possibilities are often anxious to help readers behave as they wish to; they “foreground” sequence and message. This cannot be done without backgrounding something, and indeed it is not uncommon for large parts of a novel to go virtually unread; the less manifest portions of its text (its secrets) tend to remain secret, tend to resist all but abnormally attentive reading.32

Often this “backgrounding” is done subtly through allusions to other texts. According to University of Canterbury Professor Jeanette King, novelists engage in “destructive genesis” wherein there is a dialogue with previous authors: “writing reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself.”33 As Robert Alter puts it, novelists work under the influence of a founding model, repeatedly returning to an origin, “seeking to emulate, extend, transpose or outdo some founder.”34

When questioned about the intertextuality of The Essex Serpent with other texts, Perry notes,

If you’re well read as a reader or, hopefully, like me as a writer, it’s very difficult to sever off all of the things that have enriched your life and your imagination. It’s tricky as a writer, you have to nourish yourself, by reading the best that there is without reading too much of the same things because then you risk it being imitative - it’s a tricky line to tread.35

34 Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, 27.
35 Perry interview with Campbell.
Rich with allusions to other novels to include quotes from *Moby Dick*, the most striking allusions are to the Bible. For Perry, who admits that she was raised mostly on the King James Bible, liberal quotes and references to the Bible make sense in this novel, particularly as a main character is a vicar. But the references to the Bible seem to serve to connect this novel to larger ideas of the human experience. According to Perry,

I was completely saturated in the most grand and deep ideas and prose in the English language. The Bible is full of cracking stories! It taught me about language, and the importance of music and cadence. My upbringing made me feel that anybody can understand massive ideas: eternity, goodness, darkness, light, the sublime.

The novel opens with a drowning and a direct reference to Genesis, our Western creation story: “darkness on the face of the deep.” In a pivotal scene where Cora and Will meet, Cora perceives Will as “...here was Adam himself: all mud, ill formed, without the full powers of speech.” The very title of the novel, *The Essex Serpent*, is a reminder of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The various references to the return of chaos as represented by the serpent, goats named Gog and Magog, and the rotting hull of a ship called Leviathan are themselves hints that we should look back to our beginnings if we are to understand our circumstances. As Alter notes,

The Bible, in part, seizes the imagination of the modern writer because of his acute consciousness of it as a body of founding texts, marking out one of the primary

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36 Perry, *The Essex Serpent*, 16-17. There is a direct quote from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*: “NEVER DREAM WITH THY HAND ON THE HELM! TURN NOT THY BACK TO THE COMPASS!,” which the character Cora Seaborne has copied onto a piece of paper. This allusion sets the stage for Cora’s “hero’s journey,” as well as a reference to a chaos monster from the sea, similar to the Essex serpent itself.


possibilities of representing the human condition and the nature of historical experience for all the eras of Western culture that have followed antiquity.\textsuperscript{41}

Despite, or perhaps because of, Perry’s assertion, that she is in a “post-religious” state,\textsuperscript{42} The Essex Serpent is not just an attempt to complete the unfinished business of the Victorian novelist, but a response to a deeper, more ancient challenge. It is part of what Jeanette King calls the postmodernist challenge to the “images of women constructed by the literature of the past, values inscribed in those images and their enduring power,” to include biblical images.

**Why Can’t Men and Women Be Friends? —The Problem of Eve**

Another female author and columnist, Rachel Held Evans, who is also questioning her strict Evangelical upbringing and the meaning of the Bible notes:

> Today we still return to our roots in times of crisis; we look to the stories of our origins to make sense of things, to remember who we are. The role of origin stories, both in the ancient Near Eastern culture from which the Old Testament emerged and at that familiar kitchen table where you first learned the story of how your grandparents met, is to enlighten the present by recalling the past.\textsuperscript{43}

If we return to our origin story, that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, what we find is a dismaying mythology that puts #MeToo in perspective. According to author Pamela Norris, the story of Adam and Eve probably originated as a folktale but has had an “unprecedented influence on how Western society has defined its moral and spiritual identity.”\textsuperscript{44} Central to this story is of course the figure of Eve, who evolved from “helpmeet” in Genesis 2-3,\textsuperscript{45} to the source of sin and death at the hands of Tertullian and Milton, to name just a few. In

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\textsuperscript{42} Perry, Interview with Saner.


the words of writer Bruce Feiler, “how [this] narrative has been interpreted over the centuries is elaborate, at times deeply misogynistic and profoundly consequential to the history of male-female relations in the West.”

It is the role, and purpose of authors, to:

…enter into a new dialogue with the Old Testament myths to try and break their hold on our imagination and beliefs by reworking them to construct more powerful and creative roles for women than the myths themselves provide.

This is the power of *The Essex Serpent*. Not only does Sarah Perry achieve what others thought impossible—— a commercially successful novel built around a friendship between a man and a woman—Perry resets the record of Victorian feminism and forces us to look at our foundational myths to answer the question: Why can’t men and women be friends? Simply put, *The Essex Serpent* is the untold story of the real Eve, the metaphorical creature who seeks knowledge, follows her rational thought, searches for the evidence of things not seen, and who is the catalyst for the great human adventure.

**Thesis Overview**

The core of this thesis is a discussion and analysis of *The Essex Serpent*. I assert that novels shed light not just on their subject but also on societal trends in the context of when the author is writing. As a result, this novel is symbolic of the emergence of a “new story” in Western society. This thesis will explore *The Essex Serpent* by relying heavily on the techniques of literary analysis developed by Robert Alter. By examining the allusions and plot, I

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will draw out the underlying themes and messages within *The Essex Serpent*. I will then provide a commentary on what the novel tells us about the story we are living today.

I will demonstrate how Perry subverts the Judeo-Christian conception of Eve as an archetype and encourages us to reach back to Eve’s original role in the creation myth. In this way, I hope to shed light on the need to reexamine our core mythology as shaped by Western religion and theology and re-explore the age-old question, re-posed as: Why can’t men and women be friends?

The starting point for this thesis is Luftig’s observation that:

> There is a good deal more to be found in scenes of heterosexual interaction than literary criticism has yet marked. That scenes of working and imaginative cooperation between the sexes may be more interesting for what they stand to create than for the sexuality they repress, express, or sublimate is by no means a new understanding in literary study; but it is an understanding that has received less expression than its opposite.48

The thesis will begin with an exploration of how novels can shed light on events of today in terms of the “story” we are currently in as a society. In Chapter III, we will explore the significance of the historical setting of the novel: Victorian England. In Chapter IV, we will discuss the theme of the novel, friendship as common vision or, as Victor Luftig calls it, “seeing together,” to show how Perry develops tension and interest in a novel about friendship. In this way, she “resets” how friendships are portrayed in the gothic novel and conducts a dialogue with Victorian authors. In Chapter V, this thesis will show how *The Essex Serpent* challenges our Western foundational origin myths surrounding the role of Eve. This section will look at the role of the Western origin story found in Genesis 2-4 and show how *The Essex Serpent* is an attempt to rescue Eve and the concept of friendship from traditional, male-centered historical narrative.

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48 Luftig, 228.
Chapter VI will provide concluding observations on the importance of novels and how they can help us make sense of the world in which we live.
CHAPTER II. METHODOLOGY: THE NOVEL AS GUIDEPOST

The nearest I have yet got to an answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own... we become these other selves. Not only, nor chiefly in order to see what they are like but in order to see what they see... This, so far as I can see, is the specific value or good of literature... it admits us to experiences other than our own... Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

—C.S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism\(^{49}\)

The Enigma of Friendship

Friendship has been a topic of discussion for philosophers, novelists, artists, and scientists for centuries. Aristotle characterized friendship as something “no one would choose to live without... even if he/she had all the other goods... Moreover the young need it to keep them from error.” In other words, we need friends to help us understand the world in which we live. We need friends to help us determine right from wrong and to help us navigate the vagaries of life.\(^{50}\) According to Aristotle, friends inspire us to be virtuous and foster virtue for its own sake. Plato built on this by emphasizing that our happiness comes from the pursuit of the good and beautiful and friends help us by allowing us to build virtues that we do not possess on our own.\(^{51}\)

Psychologist Rollo May describes it as accepting another’s “being as being—friendship does not require anything but to be with someone.”\(^{52}\) It has been described as a relationship of “complete trust and sharing, a relationship of abundant being that enhances both, expands

\(^{51}\) As cited in Scudder and Bishop, 60-61.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 46-47.
horizons;” it is what Lynchburg College Professors, John Scudder and Anne Bishop call “dialogic love.”

According to Michel de Montaigne, the author of the epigraph to *The Essex Serpent*, a friend is another self, it is a spiritual process in which the “soul grows refined;” in contrast, marriage is a bargain. In Western society there is an assumption that love and friendship between men and women are mutually exclusive, and that friendship ranks lower than a romantic relationship. Therefore, for philosophers such as de Montaigne, there cannot be friendship between men and women.

Even C.S. Lewis, who had a long-standing friendship with Joy Davidman that turned into civil marriage for convenience and eventually romantic love, firmly believed that there could be no true friendship between the sexes. According to Lewis, even if they developed common interests, “the friendship that arises between them will very easily pass—may pass in the first half hour—into erotic love.”

In direct contradiction to these arguments, Sarah Perry issues a challenge, in particular to de Montaigne’s assertion that women are incapable of being good friends:

What I absolutely didn’t want to do was write a book about two people who madly fancy each other and at the end of the book they fall in love and get married…I genuinely wanted to ask more questions than I answered. We rather live in a time where we like an absolute; so you either are a person of faith who is very mystical and believes in the supernatural or you are a rationalist and a scientist and you don’t have faith. Actually, it’s much more nuanced than that. What I wanted to do was write a book that was simultaneously modern and historical.

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53 Fehr, 151.
54 Scudder and Bishop, 8-10.
55 de Montaigne, 185-190.
56 Scudder and Bishop, 7, 21-22.
58 Perry Interview by Campbell.
The Novel as Friend

So why should we read novels to understand issues in our day-to-day lives? In response to the question, “So we tell stories to try and come to terms with the world, to harmonize our lives with reality?” the great scholar and expert in Comparative Mythology, Joseph Campbell responded, “I think so, yes. Novels—great novels—can be wonderfully instructive.”

According to Robert Alter,

The characters and life situations of the narratives of different eras speak to us not because they reflect a knowledge which never changes but rather because they express a set of enigmas with which we continue to wrestle.

Literature, like a friend, “refers readers to the complex order of moral, emotional and psychological realities;” the written word creates a “trans-historical community.” In Leo Tolstoy’s words:

Speech enables people of later generations to know all that preceding generations know and that the best of their most advanced contemporaries know through experience and reflection; art [the written word, or in this case the novel] enables people of later generations to experience all the feelings that people experienced before them and that the best of the most advanced people experience now… Art transfers these truths from the realm of knowledge to the realm of feeling.

In short, art, in this case the novel, creates an emotional linkage between generations.

Similar to the way C.S. Lewis described the value of literature in the opening quote to this chapter, friendship is described by many scholars as “...an opportunity to participate in and share...”

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60 Charles.
61 Alter, *Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, 76.
experience of lives and knowledge other than one’s own.”

According to modern philosopher Elizabeth Telfer,

Friendship enlarges our knowledge...throughout the whole gamut of human experience, by enabling us in some measure to adopt the viewpoint of another person through our sympathetic identification with him. Through friendship we can know what it is like to feel or think or do certain things which we do not feel, think or do ourselves.

Novels and friendship are both a means to transcendence. Therefore, novels by their very nature should shed light on the concept of friendship, in all its forms. Yet friendship between men and women has remained, primarily, a plot device in novels rather than a central theme. To understand how Sarah Perry transforms friendship from device to central plot, and what she brings to the surface about heterosexual friendships, is the focus of this thesis.

The Rise of the Novel

A novel is defined by Ian Watt, a professor of English at Stanford University, as a “plot acted by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as common in the past, by general human types.” A relatively recent development in literature, the novel rose to prominence in the 18th and 19th centuries as a “popular literary genre entrusted with the responsibility of representing contemporary actuality.” The novel represents the norms of the day. According to historian Katrin Berndt, the novel was used as a “psychological exploration

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63 Berndt, 5.
of the individual in society” and the challenges that the individual faced in the context of a changing society.\textsuperscript{67}

The very term “novel,” derived from “novelty,” represents literature evolved from universal stories to stories about unique individuals that are “ordinary...but recognizable.”\textsuperscript{68} The popularity of the novel can be attributed to a number of factors: an increasingly literate population; the rise of the middle class with more disposable income;\textsuperscript{69} the emergence of mass production printing techniques; and the emergence of circulating libraries.\textsuperscript{70} According to Watts, the rise of the novel was due to “an increasingly literate reading public reading about themselves;”\textsuperscript{71} the novel became an economic phenomenon in parallel with the rise of women in the workplace: the “shop-girs.”\textsuperscript{72} At the same time, authors became professionals living on proceeds of book sales rather than by patronage. Because they were written in the vernacular which did not require a classical education, novels were more widely accessible and available to both writers and readers; female authors outnumbered male by the 18th century.\textsuperscript{73} With the rise of modern capitalism and the city, the dissolution of communal society served to provide time and space for individual pursuits such as reading.\textsuperscript{74} However, this urbanization also led to “atomization” and isolation. As a result, “correct” behavior was not as easily observed and communicated by family and friends. More frequent intermingling between the sexes in the

\textsuperscript{67} Berndt, 6.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Berndt, 38. See also Nestor, 25-26.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 17-20
\textsuperscript{74} Seager, 37-41.
workplace added another element of change and confusion for which there were few social norms. As a result, 19th century fiction became focused on how individual characters navigated changing circumstances without “compromising their moral integrity.”

In his 1883 autobiography, famous author Anthony Trollope noted:

If the extension of novel-reading be so wide as I have described -- then very much good or harm must be done by novels...A vast proportion of the teaching of the day- - greater probably than many of us have as yet acknowledged to ourselves-- comes from these books, which are in the hands of our readers. It is from them that girls learn what is expected from them, and what they are to expect when lovers come.

According to Pauline Nestor, a professor at Monash University, the relationship between the reader and the novel is not passive, but is actively dialogic, providing alternative perspectives and leading to self-reflection and self-development. With the novel, unlike with previous literary genres, we see both the interior dialogue of the characters as well as their interactions with others and can observe their thought processes as we question our own. As Ian Watts notes, novels depict “individuals who make sense of the world through their own experiences,” working out their own “spiritual salvation.”

In this sense the novel has come to replace mythology. According to Joseph Campbell, when biblical literature was dropped from our Western educational curriculum, “a whole tradition of Occidental mythological information was lost. It used to be that these stories were in the minds of people.” Further,

These bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds

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77 Nestor, 27.
78 Ian Watts, as cited in Seager, 37.
79 Campbell, The Power of Myth, 2.
of passage, and if you don’t know what the guide-signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself.  

