

## An Eco-critical Reading of the Ghosts in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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### 【摘要】

金索佛的《縱情夏日》改變了人們對鬼的觀念。鬼在大自然扮演不可思議的力量。金索佛在訪談時說：「一件事物的消失和其出現是一樣重要。」作者希望我們注意到生與死亡的息息相關。《縱情夏日》裡“看不見事物”耳語著曾被遺棄的價值觀。阿帕拉契山裡的一個小鎮提供新的生活模式和意識。“看不見事物”喚起人們的生態倫理和意識，金索佛的女主角致力於重整土地和保護其它物種。

### 【關鍵字】

鬼，看不見的力量，生態意識，再生

### 【Abstract】

In an interview Barbara Kingsolver says, “notice how the absence of a thing is as important as its presence.” The author wants us to notice that life and death are interconnected on the Earth. Invisible things in *Prodigal Summer* whisper to people the values that have been abandoned during centuries of industrialization and modernization. The small town in Appalachia provides new models with the consciousness of releasing the earth from the industrialized world. The dead evoke a sense of ecological ethics. Kingsolver's female characters devote themselves to the re-construction of the land and the protection of other species.

### 【Keywords】

ghosts, invisible force, ecological consciousness, regeneration

Many critics have examined the relationship between nature and humans in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*. In "Luna Moths, Coyotes, Sugar Skulls: The Fiction of Barbara Kingsolver," Amanda Cockrell sees Kingsolver's novel in terms of its biological context, concerning the instinct to procreate in all creatures. Suzanne W. Jones in "The Southern Family Farm as Endangered Species: Possibilities for Survival in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*" discusses the negative influences of economic activities on ecosystems due to the use of chemicals. Dilia Narduzzi perceives a supernatural force in the novel, and argues that the invisible things (the ghosts) have mysterious power with regard to the elevation of ecological ethics. Katerina Projznerová focuses on a new form of community on the farm and the inseparable relation between humans and the land. Viewed from these diverse perspectives, we can see that Kingsolver intends to reveal a crisis in the ecosystem and the possibility of reversing it by calling on an ecological consciousness.

Amanda Cockrell states that *Prodigal Summer* is "about sex: people sex, bug sex, coyote sex; about pheromones and full moons, and the drive to pass on your genes [...]. Sex is urgent and dangerous, to the human heart as well as to the lacewing" (573). Cockrell's view is reasonable, as the novel is full of language like "the urge to procreate" or "the competition for procreation," and it seems that animals and insects in the novel never stop transmitting to the protagonists the message that humans, like other animals, are all creatures that live to procreate. I agree with Cockrell's reading of the novel, but would also like to suggest that it is about death, which can be understood biologically. In the novel Kingsolver points readers to the endangerment or extinction of some species. For example, the coyote is an endangered animal, since it is seen as a predator threatening farm animals, and so has been freely hunted. Through the agency of exuberant nature, Kingsolver exposes to readers to the existence of the dead and dying in it. When showing the movement of living animals, she guides readers to think about the dead. Here are the coyotes moving into the mountains above Zebulon Valley:

The ghost of a creature long extinct was coming in on silent footprints, returning to the place it had once held in the complex anatomy of this forest like a beating heart returned to its body. This is what she believed she would see, if she watched, at this magical juncture: a restoration. (Kingsolver 63-64)

The ghosts become a visual focal point in the novel when they are brought into the world of living creatures.

*Prodigal Summer* is set in a corner of southern Appalachia. It is composed of the three narratives—"Predators," "Moth Love," and "Old Chestnuts"—about life, love, and loss. In "Predators," Deanna Wolfe, a reclusive wildlife observer and biologist working to protect coyotes, works as a patroller on Zebulon Mountain. She comes across Eddie Bondo, a Wyoming hunter who intrudes on the area to kill coyotes. "Moth Love" focuses on Lusa Maluf Landowski Widener, who keeps alive memories of her dead husband and lives as a widow with five envious sisters-in-law on the farmland she inherited. Finally, in "Old Chestnuts" Nannie Rawley and Garnett Walker quarrel constantly over the use of pesticides on their orchards, with Nannie telling Garnett to avoid them, although he always ignores her advice. Garnett is haunted by the memory of an old family tree—the almost extinct American chestnut—and his dreams of reviving it. Kingsolver connects all three narratives through the appearance of ghosts interrupting the daily lives of each character.

