



## Dust and Domestic Walls: How Isolation and Gendered Labor Confine Ellen's Agency in *The Lamp At Noon*

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### ABSTRACT

*This research studies Sinclair Ross's short story "The Lamp at Noon" through an ecofeminist and spatial theory framework, how the harsh prairie environment of the Great Depression intersects with patriarchal gender roles to subvert female agency. This research explores how Ross constructs the farmhouse as both material haven and psychological prison for protagonist Ellen, using spatial imagery and environmental symbolism to represent the dual pressures of environmental calamity and patriarchal imprisonment. Through close text analysis, the study demonstrates how the personified dust storm is both literal environmental calamity and metaphorical expression of Ellen's psychological suffering, serving as an externalized voice for her repressed emotions. This research uses the qualitative method utilizing the close reading with the theoretical framework ecofeminist, gender roles, and environmental determinism. The analysis shows how gendered divisions of labor under environmental catastrophe intensify Ellen's psychic trauma as her domestic labor becomes increasingly useless against the invading dust while her husband Paul maintains a narrative of heroic survival. Ross's narrative structure, with its alternating perspectives and rhythms of failed communication, highlights the utter isolation and psychological breakdown for women in crisis. This analysis is used to describe how nature writing reveals the uneven impact of ecological disasters on women and marginalized communities, offering knowledge relevant to current environmental and social justice movements.*

### INTRODUCTION

The harsh life on the prairies during the great depression is often an important setting in Canadian literature, where women are often constructed as losing control of their lives due to restrictive social and geographical realities (Harrison, 1977; Buijs, 2024). Especially in the stories that show how heavy environmental conditions affected personal and family relationships. One of the things that often comes up in literature-short stories is the psychological and emotional burdens felt by women, especially those living in rural areas. They are often depressed, forced into demanding roles, and feel alone because of the social rules that restrict women and the difficult struggles of life. Sinclair Ross's short story *The Lamp at Noon*

(1939) illustrates this through the character Ellen, whose sense of hopelessness mirrors the hardships of many women on the prairies at the time (Ross, 1939; Ross, 2018).

The roles and spaces assigned to women are socially designed to limit their freedom. The conflict between personal freedom and pressure from the environment through Ellen, the wife who is increasingly pressured by unequal domestic roles and an undeveloped life. The setting of a continuous dust storm symbolizes the violence of nature and the social isolation that pressures the farming family (Salamon, 1995). The story shows that home is not always a place of safety but can be a space of misery. Although this story is often seen in terms of environmental symbolism it is also important to see it from a feminist perspective. This article argues that Ellen's limited agency is a result of the social isolation of the prairie and restrictive structure of gender roles.

Literature provides a unique window into understanding how environmental disasters are felt differently across lines, often uncovering patterns of harm and inequality that statistical analysis may miss (Buell, Heise & Thornber, 2011). Ellen's mental in "The Lamp at Noon" is a striking case study of female subjectivity to the double pressures of ecological catastrophe and patriarchal domination (Bannon, 2022). Her ultimate rupture with reality racing out into the hurricane with her baby symbolizes the catastrophic ramifications of disregarding women's knowledge, autonomy, and emotional well-being in the face of environmental crisis. In close textual reading, this research documents how Ross's prophetic account illuminates' interconnections between environmental degradation, spatial restriction, and gender oppression that remain relevant to contemporary environmental and social justice agendas (Agyeman et al., 2016; Chakraborty et al., 2016).

The theoretical basis lies with ecofeminist critique, which examines the interconnected domination of women and nature in patriarchal structures (Gaard & Murphy, 2021). The theoretical framework reveals how ecological degradation and gender disparity function as systems of oppression that reinforce each other (Engel-Di Mauro, 2024). Spatial theory is also brought to bear by research in analyzing how the domestic sphere is a site for the reproduction of ideologies where the hierarchy of gender is reproduced in daily practices and control of movement. Theory in environmental determinism is also employed (Sargentis et al., 2022), the aim is to illustrate the role that landscape plays in shaping human mindsets and relationships while affecting human action and social structures simultaneously.