In the modern West, the atomization originally experienced during the 19th century has only grown stronger with decreasing in-person interactions, and communities being formed “virtually” on the internet and in social media. Ironically psychologists are finding that social media is actually creating greater social isolation. This trend has been exacerbated by the diminished influence of the Bible and the Church. As a result, popular culture serves to provide us with role models and to define social norms.

The Importance of the Novel in Western Society

Narrative, which is the form that novels take, is a key part of the human experience and a foundation of Christian mythology or our theology. Creation is based on logos: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (John 1:1, NRSV). Poet and literary critic, Jane Hirshfield, noted that narrative “uses the structure of time to defeat the ephemerality of time.” As explained by Gregory Mobley, a professor at Yale Divinity School,

The ephemerality of time refers to the fact that time marches on, times flies, time waits for no one. The moment does not allow for clarity or insight...Narratives create chains of events bound by cause and effect along a timeline, allowing us to pin down a story before it slips away. Once the story is told, the chaos of experience assumes shape, direction, motive and episodes. This led to that which led to this which led to that…. Once we have a story...We no longer have chaos; we have meaning and order.

This was the key act of God, making order out of the formless void through logos: “Then God said ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light.” (Genesis 1, NRSV). According to John H.

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80 Ibid.
Walton, an Old Testament scholar and Professor at Wheaton College, the initial acts of creation were acts of establishing order and function, not creating material things.\textsuperscript{83}\  Similarly, we humans—made in the image of a Judeo-Christian God—use narrative to create that same order. For Mobley, “The task of theology is the linking of our individual story to the biggest story we can imagine.”\textsuperscript{84}\  Narrative is integral to our Western culture and inseparable from our foundational myth: the Bible. In fact, according to Christian blogger, Rachel Held Evans, “Jesus’ favorite way to speak about the kingdom is through story, riddle, and metaphor.”\textsuperscript{85}\  Further,\n\begin{quote}
It is notable that according to the Gospels, when God was wrapped in flesh and walking among us, the single most occupying activity of the Creator of the universe, the Ultimate Reality, the Alpha and the Omega and the great I AM of ages past and ages to come, was to tell stories….\textsuperscript{86}\n\end{quote}
According to Philip Maughan of the \textit{New Statesmen}, “the Gospels are stories about someone who tells stories. The growth of the novel came out of a strong sense that there are things you can only communicate in narrative shape.”\textsuperscript{87}\n\begin{quote}
Beyond religion and mythology, science proves the importance of narrative. As Evans notes, counselors and neuroscientists confirm that “to connect your story to a greater one, is essential for developing empathy, a sense of purpose and well-being…. Storytelling has been, and always will be, one of humanity’s greatest tools for survival.”\textsuperscript{88}\n\end{quote}
\textsuperscript{83}\  John H. Walton. \textit{The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate}. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 38. Walton argues that the creation of humans was God’s ultimate plan and that the creation of the Garden of Eden was the creation of a sacred space, where God could interact with them. In this sense, Adam and Eve were archetypal “priests” and not the only humans on earth at the time of creation, but that humanity was created “en masse” by God.\n\textsuperscript{84}\  Mobley, 4.\n\textsuperscript{85}\  Evans, 153.\n\textsuperscript{86}\  \textit{Ibid.}, 158.\n\textsuperscript{87}\  Philip Maughan, “The books of revelations: Why are novelists turning back to religion?” \textit{New Statesman}. November 21-27, 2014: 57.\n\textsuperscript{88}\  Evans, 47-48.
According to Daniel Coyle, a journalist and consultant,

…the proof is in the brain scans: When we hear a fact, a few isolated areas of our brain light up, translated as words and meanings. When we hear a story, however, our brain lights up like Las Vegas, tracing the chains of cause, effect and meaning. Stories are not just stories; they are the best invention ever created for delivering mental models that drive behavior.89

In a world where a prize-winning novelist such as Sarah Perry can declare herself to be in a “post-religious” state, none of us can escape the foundational importance of myth. Even Perry, who has no religious practice says, “I still feel that there is something that can’t be accounted for by atoms, and neurons firing in my brain.”90 Women in particular are challenging “the images of women constructed by the literature of the past, the values inscribed in those images and their enduring power,” by revising our views of these texts through intertextuality with the Bible.91

As literature professor Thomas C. Foster notes, a myth is a set of “stories deeply ingrained in our group memory that shape our culture...a way of seeing by which we read the world and ultimately ourselves.” Whether we call it myth, religion or stories, according to Joseph Campbell,

Myth must be kept alive. The people who can keep it alive are artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world...The artist is the one who communicates myth for today.92

The novelist is the new mythologist; the one who captures ephemeral events, thoughts and concepts for all time. Novelist Michael Cunningham, in speaking of his own work, expressed it as follows: “That’s where the novelist comes in. That’s part of why we have novels—to reveal the life affirming consciousness, or whatever, that people don’t wear on their

91 King, Victorian Woman, 5.
92 Campbell, Power of Myth, 105, 122.
sleeves.” In *The Essex Serpent*, Perry not only wears the life-giving nature of friendship on her proverbial sleeve, but points to a deeper impact on our consciousness that prevents men and women from acknowledging friendship.

**How to Read *The Essex Serpent***

As Sarah Perry herself notes, part of her goal in *The Essex Serpent* is to subvert how we think about the Victorian age and the issues that men and women of that era encountered. To truly understand what the ultimate goal of the subversion is requires close reading of the novel. Alter, who has written several books on the techniques of literary analysis notes:

> Original works of literature... are themselves powerful vehicles of subversion, variously directed against prevalent beliefs and ideologies, received social and moral attitudes, literary tradition against the very conception of what literature is. The minute attention to how literature speaks through its most complex and distinctive language is an indispensable step in the processing of fully realizing the subversive power of the text.\(^{94}\)

To understand the “backstory” there are many ways to approach an analysis of *The Essex Serpent*. One approach is to look for clues in the structure of the novel.\(^{95}\) The novel takes place over the course of nine months and revolves around the mystery of a “creature” that is rumored to be haunting the waters of the town of Aldwinter in Essex. The “serpent” turns out to be an overturned, barnacle-covered rowboat. However, this unveiling is preceded by the washing to shore of a large eel-like creature, that splits open to reveal a writhing mass of tapeworms. If one wants to explore this image, coupled with an early quote from *Moby Dick*, one could conclude

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\(^{94}\) Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, 14.

\(^{95}\) The novel is a mix of narrative and epistles between the characters and is divided into sections which track to headings of the original pamphlet upon which the novel is loosely structured: “Strange News out of Essex, or the Winged Serpent,” (1669). Within the sections the novel is further divided into nine months, January-September, with the last chapter taking place in November. See, Richard M. Ratzan, “The Essex Serpent,” *Litmed*, September 7, 2017. http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/view/17093.
that *The Essex Serpent*, is a hero’s journey, similar to Jonah and the whale, with Cora representing “everywoman,” who achieves her independence. The nine months might represent her spiritual “birth” as a sexually free, Victorian “new woman,” who doesn’t require a man for her livelihood or spiritual development.

If we take Perry at her word and assume that her “conversation” is with Victorian novelists and poking fun at “hoary tropes,” one could examine each of those in turn and see how she subverts them. Within the text itself, the very characters themselves subvert the tropes of the “slow-witted parson and his fat-cheeked children,” the “bullnecked country curate all Calvin and correction, and his parsimonious wife,” and the widow who “lived on a diet of boiled potatoes and vinegar, hoping Byron’s diet might improve her silhouette,” with “Anglo-Catholic tendencies… an obnoxious lapdog, a toady ing companion with no flesh on her bones, and a squint.” Will is neither stern nor dogmatic. Cora wears men’s clothes and eats with a very healthy appetite. Stella, the “wasting” tubercular patient, is not the homely, frugal vicar’s wife of the Victorian novel; instead she is vain, “no bigger than a fairy and twice as pretty.” Neither shy nor retiring, Stella demands to examine her own phlegm and braves the “serpent” by sacrificing herself for the sake of her town. Martha, the governess, is also not a toady ing, faithful family retainer. She is a Marxist who openly challenges and criticizes Cora while maintaining an admiration that hints at lesbianism. This series of subversions might lead one to believe that Perry’s aim is merely to rewrite what we know about the Victorians to set the record

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98 Ibid., 58.
99 Ibid., 51.
straight and simply demonstrate how a friendship between men and women could work. Both of these approaches highlight the “foreground” — a story of friendship.

However, Frank Kermode and Robert Alter urge us to look at the backstory which is often developed in allusions to other texts. These allusions can include direct quotes, as in our *Moby Dick* example, paraphrases of famous lines, commentary on other texts by characters, or more difficult subliminal clues and situational ones. A subliminal clue includes things like character names. For example, Cora’s last name Seaborne, is the English translation of “Morgan.” The most famous Morgan is Morgan Le Fay, which is also hinted at when Will and Cora witness the *Fata Morgana*, an optical illusion which challenges Cora’s atheism and drives Will to seek a scientific explanation.\(^{100}\) This could take one down the path of analyzing potential parallels with the Arthurian legends.\(^{101}\)

Instead, this thesis will explore Perry’s use of allusion by examining her choice of timeframe, subliminal clues and what Alter calls “situational allusions,” or, those marked by recurrent vocabulary, character actions and plot similarities with other texts, in particular Genesis 2-3. According to Alter, a “key allusion may provide the whole ground plan for a work...or a kind of imaginative center to which the work reverts as it amplifies its own distinctive resonances.”\(^{102}\) Through the use of biblical allusions, Perry’s “story ceases to be locked in the [19th] century, it becomes timeless and archetypal—speaking to tensions and difficulties that

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\(^{100}\) *Ibid.*, 171.

\(^{101}\) A few interesting things to note about the allusion to Morgan le Fay. She herself does not appear as an allusion in the novel, but the characters witness a *Fata Morgana*, a mirage that makes a ship appear to float with seagulls flying beneath it. It is named for “the fairy Morgan le Fay, who set about bewitching sailors to their death by building icy castles in the air above the sea.” (Perry, *The Essex Serpent*, 171.) This might be an allusion to The *Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, which tells the story of how the goddess culture of Morgan, which honors the serpent, comes to accept Christianity because of its exaltation of the Virgin Mary. A quick internet search shows that Morgan is Welsh for sea-circle, sea-borne or sea defender. See for example, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morgan_(given_name).

\(^{102}\) Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, 128.
exist always and everywhere.”\textsuperscript{103} By exploring the many allusions to the Bible, I will demonstrate how Perry uses the enigma of friendship between men and women to make us reexamine our conceptions of the biblical Eve. \textit{The Essex Serpent},

...unsettles the canon, makes us read it differently, invites us to imagine its cultural role in altered terms...reaffirm[s] the continuity and authority of the canon as a resource of collective memory and as a guide for contemplating the dense tangle of human fate.\textsuperscript{104}

With \textit{The Essex Serpent}, Sarah Perry takes up the challenge laid down by biblical Scholar Phyllis Trible, to not legitimate our negative conceptions of Eve, but to “reread and appropriate” our Western myths in order to create new patterns in our consciousness.\textsuperscript{105} In this way, Perry’s novel is an important contribution to what David Tracy, the Catholic theologian, called the “next intellectual revolution:” where feminism meets religion.\textsuperscript{106}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} Thomas C. Foster, \textit{How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines}. (NY: Harper Collins, 2014), 51.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Robert Alter. \textit{Canon and Creativity}, 19-20.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Cullen Murphy, \textit{The World According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and our Own}. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998), xi. According to Tracy this is the fifth intellectual revolution with the first being the formation of the Bible which set Israelites apart from the rest of the ancient world. The second revolution was the rise of the New Testament. The third revolution was the Reformation and the advent of the printed Bible. The fourth being the Enlightenment with science and historical investigation challenging the Bible’s authority.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER III. THE SETTING: A FUNCTION OF TIME

However, it was my poverty and not my will that consented to be beaten. It takes two or three generations to do what I tried to do in one… I was perhaps, after all, a paltry victim to the spirit of mental and social restlessness, that makes so many unhappy in these days.

— Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895)

Why the Victorian Era?

Sarah Perry is not a historical novelist. Her other two novels, *After Me Comes the Flood* and *Melmoth*, are set in the 20th and 21st centuries. In both of those novels, the time frames do not seem particularly meaningful. In fact, in *Melmoth*, the time frames shift. However, in *The Essex Serpent*, Perry references a number of developments, themes and persons that were prominent in the late 1800s to include Mary Anning, Charles Darwin, and Eleanor Marx, to name a few. The significance of the time frame is signaled early on in the novel.

The novel opens on New Year’s Day with a drowning in Essex, with the closing line: “The pendulum swings from one year to the next, and there’s darkness on the face of the deep.” This is a direct commentary on time as well as a reference to Genesis 1, the beginning of time.

The next page opens Section I in January with another commentary on time:

One o’clock on a dreary day and the time ball dropped at the Greenwich Observatory…Skippers marked the time and tide…bells tolled fifty against the anvil as if time were running out. Time was being served behind the walls of Newgate jail, and wasted by philosophers in cafes on the Strand; it was lost by those who wished the past were present, and loathed by those who wished the present past. Oranges and lemons rang the chimes of St. Clement’s, and Westminster’s division bell was dumb.

Time was money in the Royal Exchange…in the offices of Holborn Bars the long-toothed cog of a master clock caused an electric charge to set its dozen slave clocks chiming…On Charing Cross Road time exchanged its chariot for buses and cabs in urgent fleets, and in the wards of Barts and of the Royal Borough pain made hours of minutes. In Wesley’s chapel they sang *The sands of time are sinking*…

In Lincoln’s Inn and Middle Temple lawyers eyed their calendars and saw statutes of limitation expire; in rooms in Camden and Woolwich time was cruel to lovers wondering how it got so late so soon, and in the course was kind to their ordinary wounds. Across the city in terraces and tenements, in high society and low company and in the middle classes, time was spent and squandered, eked out and wished away….

The opening references to time serve two functions. First, they set the locations of the novel, moving between Essex and London, which establishes the foreground of the novel as Cora’s development evolves between the two locations. However, the discussion of time is interesting because Perry does not return to this as a major theme in the novel itself. While the long discourse quoted above serves to set a mood, the discussion of time might be a hint to the hidden back story. As if to say perhaps, “it is time to relook at this time period.” Or possibly signaling a “break in time” where Cora, the hero of our story, is about to depart from what we know of the traditional linear narrative defined for women of this age.

According to Jeanette King, the Victorian Age is one of unresolved gender issues: a movement started that was not completed. While there is no evidence to suggest that Sarah Perry is a feminist, it cannot be denied that The Essex Serpent portrays Victorian women in a non-traditional narrative. In this sense, The Essex Serpent does fall into a category of fiction that “maps out an alternative, female historical landscape which often constitutes a radical rewriting of traditional, male-centered historical narrative.”