In an interview, Kingsolver reminds readers of the importance of the ghosts in the novel:

If you have a biologist in your book club, ask for a definition of the scientific field of ecology; otherwise, look it up (Hint: It has nothing to do with saving the earth or recycling.) Think about why the story's three main narrators are obsessed with what they call ghosts: extinct animals, dispossessed relatives and the American chestnut. In the networks of life described in this story, notice how the absence of a thing is as important as its presence. Notice the sentence that begins and ends the book: "Solitude is only a human presumption."<sup>1</sup>

Kingsolver asks us to notice that all life is interconnected, even the dead and the living, and to look deep into the messages that the endangered coyote or chestnut transmit to people. As Dilia Narduzzi argues, *Prodigal Summer* works by "exposing the connections that humans and the natural world have to the ghostly" (61).

It is obvious that, as Kingsolver notes, the ghosts in *Prodigal Summer* are

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<sup>1</sup> See the interview on  
<<http://harpercollins.com/author/microsite/readingguide.aspx?authorID=5311&displayType=essay&articleId=7456>>

chiefly concerned with the intimate connection between the living and the dead. The ghosts<sup>2</sup> who wander on the boundaries of life and death in the forest send messages to people, and as Kingsolver's protagonists perceive them, so they become more active participants in the protection of the environment, engaging more in ecological ethics. In this essay I will focus my discussion on the link between ghosts and ecological consciousness in Kingsolver's work, and will also discuss to what degree the author approaches the spirit of ecological ethics that goes beyond sex.

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The invisible things in *Prodigal Summer* whisper to the characters of the values that have been abandoned due to industrialization and modernization. The consciousness that is evoked in the small town in Appalachia is, I believe, an ecological one. Kingsolver's female characters focus on the environment in a non-human centered manner, and are devoted to the practice of ecological ethics<sup>3</sup>. For example, Deanna Wolfe stops Eddie Bondo from hunting coyotes in the mountain. Bondo's view of coyotes is human centered since he simply sees them as predators harmful to farmers. In contrast, Deanna defends the importance of coyotes in non-human centered terms. Coyotes help the regeneration of the endangered red wolves, since they can be interbred with each other<sup>4</sup> (Kingsolver 14). Deanna also says to Eddie that people often mistakenly attribute the killing of lambs on their farms

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<sup>2</sup> In *Prodigal Summer*, the ghosts—coyotes in “Predators,” the moth and the dead in “Moth Love,” and the near extinct American chestnut tree in “Old Chestnuts”—appear in each character's reminiscence.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Curry in *Ecological Ethics* discusses human's relationship with nature in the following terms: “I start from the belief that, or perception, that nature—which certainly includes humanity—is the ultimate source of all value. This ‘more-than-human’ nature... is not simply a set of resources for us to use as we will” (2). Ecological ethics are different from anthropocentrism, which addresses the environment in terms of human's values. Steven C. Rockefeller in “Faith and Community in an Ecological Age” discusses biocentric philosophy of respect for nature. “In a biocentric approach, the rights of nature are defended first and foremost on the grounds of the intrinsic value of animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and ecosystems rather than simply on the basis of their utilitarian value or benefit to humans” (143). He also believes that “the struggle to liberate people and the movement to liberate the larger biosphere are interdependent” (146).

<sup>4</sup> Deanna defends coyotes, “He's not the top of the food chain. Not the big bad wolf” (Kingsolver 13). Research shows that coyotes sometimes mate with wolves or dogs, and such interbreeding can help save endangered wolves from extinction. “Coyotes have also been known, on occasion, to mate with wolves, mostly with eastern subspecies of the grey wolf such as the Great Plains Wolf, though this is less common than with dogs, due to the wolf's hostility to the coyote. The offspring, known as a coywolf, is generally intermediate in size to both parents, being larger than a pure coyote, but smaller than a pure wolf. A study showed that of the 100 “coyotes” collected in Maine, 22 had half or more grey wolf ancestry, and one was 89% grey wolf. The large eastern coyotes in Canada are proposed to be actually hybrids of the smaller western coyotes and grey wolves that met and mated decades ago, as the coyotes moved toward New England from their earlier western ranges.” See <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coyote>>

to coyotes, even though the attacks are done by other predators (Kingsolver 176).