The relevance of this research extends from literary analysis to environmental and social justice concerns of today (Solomonian & Di Ruggiero, 2021). As climate change increasingly creates unstable weather that disproportionately victimizes already marginalized groups, rural women farmers being one such group, it becomes relevant to know how environmental disasters were represented in the past in order to make more equitable responses to ecological tragedies. Ellen's psychological collapse in "The Lamp at Noon" is a compelling case study of feminine subjectivity under the dual pressures of environmental catastrophe

and patriarchal domination, and one whose lessons remain relevant today to the examination of modern climate justice issues. The theoretical method involves attentive close reading of the text and marrying it with theoretical reading in order to deconstruct how the narrative constructs and restricts women's agency by means of spatial imagery, environmental symbolism and gendered labor divisions (Schouten, 2022; Wiesner-Hanks, 2023; Rahman & Kholid, 2025; Dominguez-Folgueras, 2022). This approach allows for a detailed examination of Ross's literary practices in the context of broader theoretical models that clarify the interrelations between environmental degradation, spatial constraint, and gender oppression.

This research examines the way Ross constructs the farmhouse as material shelter and jail for Ellen, in relation to how spaces of home are spaces of conflict over gendered power during times of environmental emergency. This research questions: How does Ross construct Ellen's eroding agency using spatial imagery and borders? How and in what ways does the dust storm act as both literal environmental calamity and symbolic representation of patriarchal entrapment? In what ways does the gendered labor division in crisis further enhance psychological trauma for the female character. The research is particularly opportune as global climate change increasingly creates extreme weather patterns that affect disproportionately already at-risk populations, such as women who reside in agrarian-dependent communities. Literary analysis of earlier representations of environmental calamity can provide valuable insights into the gendered dynamics of climate crisis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Ecofeminist in Prairie Literature

Ecofeminist literary analysis provides a foundational paradigm for understanding the interconnected oppression of women and nature in prairie literature, offering insight into how patriarchy controls both female bodies and natural environments through similar methods of domination. Gaard and Murphy (2021) define ecofeminism as exploring the interconnections between the domination over nature and oppression of women, to the extent that both stem from a concomitant hierarchical, dualistic ideology that privileges mind over body, reason over affect, and culture over nature. This theoretical frame has been particularly productive in the explanation of prairie literature, wherein harsh natural environment often functions as literal setting as well as metaphoric representation of women's existence under patriarchal oppression (Thompson, 2018; Jacobs, 2020; Mortensen-Smith, 2021).

Recent work has increasingly employed ecofeminist critique to study Canadian prairie fiction, with particular attention paid to the manner in which environmental disasters reveal gendered trajectories of suffering and survival. Thompson (2018) argues that within prairie novels, "the dust storm exists as both actual natural disaster and symbolic vehicle of patriarchal violence upon women bodies and psyches," demonstrating the manner by which environmental calamity functions as a paradigm for the investigation of

gender-based oppression (p. 56). Similarly, Jacobs (2020) contends that women's breakdowns in environmental disaster narratives are "the inevitable psychological cost of excluding women's ecological knowledge and keeping them at home while men make disastrous land management choices" (p. 134). Mortensen-Smith (2021) extends this reading by examining how "ecofeminism reveals the interwoven sorrows of women and land in Canadian prairie fiction," illustrating how female characters' experiences mirror the exploitation of nature (p. 115).

Application of ecofeminist theory to "The Lamp at Noon" clarifies the manner in which Ellen's breakdown of mind reflects natural breakdown of the prairie landscape, woman as well as land being subject to masculine systems of control and exploitation. Chakraborty (2020) introduces the concept of "ecological grief" to show how loss of the environment affects people psychologically, particularly women whose ability to respond to crisis is constrained, arguing that "literature provides a distinctive window on the way in which environmental catastrophes are experienced differently along gender lines" (p. 42). This research illuminates Ellen's experience of anticipatory grieving both for present losses and for foreclosed futures. Goldman (2019) takes this further by examining how "gendered ecologies" in Canadian prairie fiction reveal patterns of environmental and social injustice that arise over time (p. 89).