109 Until sometime in 2018 Sarah Perry maintained a twitter account (@Sarahgperry), where she discussed resentment at being pigeon-holed in any way, particularly as a “female author” or a feminist and denied that Cora Seaborne was a “strong woman” and actually expressed strong dislike for Cora as a character and denied that Cora represents a feminist ideal. Unfortunately, the account is now closed and not available for citation.
In this context, time—as Perry points out in the opening of her first chapter—is a function of human perspective. How we view time depends upon our individual narrative. When we are in love, we want a moment to last forever. When we are in pain, we cannot bear the passage of time. Because time is a function of our own narrative, we are free to rewrite the narrative and change how we look at particular slices of time. As spiritual writer Margaret Silf notes, “Re-membering means, literally piecing together again what has become fragmented or broken.”

According to Alter,

We order time through a stable framework of memory and expectation, measuring it with clocks and calendars, anticipating and planning for what will come on the assumption, grounded in what has been that in some respects we can exert control over the future.

Part of the backstory of *The Essex Serpent* is to re-assemble the fragments of our Western history and create a new continuum in the story of women in society. In this sense, the opening paragraphs of Perry’s novel serve to reset the clock and reorder our memories to allow us to re-examine our present and rewrite our futures.

**The Victorian Context**

The 19th century was a time of tremendous change. As already noted, industrialization changed the foundation of the British and American economies, as well as patterns in reading. Industrialization also led to the well-known rise of Marxism and the dissemination of scientific

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findings to include Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, which forced Victorian society to re-examine what it knew about itself in all aspects.

At the same time, the female consciousness was altered by such societal changes as expanded access to reading material and options for livelihood beyond marriage or domestic service. The invention of the bicycle gave women freedom of movement and a greater ability to broaden their horizons, which led to reforms in dress, and by 1894, the “New Woman” emerged in both fiction and in reality. Much like the creation of earth and the naming of animals and Eve in Genesis, once something is named, it becomes a reality: “part of the power of a newly coined label is precisely its ability to gather to itself and unify disparate positions.”

The New Victorian Woman questioned everything from voting, to the woman’s place in the home, to society’s approach to prostitution and contagious disease, to inheritance and property rights, to challenging the foundations of Western society: some of them rejected marriage, preached free love or even celibacy. These debates, and women authors and characters, dominated novels of this time period. By the 1890s, the novel became the “manifesto of the New Woman.” Novels largely unread and unknown today, such as Olive Schreiner’s *Story of An African Farm*, featured characters (Lyndall) that openly questioned the

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115 It is interesting to note that the number of women writers dropped by half between 1850 and 1950 with a parallel decrease in female protagonists. Kate Mosse, founder of the Women’s prize for fiction, speculates that this might be attributed to several factors. Chief among them is that men dominated literary criticism making books by men more commercially successful. Other factors could be increasing opportunities for women outside of novel writing, leading to a decline in women novelists as they pursued careers in science and other spheres. See, Allison Flood, “Women better represented in Victorian novels than modern, finds study,” The *Guardian*, February 19, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/19/women-better-represented-in-victorian-novels-than-modern-finds-study.

status of women in society. Even male authors included independent, free thinking women in their novels, and joined in the debate. Bathsheba Everdene in Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*, who successfully runs her own farm, or Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*, both of whom hate the idea of marriage but end up in disastrous marriages nonetheless, exemplify this trend.

The New Victorian woman was influenced by writers such as John Stuart Mill, who wrote essays about the subjugation of women, and 18th century writer Mary Wollstonecraft who insisted, in her writings, on friendship in marriage. The New Woman demanded “companionate marriage,” instead of the business arrangements that characterized marriages of the past. According to the New Woman, relationships should involve mental compatibility, freedom of choice and mutual respect: a renegotiated social and sexual contract. At this time, terms such as “boyfriend” and “comrade” arose to characterize these new relationships.\(^{117}\)

While these debates were occurring in novels, other debates were also occurring in the free press. A parallel trend to the “New Woman” question was the discussion of evolution vs. creationism. In 1859 Charles Darwin published *The Origin of the Species*, which challenged the idea that God created man from earth, and theorized that humans had evolved over time into our current form. At the same time geological and archaeological discoveries indicated that Earth was more ancient than originally understood, and even predated the Bible, which forced Victorians to question the very authority of the Bible.\(^{118}\)

However, while science threatened the religious authority of the Bible, the science of the day reinforced traditional patriarchal ideas about gender and the role of women. Scientists


stressed difference in brain size and skeletal shape. Darwin emphasized that inequality between men and women was part of the natural evolutionary process. George Romanes, an evolutionary biologist and physiologist of the time, wrote that “it must take many centuries for heredity to produce the missing five ounces of the female brain.”\textsuperscript{119} It is against this backdrop that \textit{The Essex Serpent} takes place.

**Women in Victorian Novels**

In 1886, Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl Marx, not only espoused communism but argued that marriage legalized gender inequality.\textsuperscript{120} Despite arguments put forth by T.H. Huxley and John S. Mill that “liberating” women would bring a “double emancipation” because “no human being can arbitrarily dominate over another without generous damage to his own nature,” the liberation of women was mostly seen as a threat to the social order of life in the Victorian age. Opponents argued that women belonged in the home and that the intent of nature was for them to focus on motherhood. Some even argued that women should be treated as minor goddesses and not meant for work or intellectual pursuits.\textsuperscript{121}

Women in Victorian literature fell into two general categories: the “angel in the house,”\textsuperscript{122} or the “the fallen woman,” represented by the Victorian New Woman. This has also been described as the “Ave/Eva” dichotomy. Ave, or the Virgin Mary, is described as espousing the Victorian feminine idea: submissive, obedient, free of sexuality and a model of maternal devotion. On the other hand, Eva, or Eve, was seen by Victorians— influenced mostly by

\textsuperscript{119} As cited in Jeannette King. \textit{The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction}, 35.
\textsuperscript{121} Fernando, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{122} This phrase comes from the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore which portrays women as the queen of her home and was seen by many as a feminine ideal. See Jill M. Hebert, \textit{Morgan Le Fay: Shapeshifter}. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 99.
Milton’s 1667 *Paradise Lost*— as disobedient, easily deceived, and lustful. The latter arguments were used to justify subordination as women, by their very natures, were easily misled and needed male guidance.\(^{123}\)

When women were primarily confined to the home, the problem of friendship between the sexes was a non-issue. With massive change in the economy, a growing globalization, the rise of Marxism and scientific challenges to the Bible, “[t]he old certainties of gender needed constant shoring up to prevent social disintegration of the kind that was widely feared.”\(^{124}\) With women entering the workforce, separation between the sexes was no longer possible. The literature of the day provided no examples or instruction on how to engage with members of the opposite sex. There were no etiquette or letter writing guides that addressed this need. These guides, for the most part, focused on the dangers of such relationships. An advice book from 1803 explained that while a same sex friendship “is the noblest of the human breast...this is a passion too refined, and of too platonic a nature to exist between those of different sexes. The friendship would ‘must repine into love or degenerate into lasciviousness’.”\(^{125}\)

With women dominating novel writing, themes of equality and a woman’s role in society could not be suppressed—equal friendship and companionate marriage became a political demand. Even male authors such as Thomas Hardy used the novel to explore issues of gender

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\(^{125}\) Advice to the Fair Sex in a Series of Letters on Various Subjects Chiefly Describing the Graceful Virtues which are Indispensably Required to Adorn and Perfect the Female Sex...and the Contrast: Thereby Showing how to Follow what is Good and Eshew [sic] what is Evil, (1803) printed for Cassandra A. Good as cited in “Friendship Relations: Situating Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic, 1780-1830,” *Gender and History*, Vol 24, No. 1, April 2012: 20.
relations, friendship and marriage. However, friendship, until *The Essex Serpent*, was used more as a fictional device than as a central theme.

**Victorian Novels: Putting Friendship Into Words**

Because novels served as a means by which Victorians could debate social change, friendship as a theme became the means through which characters could discuss issues. Novelists depicted literary characters that discussed issues of the day through dialogue and through letters. These discussions allowed for multiple perspectives not available in the predominant style of third-party omniscient narrators, prevalent in 18th century and early 19th century novels.¹²⁶  In the Victorian novel, friendships were used to propel the plot. Typically, a visit to friends of the family would provide an opportunity for the heroine of the novel to leave her normal environment and meet the eventual love interest. Another common trope was an unhappily married woman who would confide in a confidant, normally another woman, but sometimes a man. Another common motif was the “false friend” who would serve to lure the heroine into a compromising position. These novels would usually end either in tragedy or a marriage of the lead characters.¹²⁷

Victor Luftig undertook a survey of Victorian fiction and concluded that “friendship” between the sexes is caught in an “idiomatic bind” that began in the 1800s and continues into the present day. In his words, “In Victorian England, ‘friendship’ challenged the defining lines between some of the most valued bourgeois institutions—courtship, the family home, and the

¹²⁶ Berndt, 2-20 and 143-144.
place of work.”¹²⁸ Novels throughout the 19th century struggled to define relations between men and women that accurately reflected a new social reality.

One such novel published in 1895, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, spends over 400 pages with its various characters attempting to describe or define the relationship between Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead. *Jude the Obscure* is a study in the tragedy that societal conventions around marriage can bring to the lives of Jude and his family. Jude, who is married to Arabella, and Sue, who is married to Phillotson the school teacher, are both miserable in their marriages. Despite the fact that both get divorces, Sue refuses to marry Jude despite having children together and raising Jude’s son, “Father Time.” The novel explores the lives of characters who “belong to a new generation unfit for life;” living outside their time.¹²⁹ Hardy’s character, Sue, states halfway through the novel,

> I have been thinking...that the social moulds civilization fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes that the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star-patterns.¹³⁰

Sue is so non-traditional that she refuses to take tradition “on trust” and creates her own Bible by “cutting up all the Epistles and Gospels into separate brochures and re-arranging them in chronological order.” She goes so far as to say, regarding the Song of Songs:

> ...people have no right to falsify the Bible. I hate such humbug as could attempt to plaster over with ecclesiastical abstractions such ecstatic, natural, human love as lies in that great and passionate song!¹³¹

As if predicting feminist authors of a hundred years in the future, Hardy draws a character that appropriates the Bible to retell her own narrative. Sue grasps what de Montaigne, Aristotle and

¹²⁸ Luftig, 1-7.
¹²⁹ Dennis Taylor, “Introduction to *Jude the Obscure*,” Hardy, xxviii.
¹³⁰ Hardy, 205.
¹³¹ Ibid., 152-153
Plato defined as a true friend and says to Jude: “...I did want and long to ennoble some man to high aims; and when I saw you, and knew you wanted to be my comrade, I—shall I confess it?—thought that man might be you.” Unfortunately, neither Jude nor Sue can convince society to accept them as comrades. They are unable to find lodgings due to their unmarried state and their story ends in tragedy as their children commit suicide to save their parents.

While a commentary on marriage, Hardy’s struggle to define a heterosexual relationship outside of marriage results in a near endless argument between Sue and Jude on the nature of their relationship. Sue voices what most women probably felt: “And I am not so exceptional a woman as you think. Fewer women like marriage than you suppose, only they enter it for the dignity it is assumed to confer, and the social advantages it gains them sometimes....” In the novel, Sue reduces marriage to a contract to “cherish me under a Government stamp, and I was licensed to be loved on the premises by you-- Ugh, how horrible and how sordid!” Hardy’s novel highlighted the notion that sex, as a factor between men and women, must be dealt with.

Another author who also seemingly wrote outside of her time was George Eliot. In her last novel, she portrays a friendship between Gwendolen Harleth and the eponymous Daniel Deronda, which is not romantic and does not end in marriage or unexpected tragedy for either main character. *Daniel Deronda* was the only one of Eliot’s novels that took place in “the

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132 Ibid., 153.
133 Ibid., 159-260.
134 See Fernando, 146, who claims that Hardy rescued English fiction from “provinciality and priggishness” by attempting to come to terms with sexuality in *Jude the Obscure*. This paved the way for authors like D.H. Lawrence to deal with the subject in the next generation.
135 See Luftig, 80-81, who explains that Daniel’s feeling for Gwendolen is distinct from his feelings for other women. While there is an attraction, the attraction is subordinate to the center of their relationship.
Victorian society of her day.” Eliot herself lived, for many years, in an extramarital relationship with George Henry Lewes and had had a number of affairs outside of wedlock.

Published in 1876, *Daniel Deronda* tackles issues of marriage, the “Jewish question” and nationhood for Israel. Gwendolen’s uncle, representing the patriarchal clergy, tells her that it is her duty to save her family from poverty:

> Marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman, and if your marriage with Mr. Grandcourt should be happily decided upon, you will have probably an increasing power, both of rank and wealth, which may be used for the benefit of others. These considerations are something higher than romance. You are fitted by natural gifts for a position which, considering your birth and early prospects, could hardly be looked forward to as in the ordinary course of things...

However, a minor character, the heiress Catherine Arrowpoint questions social conventions and defies them in marrying her music teacher:

> Why is it to be expected of an heiress that she should carry the property gained in the trade into the hands of a certain class? That seems to me a ridiculous mish-mash of superannuated customs and false ambition. I should call it a public evil. People had better make a new sort of public good by changing their ambitions.

By setting the novel in her own time, Eliot directly addressed issues of the day. In an essay written in 1879, Eliot said she wanted to write: “...something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary historical fiction,” something that would give her “freedom from the vulgar coercion of the conventional ‘plot’,”...by the exercise of a “veracious imagination,” an author could “help the judgment greatly with regard to present and future events.” According to Fernando Lloyd, Eliot sought to change the world, not just interpret it; Gwendolen’s story was

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139 Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 147.
emblematic of “the race growing to an awareness of the need to move from the deadness of the present to the Utopian vision.”  

The novel ends with Daniel marrying Mirah, the Jewish singer that he rescues from suicide, and tying his story to that of Israel—in Rachel Held’s terms, tied to the biggest story he could imagine. This leaves the selfish and spoiled Gwendolen to realize that her own drama was empty and possibly meaningless. In her farewell letter to Daniel, she writes:

I have remembered your words—that I may live to be one of the best of women, who makes others glad that they were born. I do not yet see how that can be, but you know better than I. If it ever comes true, it will be because you helped me. I only thought of myself, and I made you grieve…It is better—it shall be better because I have known you.

Unlike Hardy, who wrote Jude the Obscure about twenty years later, George Eliot spends little time defining the relationship between a man and a woman. Instead she spends over 900 pages exposing Daniel’s process of self-discovery. Gwendolen serves to define what society wanted him to have but which he was not seeking in a mate. In Gwendolen’s case, Daniel serves at the very end to raise her consciousness to seek more of her life than wealth. However, the relationship of Daniel and Gwendolen is not central to the novel. In fact, the two characters are not seen together throughout much of the novel and there is very little shared action between them. In this sense, according to Luftig, Eliot was mostly silent on the subject of friendship between men and women.