Kingsolver warns people that one ecological crisis is caused by disappearance of predators. In the essay "Small Wonder," she states that the removal of predators from nature is due to man's demonization of such animals:

Bears are scarce in the world now, relative to their numbers in times of old; they're a rare sight even in the wildest mountains of Iran. They have been hunted out and nearly erased from the mountains and forests of Europe, much of North America, and other places that have been inhabited for thousands of years by humans, who by and large find it difficult to leave large predators alive. Bears and wolves are our fairy-tale archenemies, and in these tales we teach our children only, and always, to kill them, rather than to tiptoe past and let them sleep.... We need new bear and wolf tales for our times, since so many of our old ones seem to be doing us no good.... [We must] stop in our tracks...before every kind of life we know arrives at the brink of extinction. (13-14)

If the images of monstrous animals prevail in cultural structures that keep reminding people of the danger of animals (especially predators), Kingsolver reminds people of the new recognitions of wild animals.

In *Prodigal Summer*, ghosts in Appalachia symbolize a new power that evokes an ecological consciousness in a rapidly changing industrialized society. As the reviewer Dana Schwartz writes, "With insects incessantly buzzing, twigs snapping, animals scurrying, leaves whispering, birds squalling, moths mating, it's as if hundreds of different languages are being spoken all at once. The forest is not a quiet place, and THE PRODIGAL SUMMER is not a quiet novel."<sup>5</sup> The invisible things, such as the extinct animals and the memories of the past, never disappear, even though human beings "have progressed" in their civilization. Different languages are accompanied by energy (the erotic energy of the animals), and the forest is an area which symbolizes the past, the dream, or the undefined. The invisible things and the mysterious communication with them are reminiscent of the pre-industrial world (what human beings once were part of), and they transmit the message to Kingsolver's characters to that we should work to construct new models that embody

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<sup>5</sup> Dana Schwartz's review of *Prodigal Summer*.  
<<http://www.bookreporter.com.aspl-14.dfw1-2.websitetestlink.com/reviews/0060959037.asp>>

the best features of this lost past.

Dilia Narduzzi in “Living with Ghosts, Loving the Land” points out that ghosts have the power to affect the living:

Ecofeminist theorists are concerned with the idea of place and how humans interface with the natural world that surrounds them. Derrida focuses on how instances of the ghostly interrupt the here and now—our place in time. He further argues that the ghostly disturbs linearity and calls those affected by ghosts to be responsible to their inheritance or legacy. (63)

What do the ghosts want people do in the small town of Appalachia? Narduzzi suggests that the ghosts in *Prodigal Summer* evoke ecological consciousness and a sense of duty to one’s surroundings. The protagonists aim to protect the environment from further destruction, and take actions to inspire those around them to have an ecological consciousness to aid the endangered species. For example, Deanna in the mountain forest protects the endangered coyotes as she hears the sounds of the ghosts.

She heard another magnolia warbler—a sign and a wonder, it seemed to her, like something risen from the dead. So many others never would rise again: Bachman’s warbler, passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, Flint’s stonefly, Apamea moth—so many extinct creatures moved through the leaves just outside her peripheral vision, for Deanna knew enough to realize that she lived among ghosts. She deferred to the extinct as she would to the spirits of deceased relatives, paying her quiet respects in the places where they might once have been. (Kingsolver 59-60)

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Each human being possesses a soul, a ghost, who in the concept of reincarnation associated with the lives of other animals and non-animals, like trees and stones, which might be the transformed spirits of non-human entities. Wai Chee Dimock in “Ecology across the Pacific: Coyote in Sanskrit, Monkey in Chinese” writes,

Human beings belong to a family that can be variously defined: across many time frames, many stages of evolution. Our kinship network goes back and branches out on a scale that makes us second and third cousins

to every other species on the planet. Kinship of this sort is of a piece with the planet's biodiversity. (170)

As Dimock states, since humans and all other species continually return to life in new forms that might be human or not, there should be no hostile relationship between the human and non-human. The earth should be seen as containing both life and death, rather than something that maintains an absolute distinction between two worlds that cannot communicate with each other. Dimock reverses the anthropocentrism that defines the earth in human centered manner.