### **Gender Roles and Spatial Confinement**

The deconstruction of gender roles in prairie fiction reveals the ways in which spatial organization and domestic roles are used to limit women's agency and mobility, creating conditions by which environmental disaster is particularly disastrous for female protagonists. The politics of mobility in Canadian rural literature, demonstrating how "women's movement is systematically restricted through both physical barriers and social expectations that confine them to domestic spaces (Stratton, 2023). Such spatial confinement becomes particularly problematic during environmental disasters when traditional gender roles exclude women from engaging in decision-making processes that affect their survival and health.

Feminist spatial analysis offers vital observations regarding how domestic space operates as a space of both protection and imprisonment for women in prairie fiction. Wong (2017) uses Foucauldian analysis to explore "power, surveillance, and gender in rural spaces," which suggests that the farmhouse is an apparatus of social control in which "women's activities are monitored and restricted through the architecture of domestic life" (p. 145). Hammill (2016) develops the above analysis by examining in detail how "domestic spaces are sites of ideological reproduction where gender hierarchies are constantly reinforced through daily practices and constraints on movement" (p. 112). Chen (2018) is specifically interested in "domestic architecture and female psychology," showing how the material organization of prairie houses reflects and reinforces women's psychological confinement (p. 65).

Environmental crisis-gendered division of labor adds additional burdens that aggravate women's mental distress and provide men heroic perseverance storylines. Matthews (2019) explores how "environmental crisis and the division of suffering in depression-era fiction" illustrates that "agricultural crisis tends to heighten male characters' stoic masculine conformity at the expense of female characters' potential for upholding traditional femininity" (p. 92). Liu (2022) offers the research of "environmental maternal trouble" to describe "the particular psychological distress that mothers feel when they are unable to protect their children from environmental risk," highlighting the way that motherhood becomes a cause of worry rather than contentment in the context of ecological crisis (p. 210). Expert examines the way such gendered crisis reactions provide "narrative ambiguity and moral complexity" in prairie fiction, since characters struggle to maintain their selves in the face of severe environmental pressure (p. 115).

### **Environmental Determinism and Psychological Landscape**

Theory of environmental determinism provides a framework to understand how natural environments shape human behavior, relationships, and states of mind and are shaped by human activities and social structures. Davidson (2018) investigates how "literary cartographies of environmental crisis" in Canadian literature reveal that "the devastated landscape becomes both product and human psychological deterioration" (p. 78). This mutual process between environment and psychology can particularly be observed in prairie fiction, where the hostile natural environment tends to mirror captures' inner emotional states and is actively involved in their psychological breakdown downfall.

The concept of environmental determinism in prairie literature extends beyond causal and effectual relationships to encompass complex relationships between nature forces, society structures, and human psychology. Whitlock (2016) takes into account "ecological grief in Canadian literary narratives of climate change," arguing that environmental fiction is likely to portray "landscape loss as a form of slow violence that manifests as psychological breakdown, particularly for subjects with the most restricted mobility and agency" (p. 67). Chakraborty (2020) further extends this argument by taking into account the way "psychological responses to loss of landscape" in prairie literature show patterns of "ecological grief" that disproportionately affect marginalized communities who lack means to adapt to environmental change. These writers demonstrate how environmental determinism is expressed differently by gender, with women primarily experiencing landscape change as psychological trauma and men having stories of struggle and eventual success (Rahman et al., 2023)..

The anthropomorphist of nature forces in prairie fiction is a literary tool for describing the psychological impact of environmental crisis on female characters. Davidson (2018) explains how "environmental consciousness" in Ross's fiction connects "light, darkness, and the characters' interior affective realities". Expert explains how "environmentally inflected irony" in prairie fiction describes the gap

between natural cycles and human tragedy, how "natural beauty coexists with human suffering in forms that highlight the limits of human agency against environmental forces" (p. 118). This research reveals how environmental determinism in prairie literature functions not as causation but as an emergent system in which natural forces, social structures, and individual psychology conspire to create conditions of crisis that specifically affect marginalized groups.