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140 George Eliot, Impressions of Theophrastus Such (London, 1879), 450, as cited in Fernando, 53.
141 Eliot, Daniel Deronda, 810.
142 It is interesting to note that when Daniel first encounters Gwendolen, she is dressed in an “ensemble du serpent”: “sea-green and silver ornaments, with a pale sea-green feather fastened in silver falling backward over her green hat and light-brown hair… ‘yes she has got herself up as a sort of serpent now, all green and silver’…. Eliot, Daniel Deronda, 12.
143 Luftig, 60-61.
Luftig concludes his analysis with an observation that, it is better not to focus on naming a relationship but to focus on what a “shared vision” can lead to:

The history of attempts to legitimize such idioms suggests that merely renaming relationships between men and women must finally be far less productive than invoking the actions “friends” undertake together: the best evidence of the value of friendship must be found in accounts of shared actions and processes of cooperation, not in the words designating relationships themselves.144

By the end of the 1800s, women had made great gains. They had access to education, employment outside the home, rights to divorce, and property ownership rights; they demanded and had gained knowledge.145 Friendship emerged as a social reality as the sexes intermingled in society and the workplace. While the novel offered friendship between men and women in the 19th century its best chance to “gain credibility,”146 this type of relationship remained mostly unexplored. And, unfortunately, by 1896, the “New Victorian Woman” had become a comic stereotype.147

If a generation is measured as twenty-five years,148 relations between the sexes would not resolve in two or three generations as Jude Fawley suggests in the opening quote to this chapter. It would take nearly five generations for a novelist to do what Luftig suggested and for society to begin to critically re-examine itself and how it understands friendship between men and women. Sarah Perry takes up the loose end left by Victorian novelists and “re-members” the narrative to show us a friendship between a man and a woman as shared vision and action, not through “words designating the relationship.”

144 Ibid., 7.
145 See Burdett, 363-373.
146 Luftig, 59.
147 Berndt, 58.
CHAPTER IV. THE FOREGROUND: “SEEING TOGETHER” IN THE ESSEX SERPENT

If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I.

— Michel de Montaigne, On Friendship

The Essex Serpent: Overview

Perry’s novel depicts the story of a small circle of individuals that revolve around Cora Seaborne, a London-based Victorian widow, and her process of self-discovery. The novel opens with familiar elements of the Victorian gothic novel. It begins with a mysterious drowning which the locals attribute to the return of a supernatural and long-fabled sea serpent. It is revealed that Cora’s marriage to husband Michael was unhappy, and at times abusive. Michael’s death is the deus ex machina which starts Cora’s journey. Michael’s illness brings Cora’s suitor, Dr. Luke Garrett onto the scene, as well as his friend George Spencer. The “friend” trope, represented by Charles and Katherine Ambrose, serves to bring our main characters together. They introduce Cora to the Reverend Will Ransome and his wife, Stella, who promptly issues an invitation to come to their town of Aldwinter. This sets up the normal plot construction whereby the typical romantic entanglement, crisis, death and marriage would typically unfold.

If The Essex Serpent were written in the 19th century, it would likely have used Stella’s death as the existential crisis, ending with Will and Cora marrying. Rather than continuing to waste his intellectual capabilities as a country vicar, Will would likely, in the 19th century version of The Essex Serpent, use Cora’s wealth and Michael Seaborne’s absent seat in government to move to London and take his place in society. This formulaic narrative would

149 Epigraph to Perry, The Essex Serpent.

150 We first hear of Will Ransome through Charles Ambrose. He is described as the “disappointing brother of a Liberal MP of whom the Ambroses were fond. Disappointing, because at an early age he’d decided to hitch his
serve the function of the typical Victorian novel to restore the stability of the aristocracy and return our heroes to their place in London.\textsuperscript{151} Even if written by Thomas Hardy or George Eliot, there would have been a marriage at the end.

Instead, Perry diverges from this formula in many ways. Cora is a non-traditional heroine. She is well-educated and was raised mostly by her father who taught her none of the social graces expected of Victorian women. In Cora’s own words,

> You wonder why I grub about in the mud—it’s what I remember from childhood. Barely ever wearing shoes—picking gorse for cordia, watching the ponds boiling with frogs. And then there was Michael, and he was—civilized. He would pave over every bit of woodland, have every sparrow mounted on a plinth. And he had had me mounted on a plinth. My waist pinched, my hair burned into curls, the color on my face painted out, then painted in again.\textsuperscript{152}

Although “domesticated” by Michael Seaborne, she is untidy and upon his death near immediately dispenses with corsets and most traces of femininity. Cora has no interest in music, needlework and painting, as most Victorian heroines are depicted. As she tells Will, “And now I’m free to sink back into the earth if I like—to let myself grow over with moss and lichen.”\textsuperscript{153} Cora collects fossils and rocks and longs to discover a new species of sea creature. This is what draws her to Aldwinter.

The “romantic” element of the novel centers on the tangle of emotions among Will, his wife Stella, and Cora. Also, in the mix are her suitor Dr. Luke Garrett and Martha—the nanny, turned companion—who is also in love with Cora. In a minor, but no-less-significant plot line, Martha herself exists in a romantic triangle between George Spencer and Edward Burton, a


\textsuperscript{152} Perry, \textit{The Essex Serpent}, 166.

\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Ibid.}, 168.
working-class young man that Luke Garrett saves through an unprecedented open-heart surgery.\textsuperscript{154}

Unlike the typical Victorian novel that culminates in an “ending,” whereby life normalizes after the ending event, \textit{The Essex Serpent} has no real ending. The characters continue be friends. In a radical departure from most formulaic novels, the dying lady does not die. Instead of serving as the dramatic element, Stella’s illness gives her tubercular delusions which allow her to reach Cora’s seemingly autistic son Francis; this permits them to form a friendship that enables Francis to develop.

On the surface, \textit{The Essex Serpent} appears to be Cora Seaborne’s “hero’s journey.” When we first meet her, she is in her bedroom dressing for Michael’s funeral. The idea that she is not a typical heroine is broadcast by the description of the room:

Any visitor would pause puzzled at the door, seeing on the one hand the high soft bed and damask curtains of a wealthy woman, and on the other the digs of a scholar. The farthest corner was papered with botanical prints, and maps torn from atlases, and sheets of paper on which quotations were written in her large black capitals (NEVER DREAM WITH THY HANDS ON THE HELM! TURN NOT THY BACK TO THE COMPASS!) On the mantelpiece a dozen ammonites were ranked according to size; above them, captured in a gilded frame, Mary Anning and her dog observed a fallen fragment of Lyme Regis rock.\textsuperscript{155}

This quote from \textit{Moby Dick} is a harbinger of Cora’s encounter with the “Belly of the Whale,” or what Campbell calls the passage of the magic threshold that signals a journey into the unknown, the resulting self-annihilation or metaphoric death, and the subsequent rebirth into a newly enlightened person. The beast is the herald of adventure.\textsuperscript{156} Despite the fact that the Essex serpent, which is what draws Cora on her journey, turns out to be an illusion, the actual eel

\textsuperscript{154} There are other characters in the novel that are not treated in this thesis, or only mentioned: the three Ransome children, Joanna, John and James; Naomi Banks, their friend; Charles and Katherine Ambrose, mutual friends of Cora and the Ransomes; Cracknell, a neighbor and Thomas, the beggar.

\textsuperscript{155} Perry, \textit{The Essex Serpent}, 16-17.

\textsuperscript{156} See Joseph Campbell, \textit{The Hero with a Thousand Faces}, 64-77, 212.
that washes onto shore and splits open—like Jonah’s whale—does not lead to any particular enlightenment to signal Cora’s rebirth. The eel washes up in September, near the end of Cora’s journey, following the sexual encounter between Cora and Will. Instead of marking the end of Cora’s journey, the eel represents the need to examine their relationship. It is at this point in the novel that the sexual tension between them must be resolved to propel the story forward. Thus, the sea creature’s death and release may not be representative of Cora, but of the friendship itself.

The novel, as the epigraph declares, is truly a novel about friendship in its various forms. Instead of describing a friendship, Perry shows us how friendships function. It is about how friends “see together,” and make sense of the world around them; she directly responds to Victor Luftig’s challenge to write a novel with narrative interest, “to name not relationships but cooperative actions—to forego ‘friendship’ or any comparable noun in favor of some accounting of what working friends of opposite sexes enact.”157 As C.S. Lewis so aptly pointed out in *The Four Loves*: “Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side absorbed in some common interest.”158 To show how Perry achieves what neither Hardy, Eliot, nor any of the Victorian authors could, this chapter will examine how the characters interact to show how friendship operates.

**Seeing Together: The Perfect Friendship**

Unlike Hardy, Perry does not have the characters spend countless hours endlessly talking about their relationships. In defiance of both Victorian and modern societal convention, Perry

157 Luftig, 122.
uses the words “friend” and “friendship” with no qualifiers. She feels no need to describe friendships in this novel as “platonic,” or “with benefits,” or to describe these friendships any differently whether they be between the same sex or the opposite. If one reads the novel closely, one notices that one of the most often repeated action verbs are variants of “to see,” or “to look.” Characters “look” and “see” almost as often as they “say” in a novel heavy with dialogue. The act of seeing, both together and separately, is what defines the friendship dynamic between Perry’s characters.

According to C.S. Lewis:

Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.”

Lewis’ insight is demonstrated early in the novel when we witness the interaction between Luke Garrett and George Spencer which is the “foil” for the other relationships in the novel. Both studying to be doctors, Spencer actively avoided Garrett: “He suspected no good could come of being seen with him, and besides was a little afraid of the black glitter set behind

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159 The Kindle Cloud Reader search function shows that variants of words for speech (said, say, spoke, speak, talk, talking) occur about 1100 times in the novel, whereas words for vision (see, saw, look, seen, seeing, vision, view) occur a little under 900 times. In contrast variants of hearing occur less than 100 times; feeling a little over 200; walking/wandering approximately 130 times; eating less than 50; reading and writing each less than 100.

160 In this way Perry extends the concept that Virginia Woolf developed in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Not an exploration of friendship as much as how looking or seeing together forms connections between members of the opposite sex, Woolf perfected this image in this particular novel. In a scene between the Mr. Ramsay and the guest Lily Briscoe, wherein he examines a painting she is working on, Lily muses on a shared moment of artistic vision: “But it had been seen; it had been taken from her. This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate.” Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, with a Foreword by Eudora Welty. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), 53. Another scene is one where Mrs. Ramsay and another guest, Augustus Carmichael both gaze on a plate of fruit: “…she saw that Augustus too tooasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. This was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them.” (97). According to Luftig, Woolf draws on the concept originally developed by Joseph Conrad of friendship as “looking on,” to offer “hints of an idiomatic strategy that might serve social discourse beyond Woolf’s novels.” (Luftig, 201).

his eyes.” One night, George encounters Luke in a lab and is welcomed with the phrase, “Look! Come and see what I have made!” Their friendship is built on a shared appreciation of a glass slide containing human stomach lining. Imagining at first that it is a Japanese fan embroidered in miniature, “Stooping to look close, his [George’s] vision sharpened and shifted, and he realised what is was…. ‘Oh!’ He caught Garrett’s eye, and they shared a look of delight that was a stitch neither ever severed.” The slide is so special to him that Luke declares “I live in hope of one day knowing someone who’ll think it as beautiful as I do.”

The significance of this moment for understanding their friendship is shown four months later Luke decides to present this most precious object to Cora at a party she throws for her friends in June. “When she opened it, Katherine Ambrose saw a small frame in which a miniature embroidered fan was set behind glass and wondered what on earth the man was doing working with linen and colored silk threads.” Luke, who is poor, has gone to the expense of having the slide framed and wrapped. While he has handed the package to her “rather carelessly as if it hardly mattered whether it pleased her,” the gift goes unnoticed and Cora makes no remarks upon receiving it. This is in sharp contrast to his relationship with George who shares his fascination, interest and appreciation of the object. The others, while fond of Luke, do not share the same appreciative insight as George Spencer. Luke’s alleged friends don’t even take the time to examine it or even wonder at what it is.

George and Luke represent de Montaigne’s ideal of friendship. Their love for each other is obvious when Luke sacrifices his own hand to save George from Samuel Hall’s knife. Samuel Hall, who had stabbed Edward Burton earlier in the novel, is determined to kill Luke for saving

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162 Perry, The Essex Serpent, 34.
163 Ibid., 234-235.
Burton’s life and interfering in his revenge. George saves Luke from Hall only to have Hall turn the knife on George: “In the long moment that followed he saw also Spencer laid out upon a mortuary table.” This vision propels Luke into the selfless act that destroys his dreams of being a renowned surgeon.

Later, after Cora makes it plain that she doesn’t love him, and it is clear that Luke will never operate again, he goes to hang himself. However, what stops him from suicide is seeing the belt with the image of the caduceus that George had had made for him:

There it was, the coiled snake, the sign of his profession...It was a mockery—he had no right to it...Worse it called to mind Spencer...How extraordinary it was that all the while he’d sat leaning on the gallows he’d chosen, numbering his reasons for living and setting each one aside, he’d never once thought of his friend....No— it was impossible to think that he could do such harm—and it was also unfair: must he really struggle numbly on for the sake of George Spencer? How humiliating it was that neither the hope of professional glory nor the possession of Cora Seaborne might keep his neck from the noose, but nothing more than a friend."

By the end of the novel, George has moved in with Luke, serving as his hands in the operating room. They become one surgeon between the two and “a marriage of true minds has taken place. There are moments when each heartily wishes the other at the bottom of the Blackwater, but no more devoted couple can be found from one end of the Thames to the other.”

**Seeing Together: A Man and A Woman**

Friendship is no more separable from love between Will and Cora than it is for George and Luke. However, Cora cannot explore friendship with a man until she leaves the confines of

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London. As a nod to Victorian life, Perry sets the stage by reminding us that women are neither equal nor truly free to pursue friendships with men in this time period. In musing on her life with Michael Seaborne,

It struck her that really she’d known nothing of him in his public life, which was carried out in (she imagined) identical rooms in the Commons, and in his Whitehall set, and in the club which she could not attend, having the misfortune to be female. Perhaps, he dealt elsewhere with kindness—yes: perhaps that was it—perhaps she’d been a kind of clearinghouse for cruelties deserved elsewhere. There was a kind of nobility in that, if you thought about it: she looked down at her hands as if expecting the notion to have raised stigmata.  

Cora later tells Will the she sold her soul, “so that I could live as I must. Oh, I don’t mean without morals or conscience—I only mean with freedom to think the thoughts that come, to send them where I want them to go, not to let them run along tracks someone else set, leading only this way or that…”  

Unfortunately, her marriage did not allow her the freedom she sought, and in another well-worn trope of Victorian literature, Cora goes to Essex in search of fossils and finds friendship. As a Henry James character in The Awkward Age (1899) noted,  

I never really have believed in the existence of friendship in big societies—in great towns and great crowds. It’s a plant that takes time and space and air; and London society is a huge “squash,” as we elegantly call it—an elbow pushing perspiring, chattering mob.  