In *Prodigal Summer*, communication with ghosts functions as a form of dramatic tension in the removal of the binary distinction between the dead and the alive. Each narrative shows the influence of the ghosts on their consciousness. As Kingsolver's characters move into the invisible realm, the connection between the dead and the alive is significant, as they are able to integrate the force of the invisible world into their ordinary lives. For example, Deanna Wolfe, one of the heroines in *Prodigal Summer*, comes to experience a life of isolation in the mountains, where she traces the footprints of an endangered species, the coyote, enters the territory of animals and invisible things, and feels part of them. Eddie sees her as coming out of a silkworm's cocoon, and compares her to strange and natural things: "He'd called her hair a miracle. He'd said it was like rolling himself up in a silkworm's cocoon" (Kingsolver 55). "She slipped her long flannel gown over her head and shook it down over her body like a cocoon" (183). Deanna's transformation into a moth sees the instinct to procreate return. She also transforms into a predator and feels part of the family of coyotes. The consciousness of the animals (including the dead coyote) enters her own as she protests against Eddie's hunting of the animals. There is a removal of the binary distinction between humans and non-humans, the alive and the dead, as Deanna is conscious of the existence of the invisible force.

Here *Prodigal Summer* is a work that deals with the return or revelation of the dead, and emphasizes the existence of things that are invisible. Its characters protest against the exploitation of land as practiced by industrial society, and which gradually destroys the beauty of the earth. The communication with ghosts thus functions as a ritual that can raise ecological consciousness.

Kingsolver puts the eyes of ghosts in each narrative in *Prodigal Summer*. Derrida writes, “this spectral someone other looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it...” (6). The ghosts never stop “gazing at” Kingsolver’s characters. Coyote-ghosts in “Predators” make Deanna feel like part of the family with the coyote, and reinforce her consciousness decision to protect them. As a forest ranger watching over the ecosystem of Zebulon Mountain, Deanna works not only for the preservation of the endangered animals, but also as a form of escape from the trauma of failed marriage. The mountain is a “cocoon” by which Deanna protects herself from the critiques of her ex-husband, a man who is unable to appreciate her enthusiasm for coyotes. Aged forty-seven, the heroine is somehow self-abnegated, identifying herself as a cast-off old hag that cannot get rid of the feeling of misanthropy against a “hostile world.” However, the ecological system of love and beauty that she hears in the mountains is able to weaken her self-abnegation. The coyotes become a new family (Kingsolver 203) that compensates for the loss of her marriage. Her finding of the coyote family<sup>6</sup> helps her to recognize the invisible world where all lives (as well as the dead) are symbiotic. Just like the sister-coyotes helping their alpha looking after the cubs, no creatures can live entirely alone. “All life is connected,” even though in solitude (Kingsolver 8). The truth of nature dawns upon Deanna. The coyote-ghosts affect her and it sparks an ecological consciousness within her. Deanna thus becomes a coyote defender, and intends to set Eddie straight when the latter thinks it necessary to kill the predators. “Don’t you get it? To kill a natural predator is a sin,” she tells him (Kingsolver 179). “Herbivores tend to have shorter lives, and they reproduce faster; they’re just geared toward expendability” (Kingsolver 178). Deanna argues that killing coyotes causes an imbalanced ecology which will then affect human beings.

In narrative “Predators” Kingsolver emphasizes how other species in “the invisible world” have close links to human beings. “Predators” goes along with the thought that human beings ought to understand the importance of maintaining harmony with other species and loving them due to a wider symbiosis with all living

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<sup>6</sup> Deanna finds the den of a coyote family by accident one morning. Those cub coyotes that Deanna finds have no father. They are nursed by their mother and taken care of by their sisters. See *Prodigal Summer*, p. 18-19.



things. The coyote-ghosts in "Predators" inspire Deanna to continue living, and to do something for the earth.

In "Moth Love" the ghosts—the dead and the moths in memory—gradually awake love in Lusa and evoke her consciousness with regard to protecting the family farm. Lusa experiences liberation from a sense of detachment, and she finally establishes a home with her ghosts. At the beginning of the story, Lusa suffers isolation because she sees herself as an outsider in her husband's family. She has jealous sisters-in-law, and avoids seeing them by hiding in her bedroom with a book by Darwin. When working in the family kitchen, she is alarmed and feels attacked or hunted by the ghost of her mother-in-law, for she believes that her working in the kitchen might have stirred the mother's territorial jealousy. The rhythm of the house unnerves Lusa, until she grows to remember her love of moths. Memories of the moth-lovers in the laboratory constantly return and interrupt Lusa. These memories are so impressive that she gradually desires to establish social relations with the community on the Wideners' farm, including the Wideners and all the animals and other forms of lives on the farm. Katerina Projznerová sees Lusa's change as an indication of a woman's desire for a home.<sup>7</sup> Projznerová is not wrong, but there is another meaning beyond this. With a determination to protect the family farm, Lusa replaces the hostile-ghosts with energetic ones. The house is no longer preoccupied with the mother-in-law's ghost, but instead is full of the joys of the ghosts children climbing up and down the stairs. The defining moment that changes Lusa from a sense of separation from the Wideners farm to participation in the re-construction of the farm is when she hears the voice of the ghosts of children.

She pressed her face against the cotton of his white T-shirt and the warmth of his chest and let herself stay there, sobbing, wishing she could fly away from here. In her mind she could easily picture it: throwing things in a suitcase, books and clothes, practically nothing—she'd leave behind all the heavy family furniture. Just run down the steps and away. But those two children were on the landing with their backs to her, impossible to get around. They stopped her. (Kingsolver 241-242)

This moment is emotionally intense. It recalls the link between the dead daughter and

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<sup>7</sup> See "Women Farmers' Dream of Home: A Bioregional Analysis of Harriette Simpson Arnow's *Hunter's Horn* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*."

the family in Kingsolver's "The Poisonwood Bible": as Ruth May is dying, she grows to understand, and wants her mother to understand, the Congolese term of 'muntu' which describes interconnection of all lives. In *Prodigal Summer*, Lusa grows conscious of her duty to protect the family farm, which is also an ecological activity to prevent it from becoming a waste land. She is enthusiastic about the idea of adopting her sister-in-law's two children if she dies of cancer.

If the moths-ghosts inspire Lusa to re-establish family relations, the ghost in the narrative "Old Chestnuts" works to urge people like Garnett to stop hurting the earth. The ghost in this case—the near extinct American chestnut tree that Garnett dreams of restoring to the land—surreptitiously enters Garnett's orchard, which he has been using a lot of pesticides on. The environmental crisis and the environmental ethic of care are highly emphasized in this narrative. Suzanne W. Jones notes that Kingsolver is among those writers who "believe that agribusiness and consumer ignorance are driving small farmers out of business and that clear-cutting timber and farming practices dependent on chemicals are threatening local ecosystems" (83). Garnett's use of chemicals not only influences his own orchard, but also his neighbor's (Nannie's), as well as beyond this, since all lives are interconnected within the web of ecology. Nannie constantly works to enlighten Garnett on the interconnections between the natural and human world. She states that "everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads. Things you don't see can help you plenty, and things you try to control will often rear back and bit you" (Kingsolver 216). Although Garnett does not immediately follow her suggestions, "the ghost" of the dead tree seems to haunt him until he adopts a more ecological sense of ethics. The old American chestnut is cut down, but Garnett believes that he can restore the tree.