The theme of “seeing” runs throughout the relationship between Will and Cora and marks key turning points in their friendship.  

The strength of their friendship results from a shared vision of a mystery. Cora who adopts the philosophy of science and reason over faith and religion is forced to reconsider as she and Will witness a mystery that cements their friendship—*Fata Morgana*: “William Ransome and Cora  

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Seaborne, stripped of code and convention, even of speech, stood with her strong hand in his: children of the earth and lost in wonder.” Will later researches it and discovers it was an optical illusion creating an image of a ship floating above the horizon, with seagulls flying beneath it; its twin shown floating beneath. Based on this Will concludes that, “far from there being one truth alone, there may be several truths, none of which it would be possible to prove or disprove.” As for Cora, she allows for mystery by simply responding: “I was there! I saw what you saw: I felt what you felt.” Later she tells Thomas, a minor character who begs at the ruins of a castle in a nearby town: “I’ve always said there are no mysteries, only things we don’t yet know; but lately I’ve thought not even knowledge takes all the strangeness from the world...It was just the light, up to its old tricks. But how was my heart to know?”

This shared vision allows them to synthesize their different viewpoints and grow intellectually. By sharing in this moment, the playing field is leveled and they experience a moment unique to themselves. As C.S. Lewis noted, friends “see” side by side, Cora and Will,

Side by side they sit at his desk, books opened and discarded. They sharpen themselves on each other; each by turn is blade and whetstone; when talk falls to faith and reason they argue readily, startling themselves by growing swiftly bad-tempered…. Each considers the other to have a fatal flaw in their philosophy which ought by rights exclude a friendship, and are a little baffled to discover it does nothing of the kind.

Of course, the success of their friendship requires equality. Without an independent income, Cora would not have had the freedom to both explore her environment and expand her social circle. However, their friendship is also based on an equal level of intelligence and respect for each other. They even share a physical similarity which metaphorically signals their equality:

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171 Ibid., 217.
172 Ibid., 180-181.
“They fell easily into step, matching pace for pace; it occurred to him that their legs must be the same length, their height the same, perhaps the span of their open arms.” Perry uses this shared vision to demonstrate how a man and a woman can enjoy a friendship similar to Luke and George. However, Perry does not stop here, but continues to explore the full range of emotions inherent in friendships between the sexes. She does so by showing the effects of not seeing together but seeing separately.

**Seeing Apart: The Challenge of Individualism**

When Will and Cora first meet, Will is attempting to rescue a sheep stuck in the mud and in danger of drowning. Alone when she encounters this event, Cora immediately misperceives it as something ominous. She does not know Will and has no context to understand what she is hearing and seeing:

> In the silence a curious sound reached her: it was a little like a child crying, but a child old enough to know better. She could not make out any words, only an odd choking, whinnying nose, which fell silent for moments at a time then started up again. Then another voice joined it, and it was the voice of a man—crooning, patient, deep—wordless also, though (she listened harder) not quite now... now... now... After a pause—during which her heartbeat thrummed, although she later claimed she’d never been afraid—the man’s voice set up again, only this time at a higher, rougher pitch; she could not quite divine the words, but thought in among the frantic urging was, Oh, damn you! Damn you! Then there was the sound of something heavy striking something soft, and another choked little bray...on the nearer bank a man stooped struggling over something pale, which made frantic movements and gave out another weak cry. The sound of it struck and sickened her, and there was something familiar in the wretched imploring movements it made....”

Having been thinking about her troubled relationship with her son Francis, her abusive marriage and her reliance on Martha, she imagines the scene as one of violence. Even when relieved to

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find that it is not “whatever horror she’d imagined,” her first impressions of Will are formed in
that one moment: “Man’s a half-wit,” “shabby,” “rough-looking:” “If the stories were right, she
thought, and man had been first made from a handful of dust, here was Adam himself: all mud,
ill formed, without the full powers of speech.”

When they are finally properly introduced, this shared memory creates a shared vision
that allows them to connect immediately: in these first moments they see themselves through the
eyes of the other and establish a common bond despite their philosophical differences. Will feels
he should be annoyed “at this odd woman’s gray gaze challenging him at his own table,” but he
is elated when she says: “We both speak of illuminating the world, but we have different sources
of light, you and I.”

This instance of “separate vision” and misperception is replayed later when Cora suggests
that Luke hypnotize Joanna, Will and Stella’s daughter, in an attempt to understand the source of
hysteria among girls in an earlier classroom scene. Not having met Luke prior to this episode,

Will saw his daughter prone on a black couch with her arms hanging at her sides
and her mouth half open, while a creature bent over her and whispered...Martha had
greeted him with a curious look, not quite able to meet his eye; it was so unlike her
usual directness that he felt uneasy long before he opened the door and encountered
a crouching black-browed thing whispering at his daughter’s side. She lay quite
still, as if stunned by a blow; her head was tilted back, and her half-open eyes had
a vacant gaze. He was for a moment rigid with shock and distress; when he saw
Stella and Cora observing placidly from a nearby sofa, evidently complicit in the
scene, he found himself tripped into a fury... Quite what he thought was unfolding
in that well-furnished room...he couldn’t later say, only that he felt a kind of
revulsion: it was his daughter, and she was murmuring—something Latin, was it?
—and laid out like a fish on a slab.

\[175\] Ibid., 78-79.
\[176\] Ibid., 124.
\[177\] Ibid., 204-5.
This is a pivotal scene in their friendship that begins the buildup of tension, both intellectual and sexual, between Will and Cora that later erupts as the two characters stop seeing together and look directly at each other.

The key scene that tests their friendship occurs in June when Cora decides to give a party. Stella insists that Will and Cora dance together. Will and Cora face each other and seem to see each other for the first time. Onlookers sense a change immediately in their relationship but cannot process it. Katherine Ambrose, one of the friends that introduce Cora to the Ransomes, notes, “There ought to have been nothing in a brief waltz on the bare boards—nothing in those polite familiar steps to take anyone by surprise. What then had caused that curious moment, with so sudden a change in the air she’d hardly have been surprised to hear a thunderclap?” Francis, always watching, “saw how his mother smiled at Will, and how the smile was met with a steady, stern look…” It is at this point that Will is overcome by intense desire and “cannot settle his mind where Cora is concerned; he’d been so content in his love for her— he’d thought it of a kind the apostles might admire, as if in that muddy patch of earth they’d made a heaven —and then something had altered.” He writes to Cora:

I’ve never liked the look of you, do you mind? But I seem to have learned you by heart, seemed at once to know you, had immediate liberty to say everything to you I could never have said elsewhere—and all this to me is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

As for Cora,

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178 This party scene is evocative of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). In this novel, the heroine, Clarissa Dalloway also gives a party in June that opens with the eponymous character going to buy flowers for the party. Similarly, Cora gathers roses for her party. The significance of Clarissa’s party is that she has a shared moment of vision with a woman in the window and the dead Septimus Smith. See Luftig, 193, who notes that pivotal scenes in *Mrs. Dalloway*, like *The Essex Serpent*, are built around moments of shared vision.

If Cora could’ve explained what had gone awry she might have done, but for all the thought that she gave it—late into the night, and immediately on waking—she could not unravel things. She’d prized Will’s affection because it was impossible that he might want her as Michael once had; his affection was bounded off on all sides by Stella, and his faith, and by what she’d gratefully thought was his complete failure to notice she was a woman… ‘I’m only a mind, not a body: I’m safe as a child…’

And she believed it too. Even now, when she thought of the moment when everything had shifted, she saw the fault as hers, not his—she ought not to have looked at him the way she did [emphasis added], and she had no idea why she’d done it. Something in the hard flexing of his fingers against her flesh had struck something off in her and he had seen it, and it had thrown him off balance. Certainly, his letters now were kind enough—but it seemed to her a kind of innocence was lost.\textsuperscript{183}

It is at this point in the novel, when they stop looking side by side and look at each other, that they cross into a different form of friendship and begin thinking about and writing to each other \textit{about} the friendship, not because of it.

The point of separate vision is underscored by Francis’s reaction to the scene.\textsuperscript{184} Always watching, he cannot understand because he lives in a world of his own: “The evening’s muddle had unsettled him—he’d watched so carefully but found no order or reason in what he’d seen…”\textsuperscript{185} At the party he muses, “…what use was it to observe the human species and try to understand it? Their rules were fathomless and no more fixed than the wind.”\textsuperscript{186} Francis, described by Perry as autistic,\textsuperscript{187} operates on his own. Earlier in the novel, Martha notices that

\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Ibid.}, 292.
\textsuperscript{184} There is another scene of perception that is worth nothing but beyond the scope of this paper. Naomi, a minor character, is motherless and dependent upon her friendship with the Ransome daughter, Joanna and a drunken father. Upon Cora’s arrival in Aldwinter, Joanna detaches from the friendship leaving Naomi to make sense of the world on her own. In a pivotal scene that foreshadows her running away from home, she is groped (possibly worse) by men at the local inn. The activity occurs out of her line of vision and she senses that something is very wrong but cannot make sense of it on her own: “Then she is drawn down onto a waiting lap, and is all at once aware that something is wrong—she feels both afraid and outraged, but finds it impossible to move; somewhere behind her a man she cannot see makes a noise which is like that of an animal finding food.” This is an instance of something unseen that Naomi correctly perceives as wrong but cannot process it. \textit{Ibid.}, 178.
\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Ibid.}, 246.
\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Ibid.}, 242.
she fears the boy and Cora notes that Francis had rejected her early on: “Years passed: she learned his ways, and he hers. If their relationship bore little resemblance to the careless warmth she witnessed between other mothers and their sons, it was serviceable enough, and it was theirs.”

The reason for Francis’ isolation from his mother is explained by the narrator/author: “If anyone had asked, he’d have told them it was only that he tried to understand the world and its workings...He watched his mother with her mud and rocks, and made no connection between his own quest and hers. She looked down: he looked up. [Emphasis added] She was no help at all.”

Francis is the one character who, surrounded by people at this point, has no one to share a vision with. He discovers a kindred soul in Stella Ransome who shares his odd behavior by collecting blue objects. He knows that she is ill, wondering why no one speaks of it, thinking to himself: “but wasn’t it just like them all, to see but not observe?”

As a child, Francis can see, but does not have the ability to understand what he is seeing and has no friends who can help him comprehend his world.

If shifting their perspective from side by side to looking at each other complicated the relationship between Will and Cora, this action served to ease that between Martha and Luke. Both of them are in love with Cora and desire her physically. Up to this point in the novel, they dislike each other and know that they are rivals for Cora’s affection and time. Martha had originally been Francis’s nurse but “never, as she herself put it, quite got round to leaving.”

Up to this point,

Martha only ever spoke to the doctor with a show of annoyance; Imp had been her name for him; though no one remembered it now. His presence in the house on

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188 Perry, The Essex Serpent, 76.
189 Ibid., 245.
190 Ibid., 18.
Foulis Street—first a matter of duty, then one of devotion—was an annoyance to Martha, who felt her own devotion to be more than adequate.¹⁹¹

Unlike Francis, who cannot understand what has passed between the Reverend and his mother, Martha and Luke do. Francis notices, “seeing Martha withdraw, and stand beside Luke, and seeing how perfectly her face mirrored his: they looked almost a little afraid.” At this moment he witnesses a powerful moment of shared vision that draws these adversaries together. After the party ends, both Martha and Luke experience a moment of joint effort clearing tables and replacing the carpet. Luke says, “She’s [Cora] like a child, I don’t think she can see it, what they’ve done— and all the while Stella there watching—…” It is at that moment when they both realize that they are sharing the loss of Cora, they too look at each other and their relationship changes:

They surveyed each other, feeling all their antipathy ebb, and how the air was thick with the uselessness of their longing, and no way for it to be spent. In the dim room the surgeon’s eyes blackened; he watched Martha put her hands up to her hair...he moved toward her, and she turned away to the foot of the stairs. “Come with me,” she said, reaching for him: “Come up with me.”¹⁹²

This shared vision and experience, like the Fata Morgana, was uniquely their own and created a bond of friendship between them that was unexpected:

If Luke and Martha had expected either to fall in love or to despise each other in the time after midsummer, they are greatly surprised. What comes instead is an ease which is like that of fellow soldiers who’ve survived a common battle. They never revisit that night, not even in memory: it was necessary, that is all.¹⁹³

As for Stella, she understands the friendship between Will and Cora in a way that a lesser woman could not. “No more a fool now than she ever was, she’s seen his attachment to Cora grow knotted, and pities him. My beloved’s hers, and she is his, she writes in her blue book

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 23.
¹⁹² Ibid., 243.
¹⁹³ Ibid., 271.
without rancor…. Ah but he has a better helpmeet! Let him kiss her with the kisses of his mouth for his love is better than wine and she has the stomach for it!”194

Thus, Perry delivers us characters and friendships that are complicated and accurately reflect our modern struggles. We are merely human, and her characters achieve what the genre promises: showing us the struggles of individuals who look and behave like ourselves.

**Seeing Through the Eyes of Another: Being Our Better Selves**

The connection to the Victorian age and the true problems that women face in friendship is highlighted by Martha. Written as a secondary character in Cora Seaborne’s orbit, Martha emerges as the key to resolving the issues in Victorian narrative surrounding friendship and the role of women in society. Not only does Martha engage in cooperative vision, but viewing the world through her eyes is what allows other characters in the novel to transcend. While Cora’s story is of one woman, Martha, who is the only character with no last name, represents the story of “everywoman”

Martha represents the New Woman in Perry’s Victorian novel. Unlike Cora, who sought marriage as a path to liberty, Martha put herself in domestic service. “Taking her place in Cora’s household has been an act of purest pragmatism: it permitted a degree of social acceptance and a reasonable wage; it placed her firmly outside the class she despised and equally firmly within it”195 George Spencer is incredibly wealthy and in love with her, implicitly offering her the traditional Victorian option of marriage. She recognizes this but realizes that within the confines of Victorian society, a marriage like this is impossible: “I’m not what his family would’ve had in

mind!” At the same time, George Spencer is definitely not what Martha’s parents would’ve had in mind. With parents of the working class, she was raised, not on scripture, but readings from Karl Marx and folk songs of English suffering. In fact, “Truth be told, he roused in her a kind of reflexive loathing which took an effort to suppress.” George’s longing is expressed as another action of vision. When Spencer solicits Charles Ambrose’s assistance with his housing project, Spencer does so as he “pictures Martha’s face when he gives her the good news… There’ll be one of her rare smiles, he thinks: she will see me.”

However, Martha has a vision of her own and understands that even if she can’t love him, she can exploit him for his wealth and influence to help solve the problem of sanitary and safe housing in the increasingly industrial city of London. She uses his desire for her to spur him to action and in the end helps him to be a better person. As she tells Luke, “I never promised him anything...but I can’t do this alone. I’m a woman and a poor one—they might as well’ve cut out my tongue.” Even after she moves in with Edward Burton, dashing all hopes of romance between her and George, George continues to fund housing improvements on his own. Upon discovering that she is living with Burton, George sends her the following in a note:

For a long time, I wondered what use I was, with only money to recommend me... It’s because of you I’ve found a purpose which allows me to look in the mirror and not be sickened by myself. I do wish you’d loved me, but I thank you for helping me find a way to love you, and try to right the wrongs you showed me.

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196 Ibid., 283.
197 Ibid., 107.
198 Ibid., 106.
199 Ibid., 229.
200 Ibid., 283.
201 Ibid., 40.
202 Ibid., 411. In this way, George Spencer becomes the Gwendolen Harleth of The Essex Serpent.
Similarly, the notion that love, not friendship, allows one to look in the mirror and see as someone else sees is repeated in Will’s letter to Cora about Stella. He wonders, “Who will I be if she is gone? If she is not looking at me -- will I still be here? Will I look in the mirror one morning and find my reflection gone?” Even George who longs for Martha’s gaze, who cannot attend Cora’s party, is a “little relieved to be spared the ordeal of finding social graces under Martha’s gaze.” Thus friendship and love serve to show us our own virtues as well as our own faults.

In *The Essex Serpent*, Perry shows us different facets of love and friendship and, in the end, shows us that there is no real dividing line. What she does is discard the Victorian notion of attempting to find a new lexicon for friendship between men and women. Instead she shows us how it functions and tells us, there already is a word for friendship between men and women: friendship. But more so, in probably the most important of the letters that Cora writes to Will, she defines the nature and importance of friendship and love using the words “to cleave.” Noting that there are two words, and only two, that are spelled the same, pronounced the same but have two opposite meanings, Cora notes,

> To cleave to something is to cling to it with all your heart...but to cleave something apart is to break it up....I’ve never found a way to explain to myself what it is that exists here in our letters or when we sit together in warm rooms or go walking out in the woods, and I am not sure it’s necessary, not even now when I still feel your imprint in me... but for now that word’s the best that I can do...

> We are cleaved together -- we are cleaved apart —everything that draws me to you is everything that drives me away.

Just as seeing together can draw people into friendship, seeing separately can draw them apart, in the same way that the notion of cleaving can. However, by seeing together, we can also see

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through the eyes of others to see ourselves in different and better lights, as long as we do more than just look at each other, in the way that lovers do. If we merely look at each other without understanding each other, without sharing experiences, we are looking at someone as if a thing—with no context. And as we have seen, when we do that, we risk misperception and threat where none exists.

In Perry’s own words, her use of the word “cleave,” is an exploration of “Where is the idea of selfhood and the idea that one can love and love purely but be absolutely content as an individual being, fully formed and solitary.” Friendship allows us to do that in ways that romance can’t because in the throes of passion, we can often lose ourselves as we become part of a “we.” Just as Will fears he will lose an essential part of himself if Stella dies, or George can only respect himself through his love for Martha, the friendship that Will and Cora have allows them to remain themselves. In Cora’s final letter, she talks of her memory of their lovemaking: “I felt my heart cleaving, as I felt in there in the dark wood on the green stair and as I feel it now: something severed, and something joined...I love you and I am content without you.”

As for Will, as the novel concludes, he asks himself “what is she to him, after all? He cannot settle his mind…But the truth is (and he remains truth’s disciple) that casting about for how best to name her he can land on nothing more exact, more honest, than to say: ‘She is my friend’.” In the end, perhaps in response to those who struggle with defining friendship between men and women, Perry is suggesting that we stop struggling and just accept that it “is;” and enjoy it for what it brings: a means to see perspectives and understand our world in ways that we might not on our own.

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206 Perry, Interview by Campbell.
207 Ibid., 418.
208 Ibid., 416.
...but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof: And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother; and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

—Genesis 2:20-24 (KJV)

Subliminal Allusions in The Essex Serpent

There is little question that Perry achieves what Luftig had hoped—a novel that features “shared actions and processes of cooperation” to underscore the value of friendship. But, the question still remains: why is this such a singular achievement? The clues may be found, as Alter points out, in the subliminal allusions. One way to approach these allusions is to focus on the minor plot line of the story: that of Martha and Edward “Ned” Burton.

Martha’s role in the plot is to bring Spencer and Garrett into Bethnal Green where Luke’s stabbing serves to propel the narrative. As noted above, she is a secondary character but her subliminal importance is foreshadowed when we first meet her:

Michael Seaborne treated Martha with the kind of indifference he might’ve reserved for the hat stand in the hall; she was entirely inconsequential— he did not even meet her eye on the stairs. But the watchful Martha let nothing pass her by...

Martha’s actual importance is signaled by a number of factors. She is beloved by the most noble character in the novel: the easily-overlooked George Spencer. Spencer, who is Luke’s friend despite Luke’s best efforts to push him away, secretly purchases the tenement

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209 Luftig, 60-61.
210 Perry, The Essex Serpent, 27.
houses where Martha and Ned Burton live. In Perry’s subversive nod to Ayn Rand’s John Galt,211 Spencer emerges as the nobler version:

The entire tenement block has been bought up by a landlord who employed two clerks to make an audit of each home...the street took on the scent of whitewash and plaster, and over breakfast and supper, factory workers and nurses, clerks and mothers and elderly men braced themselves for a punitive rise in rent that never came. Now neighbors gather in stairwells and scratch their heads, and it’s generally agreed the man’s nothing but a fool. There’s a degree of resentment in public—I stand in no need of charity, more than one tenant says, bullishly—but behind closed doors they’d bless his name, if they knew it.212

Earlier in the novel, an allusion to “John Galt” can be found in a reference to a “Scottish man” who runs a tent mission. The mention of his name launched Martha into a tirade on decent housing as a duty of the aristocracy, resentful of the idea that living conditions should be a “gift.” However, even by the end of the novel, George has a positive influence on Martha by making her think George’s actions “...so humble, and so kind, that she briefly wonders whether her path might have better run alongside his.”213

Another clue that Martha deserves special attention is that she is the only main character in the novel that approaches the “serving class.” In a time where no aristocratic house could function without a number of servants, Martha is the only character who comes close. There are very few physical descriptions of her, instead she is described as one who “had little patience for the past and eyes fixed always at some brighter point several years distant.”214 In this sense, what is “missing” in the novel may be as significant as the details provided.

Perry herself has stated that a goal of the novel is to:

211 Ibid., 210.
213 Perry, The Essex Serpent, 411.
214 Ibid., 38.
Correct the misconceptions people today have about women in the Victorian era...women were active in politics and social justice, math, science and medicine by the time of the novel’s period setting….in the Victorian age lots of women were interested in Marx and Engels because the philosophies of the latter two attempted to create equality in society, which women subscribed to, as they weren’t socially equal to men.\textsuperscript{215}

If this is her goal, Martha is the agent of this goal. However, there is, perhaps, a more significant allusion that provides the backstory to the novel that can be found in the relationship between Martha and Edward Burton.

**Martha as the New “New Eve”**

Throughout Perry’s novels there are many allusions to the Bible. The characters quote phrases to each other, reference biblical passages and Perry, as author/narrator, uses phrases in her narrative. There are allusions to the Book of Revelations with the goats named Gog and Magog, direct quotes from the Song of Solomon, Hebrews, Matthew and Philippians.\textsuperscript{216} However, the most persistent are allusions to the Book of Genesis.

The early reference to Will Ransome as “Adam,” is difficult to miss. Stella, referred to by Will as “my star of the sea,”\textsuperscript{217} is a direct illusion to the Virgin Mary, often characterized as the “new Eve,” obedient, responsive and ultimately crowned the Queen of Heaven. Just as Mary is often depicted as stepping on the serpent, Stella has no fear of the serpent: “it’s no match for her: she sings to it and pities it for a cowardly creeping thing.”\textsuperscript{218}

\textsuperscript{215} Perry, Interview with *AuthorStory*.
\textsuperscript{216} Another possible allusion to the Bible consists in the name of Luke, who like the saint, is a physician.
\textsuperscript{217} Perry, *The Essex Serpent*, 232, 234.
\textsuperscript{218} *Ibid.*, 179.
This of course sets up Cora as Eve. Cora is the temptress bringing the serpent to Aldwinter. After her appearance in the “paradise” of Aldwinter, Naomi Banks says of Cora: “The woman came and after that nothing was all right.” Like Eve, Cora describes herself as having “barely existed” before her marriage; “[Michael] called me into being. He made me what I am.” The notion of Cora as the “Eve” to Will’s Adam is underscored by Stella’s reference to her as a “better helpmeet.” However, it is Martha whose hero journey to freedom involves, not a dead rich husband nor sea creature, but the removal of a rib.

Martha is introduced to Luke’s open-heart surgery patient through his nurse, Maureen Fry, who shares Martha’s activist bent. Not only does she find companionship with Edward, “Ned” Burton, but a cause. When Ned’s heart sack is pierced by Samuel Hall on a London Street, Maureen Fry immediately sends a note to Luke who is longing to perform heart surgery: “Patient presents with stab incision, left-hand side above fourth rib.” The surgery requires putting Burton into “a good deep sleep” and removing a “section of the rib that covered the wounded heart.” In a scene where the physician replaces God in his ability to give life, Luke performs groundbreaking surgery that ends with “the grinding of the retractor bolts, and...the muscles at the rim of the open cavity slammed shut, and then it was only the skin being stitched over a hollow place where the rib had once been.” It is this passage that signals Martha’s coming into being as the New Woman of Victorian promise. She goes from being Cora’s companion, dependent on an aristocratic woman, to a peaceful coexistence with Edward. With Edward’s quiet encouragement Martha decides,

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219 It could be argued that Cora is an allusion to “Lilith” Adam’s original wife, but it is difficult to see Stella as the corresponding Eve figure.
220 Perry, The Essex Serpent, 387.
221 Ibid., 250.
222 Ibid., 147.
223 Ibid., 152-154.
Plans are afoot, Edward Burton, mark my words. I’ve written to a man who can help—always comes down to money, doesn’t it, in the end? Money and influence, and God knows I’ve no money and not much influence, but I’ll use what I’ve got... I don’t know yet, I don’t know what I can do. But something’s going to change. Can’t you feel it?  

The relationship is not one-sided. Just as Edward helps Martha coalesce her plans around Bethnal Green, Martha helps him to “see” and to develop dreams of his own:

He’d taken his place in the city without considering it, until this woman with her hair like a rope and her brisk way of talking had stood on one of his mother’s rugs and raged at what she’d seen in the streets. Now it would be impossible to walk from one end of Bethnal Green to the other without thinking how that dark labyrinth of mean housing had a consciousness all of its own, operating on everyone who lived in it. At night, when his mother slept, he took out rolls of white paper and made drawings of high, wide buildings that let in the light, with good water running through them.

This shared vision between them of a future, is what draws them together. When Ned asks Martha to marry him, she responds with a statement that could have come straight from a Thomas Hardy novel:

Don’t ask me to enter an institution that puts me in bonds and leaves you free. There are other ways to live—there are bonds beside those sanctioned by the state! Let’s live as we think—freely and unafraid—let’s be bound by nothing but affection and by holding our purpose in common.

If you cannot have a wife, will you take a companion—will you have a comrade?

In the letter her reason for refusing is that she is in love with Cora Seaborne, a modern twist on the familiar Victorian version of the New Woman. However, unlike Jude the Obscure’s Sue Bridehead or Far from the Madding Crowd’s Bathsheba Everdene who both eventually marry, Martha is steadfast in her belief that there can be a different way. By the end of the novel, Martha, who is now a writer, notes:

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224 Ibid., 211.
225 Ibid., 211.
226 Ibid., 317.
...in the absence of Cora, it’s Edward Burton she wants, with his near-silence and his clever hands, her comrade and her friend.

Her longing for Cora is strangely no greater in Bethnal Green than it was in Foulis Street, in Colchester, in the gray house on Adwinter Common. It is fixed as the polestar, and she need not look for it. Nor does she resent their years of companionship; she understands the alterations of time, and how what was necessary may be no longer needed. Besides (she looks up from her typewriter—sees Edward frowning over his plans—touches the magazine which has lately published her work) it’s a poor woman whose ambition is only to be loved. She has better things to be getting on with.227

Viewed through the lens of Genesis 2, Martha’s function in the novel is not just to reset the course of the Victorian New Woman. Martha’s character asks us to re-examine the evolution and course of Eve herself as the mythical original woman.

**Eve in Western Literature: Fake News?**

Whether raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition or not, every person raised in the West is familiar with the story of Adam and Eve and how Eve brought sin and death upon humanity. In the famous scene of Eve eating the apple, she has been blamed for the human fall from Grace and has consigned us forever to exile from the earthly Paradise, which includes toil for men and painful childbirth for women. However, if one goes back to any version of Genesis and performs a close reading, the story is not all that clear. What the serpent tells her is that “your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”228 She doesn’t mindlessly disobey God’s word, what she does is take a calculated act based on *vision*, which she shares with Adam:

And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew...229

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228 Genesis 2:5 (KJV).
229 Genesis 2:6-7 (KJV).
The passage does not mention sin or sex. However, by the time of the New Testament, all women, as “daughters of Eve,” are portrayed as the source of sin. From Ecclesiastes\(^{230}\) to 1 Timothy, \(^{231}\) the judgement on Eve extended to all women. Early theologian Tertullian wrote,

> And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die. \(^{232}\)

However, the writers who have probably had the greatest impact on women in the Western psyche are Augustine and Milton.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine exonerates Adam in describing a scene from his youth where he stole pears. Similar to eating forbidden fruit in Eden, Augustine wrote, “Our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden,” however, there is a hint that he did so, not because the pears were pleasing to the eye, nor because they were hungry. Augustine hints he did so to “enjoy the theft itself”\(^{233}\)—to fit in with his friends: “I most certainly would not have done it alone. It follows then, that I also loved the camaraderie with my fellow-thieves.”\(^{234}\) In his work, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine lays blame for sin squarely at Eve’s feet. According to Augustine, Adam feared that she “might easily pine away without

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\(^{230}\) “And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her.” *Ecclesiastes* 7:26 (KJV).

\(^{231}\) “For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” 1 Timothy 2:13-14, (KJV). It should be noted that there is some evidence to suggest that St. Paul is not the author of 1 Timothy. See for example, Margaret M. Mitchell, “Introduction to the Pastoral Epistles,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, Fourth Edition, ed. Michael D. Coogan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2084.


him to comfort her.” Adam eats the fruit, just like Augustine did, out of “loving concern for their mutual friendship.”

Augustine also firmly believed that God intended for woman to be lesser and beneath man in the hierarchy of life. As for friendship between them, Augustine’s position is clear: “How much more agreeably, after all, for conviviality and conversation would two male friends live together on equal terms than man and wife?” However, Augustine notes that had God created two men, the first would have to have hierarchy over the other; ergo, a woman was necessary for social order.