Garnett understood that on his slow march toward his heavenly reward, he would spend as many years as possible crossing and backcrossing the American with the Chinese chestnut. He worked like a driven man, haunted by his arboreal ghosts, and had been at it for nearly a decade now. If he lived long enough he would produce a tree with all the genetic properties of the original American chestnut, except one: it would retain from its Chinese parentage the ability to stand tall before the blight. It would be called the Walker American chestnut. (Kingsolver 130)

Garnett's dream of revising the old chestnut draws on one of the significant themes in

*Prodigal Summer*: though some things may appear to be dead, they still have their influence, and beyond human vision they resist annihilation.<sup>8</sup> The pests in the orchard that Garnett kills with his chemicals will still continue to live. Garnett's love for (and memory of) the old chestnut tree exist in his consciousness. The old chestnut tree thus mediates between Garnett and Nannie, as Garnett gradually comes to understand Nannie's ecological ethics.

Ghosts in nature mediate the ecological consciousness that reminds humans to reconstruct a symbiotic relationship with other species based on love, compassion, and responsibility. Ghosts reach the inner realm (the heart) to bring an enlightened ecological consciousness to people, a process that evokes one's duty to humans and other species on the planet. The invisible power that makes men and women responsible for the environment exists in the awareness of the existence of the dead and memories of loss. "When one of these characters sees a ghost, in essence, it is because this ghost is *seeing them*, and in that seeing, is charging or compelling the characters to acknowledge the debt that comes with the ghostly" (Narduzzi 64).

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Pheromones are significant in *Prodigal Summer*, as they do not simply function for sex, but are also linked to ecological ethics. On the level of biology, pheromones are generally defined as "signals" that help individuals find the opposite sex during breeding time. Pheromones are thus "scent cues animals use to find and identify their [potential] mates" (Kingsolver 37). Like animals and insects, humans in *Prodigal Summer* move in response to olfactory mechanisms. Just as scent guides a moth towards its lover, pheromones, Lusa believes, also drew her to her husband. "I'm like a moth," Lusa confesses to Rickie, "flying in spirals" (Kingsolver 163). Deanna also says that "every single thing you hear in the woods right now is just nothing but that. Males drumming up business" (Kingsolver 13). However, Kingslover does not allow her female characters to stay in an exuberant forest. Although they are attracted by and accept the male characters, they have quarrels with them when they want to protect endangered animals or the land from further harm.

It seems there is certain chemical substance secreted in the female body that

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<sup>8</sup> Kingsolver notes that interbreeding can help revive endangered species. Coyotes can be interbred with red wolves, while foreign chestnuts help local chestnuts to thrive again. The red wolf was announced extinct in 1980, but since then coyote / red wolf hybrids have been successfully introduced in North Carolina. See "Red Wolf Recovery Program."

functions to automatically react to the motions of spirits in nature and transmit the message of ecological ethics to people. It seems the male characters in *Prodigal Summer* are bound to a biological clock with regard to breeding, and either disappear or die when this biological drive fades away. Lusa's husband dies in a car accident. Deanna's lover, Eddie Bondo, disappears when she becomes pregnant. In contrast, Kingsolver's female characters get on their lives, and devote themselves to the construction of new lives. The heroines in *Prodigal Summer* might act like Tibetan Vajrabhairava, an image related to "the intimate union of compassion and wisdom" (Rockefeller 110). They are aware of their own capability of redemption by appeasing the pains caused by anthropocentric civilization. The image of the Tibetan god shows an ecological community with its metonymic symbols of sex, love, and action. As an "infinitesimal portion" of the earth, humans are driven toward the community in the cycle of death and life with the belief that they can bring compassion and wisdom to the earth, and that they can redeem the sin caused by industrialization. Kingsolver's heroines have knowledge of biology, and they never stop their lectures about protecting the environment. They know the importance of the interconnections with other species. This is why Deanna's life is bound to the ghost-coyotes. In much the same vein, Lusa cannot separate herself from the family farm. Nannie cares for all the lives in her orchard, no less than she does for her deformed child. Pheromones for Kingsolver's heroines are invisible ghosts that inspire a sense of duty in humans and all the other species on the planet. As Narduzzi points out, ghosts in *Prodigal Summer* evoke ecological consciousness and a strong will to resume a pre-industrialized life.

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