Thomas Aquinas later took up this same argument, going further in declaring that woman is a defective version of man, a “crooked rib.” According to Aquinas, woman was meant to be a helpmeet but, in terms of agricultural labor, was of little help. Therefore, Aquinas concluded that Eve was created expressly to procreate: “for living together and keeping each other company, it is better for two [male] friends to be together than a man and a woman.” For Aquinas, women are naturally subordinate, intellectually inferior and inherently more sinful and susceptible to temptation than men.

One could imagine that Tertullian, Augustine and Aquinas, as early Christians, had some divine insight that allows them greater ability to interpret Genesis. However, in the words of historian Stephen Greenblatt:

The endless harping on Eve’s sin and the defects of all of her daughters obviously suited the mental world of monks and friars who had taken vows of chastity and

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235 Augustine of Hippo, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, as cited in John Flood, *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 25. Much as we should read the Bible in context, it might be worth re-examining these texts in context as well. It is worth noting that historical interpretations of these early authors may have colored our views of Eve, as much as—or more than—the original texts themselves.

236 Augustine as cited in Flood, 26.
237 Greenblatt, 130.
238 Meyers, 104.
abjured—at least officially—the companionship of the other sex. And it suited as well those husbands who were locked in a struggle to dominate their wives and daughters. The miseries brought by Eve became a standard talking point in the battle of the sexes, and predictable and highly useful charge because it seemed to carry the authority of the Bible itself.\textsuperscript{239}

Also, these early theologians were driven by the need to consolidate the authority of a monotheistic religion. According to biblical scholar Carol Meyers, “Lurking behind the woman’s encounter with the plausible serpent may have been priestly anxiety to warn women off the tempting Canaanite goddesses who were typically accompanied by snake avatars.” In the early days of Judeo-Christianity marriage with “foreign wives” who believed in goddesses was an “ongoing concern.”\textsuperscript{240}

By the time of Augustine, as religious historian Elaine Pagels notes, Christianity was no longer a dissident sect. With Constantine’s conversion in AD 313, Christianity became the official religion of the empire and Church leaders were no longer arguing for their survival and to create converts. Augustine’s theory of original sin and the role of Eve became the justification for a Christian state and state-sponsored Church: humans cannot be trusted to avoid sin without a firm guiding hand.\textsuperscript{241} According to Pagels, Augustine “offered an analysis of human nature that became, for better and worse, the heritage of all subsequent generations of western Christians and the major influence on their psychological and political thinking. Even today, many people, Catholics and Protestants alike, regard the story of Adam and Eve as virtually synonymous with original sin.”\textsuperscript{242} At the heart of original sin, according to Western interpretations, is Eve.

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\textsuperscript{239} Greenblatt, 126.  \\
\textsuperscript{240} Meyers, 22-23.  \\
\textsuperscript{241} Elaine Pagels, \textit{Adam, Eve and the Serpent}. (New York: Random House; 1988), xxv-xxvi.  \\
\textsuperscript{242} \textit{Ibid.}, xxvi.
\end{flushright}
Even the successful reign of a woman as Queen of England could not save Eve from the grip of the theologians, philosophers or poets. According to Meyers, our current understanding of the Garden of Eden story is based more on Milton’s *Paradise Lost* than on the Bible itself.\(^{243}\) Published in 1667, *Paradise Lost* is considered one of the greatest works of literature in the history of the English language. If Augustine committed what Greenblatt calls “Eve’s murder,”\(^{244}\) Milton wrote her obituary.

Milton’s poem is written as an “eyewitness account” of the Fall. Milton builds upon the thoughts of Augustine by firmly equating Eve with Original Sin and the serpent with Satan. In this epic poem which attempts to explain the entire history of mankind, Satan attempts to regain Heaven by weakening God’s creation: humans. Satan in the form of a cormorant first visits Eve tempting her in a dream of God-like glory. In her dream, she is led to eat of the Tree of Knowledge by “one [who] called me forth to walk” and she sees herself as a goddess: “Forthwith up to the clouds/ With him I flew, and underneath beheld/ The earth outstretched immense, a prospect wide/ And various: wond’ring at my flight and change/ To this high exaltation.”\(^{245}\)

However, her weak disposition is established before Satan can even reach her. In Book IV, Eve, upon creation falls in love with her own image in a lake: “Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed/Mine eyes til now, and pined with vain desire.” She transfers her love to Adam after his impassioned plea:

His flesh, his bone; to give thee being I lent/ Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart. Substantial life, to have thee by my side…Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim/ My other half: with that thy gentle hand/ Seized mine, I yielded, and from that time see/ How beauty is excelled by manly grace.\(^{246}\)

\(^{243}\) Meyers, 63.
\(^{244}\) Greenblatt: 120-138.
In Book IX, Eve asserts her independence by demanding to work separate from Adam in the garden. It is at this point that Satan enters the snake. Wondering at a talking snake, Eve inquires how he comes to speak and he tells her about eating the fruit of the tree: “Sated at length, ere long I might perceive/ Strange alteration in me, to degree/ Of Reason in my inward powers, and speech/ Wanted not long, though to this shape retained.”\(^{247}\) The serpent appeals to her vanity by recalling the dream:

By gift and thy celestial beauty adore/ With ravishment beheld, there best beheld/ Where universally admired; but here/ In this enclosure wild, these beasts among,/ Beholders rude, and shallow to discern/ Half what in thee is fair, one man except,/ Who sees thee? (and what is one?) who shouldst be seen/ A goddess among gods, adored and served/ By angels numberless, thy daily train.\(^{248}\)

As if Milton does not portray Eve as weak and self-centered enough, once she eats of the tree, she actually debates whether to share her new-found knowledge with Adam. Eve wonders:

...But to Adam in what sort/ Shall I appear? Shall I to him make known/ As yet my change, and give him to partake/ Full happiness with me, or rather not,/ But keep the odds of knowledge in my power/ Without copartner? So to add what wants/ In female sex, the more to draw his love,/ And render me more equal, and perhaps, A thing not undesirable, sometime Superior; for inferior who is free?\(^{249}\)

In the poem Eve finally decides to share the fruit with Adam once she imagines, after her death “Adam wedded to another Eve,../....Confirmed then I resolve,/ Adam shall share with me in bliss or woe:/ So dear I love him, that with him all deaths/ I could endure, without him no life.”\(^{250}\)

As portrayed by Milton, the love between Adam and Eve is based on shared vision and activity. When Eve is alone, she succumbs to the temptation of the snake. What is notable, however, is that Raphael, the angel who instructs Adam, doesn’t converse with Eve. Therefore,

\(^{247}\) Ibid., IX: 598-601, 201.  
\(^{248}\) Ibid., IX: 540-549, 199.  
\(^{249}\) Ibid., IX: 816-825, 206-207.  
she has to derive knowledge second-hand from Adam—she does not share this experience and her struggle for equality and independence is what leads to the Fall. For Milton, the message was most likely that women should allow men to speak and think for them.

As for Adam, he knows eating the fruit is wrong and in direct contradiction to the instructions he has received, in personal one-on-one meetings, from Raphael. However, he forsakes his relationship with God for Eve: “So forcible within my heart I feel/ The bond of nature draw me to my own,/ My own in thee, for what thou art is mine:/ Our state cannot be severed, we are one,/ One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself.”251 It is at this point that knowledge of their nakedness turns into “Carnal desire inflaming; he on Eve/ Began to cast lascivious eyes, she him/ As wantonly repaid; in lust they burn.”252

This epic poem seared into the Western psyche the story of Adam and Eve far more effectively than Augustine or Aquinas could have. The first English translation of the Bible was produced only 56 years prior to Paradise Lost, in 1611, which made it accessible to the broad English-speaking public for the first time (even for those who could not read, recitations were fully understandable). As a lyric poem Paradise Lost made the biblical story accessible, readable and beautifully rendered. Also, Milton provided an interpretation which served to fill in gaps that existed in the sparse biblical story and made sense of death. Unfortunately for women, it was based on his own imagination and influenced by earlier writers like Augustine.

As with Augustine, who was looking to solidify the authority of the Church and was driven by his own views on chastity, Milton, a Puritan and virgin well into his 30s, was publicly railing against the Church of England and the regime of Charles I. Milton’s first marriage was to

252 Ibid., IX:1013-1015, 211.
the daughter of a man who owed him money. While it is not known whether the seventeen-year-old bride was bartered to Milton, what is known is that she was a Royalist who abandoned her husband after a month and they stayed separated as Civil War broke out in England. At this point, Milton took to writing long tracts advocating no-fault divorce in England. For Milton, the justification for divorce could be found in God’s reason for creating Eve in the first place: “It is not good that man should be alone.” For Milton, the principle reason for marriage was companionship. Milton was a deeply devout Christian, who married a young woman yet was alone -- this was what fueled *Paradise Lost*. For Milton, being married to the wrong person was “God forbidden loneliness.”

Within Milton’s tortured psyche was an argument for friendship between men and women. He could have portrayed Adam and Eve as discovering the fruit together— there is nothing in Genesis 2 that actually indicates Adam was absent during the discussion between Eve and the snake. *Paradise Lost* could have been a cooperative act of free will with the intent of gaining knowledge. Eve could have been portrayed as an intelligent creature making a rational choice. Instead, in *Paradise Lost*, Eve is narcissistic, selfish, ambitious and short-sighted. According to Greenblatt, Milton’s poem “forever transformed the ancient narrative.”

We can forgive Milton as a creature of his time. However, the idea that historical interpretations of Genesis should continue to be a blueprint for relations between men and women needs revisiting. The origin of stories can, as anthropologist and expert in comparative religion E.O. James notes:

…be traced back to historical situations and perplexing and critical occurrences; the aim being to give stability to the social structure and to establish a state of equilibrium between man and nature and the sacred order upon which human

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253 Greenblatt: 162-188.
254 Kvam, et. al., 15.
welfare is believed to depend. Therefore, myth and ritual express the most deeply rooted hopes, fears and emotions of a community concerning the practical and urgent problems of daily life, physical and spiritual.\textsuperscript{255}

It is perhaps—as I think Sarah Perry is suggesting—time for us to take another look, not just at Victorian times, but go back to our beginnings and change the way we view Eve.

**Back to the Future: Toward a New Mythology of Eve**

If we go back to the very beginning and look at the creation story in its own context, we see that Genesis is unique among creation myths of the Ancient near east. In the most ancient of creation myths, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, heaven and earth are created from the body of Tiamat, a female sea creature. Tiamat, as described by Joseph Campbell, was “terrifying, dragon-like, attend by swarms of demons—a female personification of the original abyss itself: chaos as the mother of the gods...the menace of the world.” Marduk, the Sun-God, kills his own mother and “split her up like a flat fish into two halves.” From the two halves he creates heaven and earth.\textsuperscript{256}

According to Pamela Norris, Genesis reverses the natural order of creation. Instead of birth through a female, “a male god speaks the universe into being and the first woman is ‘born’ of man, formed from the rib that God takes from the sleeping Adam’s side. Later, her biological role is reinstated when she is named by Adam as Eve, ‘the mother of all living’.”\textsuperscript{257} In Jeannette King’s words, “To represent Creation instead as a speech act carried out by a male god can therefore be seen as a usurpation of a distinctly female power.” Further, according to King,

\textsuperscript{256} Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 245-246. 
\textsuperscript{257} Norris, 2.
giving birth is a punishment in Genesis.\(^{258}\) As noted above, the function of creating a male creator who had no need of a female may have been a “polemic against goddess worship.”\(^{259}\)

As many feminist biblical scholars have pointed out, we know the story of Eve through the eyes of men. The creation of Eve has been interpreted as an “afterthought,” an act that God undertook because he saw that it was “not good” for Adam to be alone: Eve has been treated as the lesser being. As early as 1790, Judith Murray wrote, “It doth not appear that she was governed by any one sensual appetite; but merely a desire of adorning her mind.”\(^{260}\) In contrast, according to Murray, Adam acted out of “bare pusillanimous attachment to woman!” However, serious biblical scholarship among women has only emerged in the last fifty years. Through their task of biblical exegesis and through their eyes a new vision of Eve is emerging.

In 1972, Phyllis Trible delivered a paradigm-breaking paper at Andover Newton Theological Seminary.\(^{261}\) In this paper and subsequent works, she argues that Eve was the crowning glory of God’s creation and the only creature not made of earth. By studying the Bible closely in Hebrew, Trible notes that the word used for Eve is helper: same that is used to describe God in later books of the Bible. She further argues that the original creature was androgynous, not male at all. For Trible, the creation of Eve was God’s act of sexual differentiation.\(^{262}\)

\(^{258}\) King, Women and the Word: 12-13.


\(^{261}\) It should be noted that Henricus Cornelius Agrippa von Nettlesheim argued this same point in “The Glory of Women,” which argued that Scripture was not a basis for male privilege. He stated that the trajectory of creation moves from inferior to superior with Eve achieving the highest status. His point was that Adam was actually flawed since he is missing a rib. For a fuller discussion, see Murphy, 23.

\(^{262}\) Kvam et al, 377-378.
Joseph Campbell supports this latter argument. Citing the Midrash: “When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the first man, He created him androgynous,” he notes that the removal of the feminine is common across religions. This act marks the beginning of the human journey, “the mystery of creation: the devolvement of eternity into time, the breaking of the one into the two and then the many, as well as the generation of new life through the reconjunction [sic] of the two.”

Trible and Meyer argue that Eve is actually the prime mover of the human story. According to Trible, Eve is both the theologian and translator. She argues that Eve is fully aware, rationale and independent, without needing to consult with Adam, when she decides to eat the fruit. In that one moment of decision she considers all possibilities—the tree is good for food, pleases the eye and is a source of wisdom. In this sense she is calculating, but in an intelligent way. Trible judges Adam not as the hopeless romantic that Milton does, instead he is the silent, passive, “bland recipient.” He is “brutish and inept.”

Carol Meyers observes that based on patterns in the Bible, the character with more spoken lines tends to be the hero of the story. In Genesis 2-3, Eve dominates the dialogue with more active verbs whereas Adam only has one, “he ate.” If we examine Genesis 2-3 closely, there is actually no textural evidence to suggest that Adam was absent from the scene. There is

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264 Among the scrolls found at Nag Hammadi is one titled *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, or *Reality of the Rulers*. This gnostic work provides an alternative view of Creation with Eve being the higher, spiritual side of humanity. When the other rulers fell in love with her, her spirit fled into the tree and became the snake giving Adam wisdom. The body she left behind became the physical Eve. See http://gnosis.org/naghamm/Hypostasis-Barnstone.html. See also Celene Lillie, *The Rape of Eve: Transformation of Roman Ideology in Three Early Christian Retellings of Genesis*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).
267 Meyers, 59.
no connection between Satan and the serpent, and no mention of sin. There is also no evidence to suggest that Eve was meant to be the lesser partner. As Trible states,

Visiting the Garden of Eden in the days of the Women’s Movement, we need no longer accept the traditional exegesis of Genesis 2-3. Rather than legitimating the patriarchal culture from which it comes, the myth places the culture under judgment. Thus, it functions to liberate, not to enslave. This function we can recover and appropriate.

Eve was the original feminist, desiring education, seeking independence and exercising free will. However, it is not just women who are reassessing the role of Eve. Mishael M. Caspi, a professor of religion at Bates College, notes that Eve introduces the world to knowledge. Her story is a “celebration of wisdom, not a parable of moral weakness.” Writer Cullen Murphy notes that Eve was the provocateur in Paradise:

And is not provocation Eve’s true vocation? In the Bible, the last few of the words given to Eve are those that follow an act of creativity, which is to say of provocation: the birth of a child. Creativity, curiosity, understanding: these are the provocative attributes for which Eve is remembered. They might not be needed in Paradise. They are made, as are we, for a world that falls short of Eden.

At the end of the day, had Eve not eaten the fruit of the tree, there would be no story.

The Role of Subliminal Allusion in The Essex Serpent. Just as Eve is the prime mover of the human story, Martha is the prime mover of the novel’s story. She supports Cora as her companion and helper, she brings the novel to one of its dramatic turning points, but more

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268 The connection with Satan is a way to explain why the snake talks. However, there is a talking donkey in Numbers, but this animal is never associated with Satan.
271 Murphy, 241.
272 In other gnostic works, for example, On the Origin of the World Eve (named Zoe or life) is actually portrayed as the daughter of Sophia (wisdom), who is not created from Adam’s side but actually awakens him and gives him a spirit. In the Secret Book of John, the creation story features multiple gods. The god portrayed in Genesis 2-3 is a lesser god who is tasked with overseeing Earth. He is jealous of mankind and lies about the nature of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to Adam. The serpent, ancient symbol of divine wisdom, appeals to Eve to resist this god. These works support the idea that Eve is the prime mover of the human story. See, Pagels, 28-31.
importantly she holds out hope for the New Victorian Woman. Just as the New Woman came into being through the novel, a modern woman can take her place in society—equal and valued as a “friend”—with no qualifiers. Martha declares that change is coming, and she will use what skills she has to bring it about. As it turns out, she ends the novel as a writer. Writing is a way to make sense of our world. It is a way to re-member, or re-assemble, the stories of our past. The task for writers is “putting the bits together again, working with the fragments, the splits and breaks and making new myths.”

Perry embraces this task wholeheartedly. She is not just challenging the patriarchal notion that women cannot make good friends for men, but she is challenging the notion of logos itself. By writing a novel where she never defines a term or word for friendship between men and women, or calls Martha a “new woman,” she challenges the idea that something must be named for it to exist.

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CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION: WHAT STORY ARE WE IN?

All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature…. At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship.

—Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” 274

And render me more equal, and perhaps, A thing not undesirable, sometime Superior; for inferior who is free?

—John Milton, Paradise Lost275

At just over four hundred pages, The Essex Serpent can probably be interpreted in many different ways. This thesis only looks at one of the potential avenues of analysis that one might explore. The intent of the author cannot be known, short of asking her, and it is possible that what a reader sees may not have been a conscious plan of the author’s but may reflect one’s own underlying attitudes and outlook. A novel is an author’s creation and as such, is bound by the perspective and thoughts of that author. However, writers write for a reason. Perry might be working out her own challenges with faith and reason. But she may also be trying to tie her story to the much larger story of what is happening in Western society today.

As John S. Dunne, a priest and theologian, asks, “What kind of story are we in?”

There is some profound link, it seems, between the story of a man’s life and the story of his world. The story of his world is his myth, the story in which he lives, the greater story that encompasses the story of his life. To discover his myth, he must go deeper into his life than he would if he were going to tell only his life story. He must somehow rediscover the world he discovered in the beginning of his life, the world into which he entered as a child.276

This connection to the larger story is the meaning of life, and our ability to understand it is essential for us to cope with the things that we cannot understand.

On an individual level, the world Dunne asks us to rediscover is normally the world as framed by our mothers. Perry nods to this in her subplot involving Francis and Stella. Francis, who cannot understand much of what he sees in the world, finds a kindred spirit in the hallucinating Stella. When Francis, out late in defiance of his mother, discovers that the serpent is nothing more than Banks’ lost boat, he runs to Stella to confess his act of disobedience and to tell her of his discovery. Stella in turn elicits his help in her plan to save Aldwinter; Francis forms a friendship with Stella because, “he was aware for the first time of being wanted, and not out of duty.”

This bond of trust is an image that Martha will always remember: Francis “who even as an infant could never bear to be held— was seated astride in Stella’s lap, his arms clasped about her neck…William’s wife and Cora’s son, fit together like broken pieces soldered on the seam.” However, as the realization dawns on him that Stella means to do herself harm, it is ultimately to his mother that he turns when he cannot make sense or order of events:

Then there he was in her lap, suddenly with his dark head fitting precisely between her cheek and shoulder; his arms clutched about her neck…The impossibility of reconciling what he had promised, and what he desired, bewildered him: whichever way he turned, something would be knocked out of place.

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278 Ibid., 375.  
279 Ibid., 402. The connection between Cora, Stella and Francis is symbolized in the novel by stigmata. In describing her relationship with Michael Seaborne, Cora notes that “He’d mock her, putting his thumb in the palm of her hand and stroking so that the flesh grew sore… (17). Later in thinking about Michael’s cruelties, Cora “looked down at her hands as if expecting the notion to have raised stigmata.” (21). In the scene described above, where Francis and Stella form their bond, as Stella thinks about her upcoming battle with the serpent, “She looked down at her palms, and read them – surely there were sores coming where the headlines cross the lines of memory?”(373) Finally, when Francis understands that what Stella has done puts her in danger, “...sitting between the ribs of Leviathan and pulling at dark splinters driven into the palm of his hand, Francis Seaborne watched — seen by neither, missed by no one.” (399)
Our mothers live in a story that has been dominated by men for over 2000 years. As feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva notes, long before the monotheism of Israel, the Northern Semites worshipped “maternal” deities. As a nomadic people, a stable unified community was essential; as a result, Judeo-Christianity becomes a “symbolic principle of community.” According to Kristeva, this community can only be formed through one means: “the word.” The story of the people is what binds them together. Therefore, it is crucial that Judeo-Christianity is based on the authority of logos, rather than birth, the basis of goddess-worshipping religions. For Kristeva, it logically follows then that the foundational myth of Western society portrays birth as a punishment for seeking independence through knowledge; in this way, the patriarchs discouraged women from goddess worship and maintained the familial structure of Israel. As Trible notes, “Throughout the ages people have used this text [Genesis] to legitimate patriarchy as the will of God.” And this God creates through the word. And his creation, Adam, names things into being. In Western society, if something is not named, it doesn’t really exist.

Friendship between men and women is one of those things that is unnamed. Despite the fact that we know such friendships exist, and they are prevalent in our society today, we continue to ask ourselves: “Can men and women be friends?” What Perry accomplishes is a subversion of the Victorian novels that came before her, by almost declaring “they can, let me show you how.” It cannot be denied that in the story of Cora and Will, Martha and Ned, Luke and Cora, Martha and George and the other characters in The Essex Serpent, we see versions of our own friendships and our own lives. But Perry also challenges our foundational mythology—the one

281 Ibid., 21.
282 Phyllis A Trible, “Not a Jot, Not a Tittle: Genesis 2-3 after Twenty Years,” in Kvam, et. al., 439.
283 It should be noted that it is a woman, Sarah’s maid Hagar, who names God, “El-roi” (Genesis: 16:15, NRSV) and naming of children is performed by both men and women in the Old Testament.
that says if something is unnamed it does not exist. Perry does not attempt to name friendships between men and women—some things cannot be reduced to taxonomy. Friendships between men and women are irreducible, as Will describes his relationship with Cora: “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”—friendship is an act of, and evidence of, faith. For something to be seen, one must believe it can be seen. The Essex Serpent is one woman’s belief that men and women can be friends and her belief manifests as images for the rest of us to share.

As Virginia Woolf noted in her essay, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, it is the responsibility of writers to create the conditions by which we can have a more exciting “intercourse of friendship.” In this sense, Perry has done her job. She has written a novel and answered Victor Luftig’s challenge as well as Woolf’s But, what of us the readers, have we done our job? Readers also have a responsibility, not just to appreciate a story and see how the foreground relates to our story, we also have a responsibility to look for the backstory and connect this story with the larger story. By doing so, we can connect our own story to the largest story we can imagine— that of our own community— to see how we can make positive change.

If we are to make sense of our own story, we must ask ourselves: Can we rewrite the story of our mothers, thereby freeing our daughters to live in a different story? Even Augustine, from which most of our misogynistic story comes, gives us an “out.” In his Confessions, wherein he paves the way by linking his autobiography to the creation of the world, he observes:

Perry, The Essex Serpent, 259. The quote is from Hebrews 11:1-3 (KJV): “Faith is the substance of things hope for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report. Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.” The NRSV translates the same passage as: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”
A spring wells up in quite a small space, yet by means of its branching streams it is a source of richer fertility, and waters wider tracts of countryside, than can any one of the derivative streams alone...So too the steward [Moses] you trusted with the telling of your story confined his message within a small compass, yet this narrative, destined to supply a theme for many messengers of the word, is a spring whence rivers of limpid truth gush forth. Everyone draws for himself whatever truth he can from it about these questions, each a different point, and then hauls his discovery through the meandering channels of his own discourse...what if human vision is incomplete? Does that mean that anything you intended to reveal by these words to later generations of readers— you who are God, not flesh and blood—was hidden from your good Spirit, who will, I pray, lead me into the right land? Is this not the case even if the man through whom you spoke to us had perhaps only one of the true meanings in mind? If he did, by all means let that one which he intended be taken as paramount. But for us, Lord, we beg you to point out to us either that sense which he intended or any other true meaning which you choose, so that whether you take occasion of these words to make plain to us the same thing that you showed him, or something different, you still may feed us and no error dupe us.\textsuperscript{285}

Augustine, in his own admittedly wordy way, is saying that the enduring word of God endures because it should be reinterpreted as the human story continues to evolve and change.

Marilyn Sewell, a Unitarian minister, urges us to revisit our ancient myths and place them in the context of today. She asks that we reexamine,

...these myths in order to expose the hidden and terribly destructive messages inherent in them. Only as the old patterns in our consciousness crumble are new patterns possible. Let us take a hard look at the canonized mythology that has kept us from spiritual wholeness. Let us tell our untold stories.\textsuperscript{286}

By placing her novel in Victorian England, Perry signals that she is not just taking on a story of friendship and challenging how Victorian women are viewed and remembered. She is picking up a fragment of time and “re-membering” and relinking the events of the Victorian Age with events of today to create a new story. The clue to this comes on page 18, where she compares Michael and Cora’s relationship to the Japanese art of \textit{kintsugi}. Cora remembers

\textsuperscript{285} Boulding, 268-273.
Michael saying: “In Japan they’ll mend a broken pot with drops of gold. What a thing it would be: to have me break you and mend your wounds with gold.” Perry is taking the “fragments” of what we know of women in Victorian England and putting the pieces together in a different way into a new, unique and beautiful story. She is saying that we can pick up those threads and march forward into a new story.

However, a responsible reader will not stop here. A responsible reader will go back to the beginning of time and memory to ask more fundamental questions: is it just because we’ve never had a model that we believe men and women can’t be friends? Perry in her allusions to Genesis encourages us to look harder and deeper. What did the New Woman share with Eve? She shared her desire for knowledge, education and freedom. She also shared her subjugation at the very moment when she was making gains. What *The Essex Serpent* is urging us to do is to go back and not just rescue the Victorian woman, but Eve herself.

As Robert Alter points out, it is possible that:

As readers we will sometimes run the risk of inventing a connection in the text where there is only a gap. For the most part, however, the dangers of overreading are far outweighed by the dangers of under-reading, a habit which modern culture, with its popular journalism and its rapid electronic messages, predispose us.

It might be a stretch to imagine that Perry intended for us to re-examine our mythological roots as a society. I may be ascribing much more to her goals and motivations than deserved or wanted. However, in this age of #MeToo, #TimesUp, and Brett Kavanaugh, it is time for us to re-examine where the odyssey is going that Eve started by eating a piece of fruit. While Eve may have brought us death, she also brought us wisdom:

Although wisdom dies with the person, the communication of wisdom reverberates throughout generations of people, thereby outliving the mortal bodies they inhabit.

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288 Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, 47.
Again, this manifests correlations with artistic creation that endures throughout the ages.\textsuperscript{289}

If Tolstoy, as discussed in Chapter II, is correct that art transmits feelings and experiences that serve to connect people across generations, then we have a responsibility to keep telling these stories in ways that advance our civilization. Literature, specifically novels, are a way to do this. In the eloquent words of Thomas Merton,

\begin{quote}
...the material of literature and especially of drama is chiefly human acts--that is, free acts, moral acts. And, as a matter of fact, literature, drama, poetry, make certain statements about these actions that can be made in no other way. That is precisely why you will miss all the deepest meaning of Shakespeare, Dante, and the rest if you reduce their vital and creative statements about life and men to the dry, matter-of-fact terms of history, or ethics, or some other science. They belong to a different order.

[Literature is about] the things that [are] really fundamental—life, death, time, love, sorrow, fear, wisdom, suffering, eternity.\textsuperscript{290}
\end{quote}

Therefore, the responsibility of the writer is to continue to mythologize our environment and our world; to push the boundaries, to question and provoke—just like Eve. At the same time, it is the job of the reader to respond, to read the secret story that lies beneath the surface so that we can connect this story to our story, and our story to that of humanity. But we must recognize that the story does not have a foregone conclusion. All our stories end in death but what is between birth and death is up to us. According to Rachel Held:

\begin{quote}
We live in an unfinished story, a story that began with the Spirit of God hovering over the primordial waters at the beginning of time....The stories we tell with our lives then aren’t meaningless absurdities, tragic in their brevity, but rather subplots of a grander narrative, every moment charged with significance, as we contribute our
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{289} Caspi, 130.
own riffs, soliloquies, and plot twists to the larger epic, the Holy Spirit coaxing us along with an ever-ebullient, And then? And then? And then?\textsuperscript{291}

No story is more unfinished that the one between men and women, which started with the removal of a rib and went awry with an instance of not seeing together. It is our obligation to future generations to tell a different story: one of cooperative vision; of men and women, equal and sharing, in the pursuit of knowledge. In the words of William Ransome, a man tested by science, lost in confusion and found in friendship:

Round and round my thoughts have gone, turning as they often do to the Essex serpent, until I begin to see how it might have appeared to us all in its various guises, and that far from there being one truth alone, there may be several truths, none of which it would be possible to prove or disprove.\textsuperscript{292}

As for friendship between men and women: it just \textit{is}. Let us stop asking about it and just enjoy it for all of its complexity, pain and pleasure. Despite the preponderant lack of evidence in popular culture, friendship is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of which is clearly felt, even if not often seen in novels.

\textsuperscript{291} Held, 217.
\textsuperscript{292} Perry, \textit{The Essex Serpent}, 172.
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