## METHODS

This research follows a qualitative literary analysis approach with a close reading emphasis on Sinclair Ross's "The Lamp at Noon" with the aid of theoretical frameworks derived from ecofeminism, spatial theory, and gender studies (Van, 2009). The methodological approach combines textual analysis with contextual and theoretical interpretation to study how the narrative constructs and pressures female agency. The analysis uses a sequential methodology to textual analysis with consideration of specific passages which illustrate the confluence of environmental catastrophe and exploitation of gender. Direct textual evidence is analyzed through the lens of contemporary theoretical frameworks while maintaining awareness of the historical context of the 1930s Great Depression and Dust Bowl period (Stephens, 2023). This method acknowledges several limitations. As a contemporary analysis of a previous document, this study unavoidably puts today's theoretical paradigms on a work written under a different social context. Despite attempts to prevent old interpretation, the analysis necessarily bears contemporary academic interests in gender, environment, and agency. Additionally, as a text-based analysis instead more than an empirical study, this research cannot make claims about actual historical experiences of women during the Dust Bowl years, but instead on Ross's literary account of those experiences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### A. The Farmhouse as Both Material Haven and Psychological Prison For Protagonist Ellen, Using Spatial Imagery

#### *Gendered Labored and Diminished Agency*

Ross's narrative carefully explains how gendered divisions of labor work to undermine Ellen's diminished sense of agency. While both Paul and Ellen experience environmental adversity, their varying gender roles establish fundamentally different relationships to that hardship. Paul's self-description as a farmer provides him part in solving the environmental degradation, whereas Ellen's household tasks are become increasingly impossible to fulfil, denying her either effective action or control.



The short story text specifically deals with the various effects of hardship and poverty on Paul and Ellen:

*"Dust and drought, earth that betrayed alike his labour and his faith, to him the struggle had given sternness, an impassive courage. Beneath the whip of sand his youth had been effaced. Youth, zest, exuberance - there remained only a harsh and clenched virility that yet became him, that seemed at the cost of more engaging qualities to be fulfilment of his inmost and essential nature. Whereas to her the same debts and poverty had brought a plaintive indignation, a nervous dread of what was still to come. The eyes were hollowed, the lips punched dry and colourless. It was the face of a woman that had aged without maturing, that had loved the little vanities of life, and lost them wistfully." (Sinclair Ross, the lamp at noon, p. 2)*

This paragraph demonstrates how environmental adversity has enabled Paul to adhere more comprehensively to masculine ideals of "sternness" and "impassive courage," whereas Ellen encounters the same situations as diminishment and loss. Agricultural crisis in prairie fiction tends to amplify male characters' stoic masculine conformity and compromising female characters' potential to do "traditional femininity" (Kachel et al., 2016). For Paul, the challenge presents itself as a test of character that he can narratively frame as heroic persistence; for Ellen, it represents the erosion of both her physical appearance and her capacity for keeping home comforts.

Ellen's housework is made irrelevant by the state of the environment:

*"There's dust in everything. It keeps coming fast than I can clean it up." (Sinclair Ross, the lamp at noon, p. 2)*

This simple statement encapsulates the powerlessness of Ellen against the external forces that force render her efforts futile. When domestic labor becomes Sisyphean—impossible to sustain or finish—women in Depression-era fiction experience not merely physical depletion but existential despair. Ellen's inability to keep the dust out is symbolic of her overall inability to generate the domestic comfort and safety that her woman's role requires of her.

The care of her child also turns out to be a source of stress rather than fulfilment:

*"The baby started to cry. He was lying in a homemade crib over which she had arranged a tent of muslin. Careful not to disturb the folds of it, she knelt and tried to still him, whispering huskily in a singsong voice that he must hush and go to sleep again. She would have liked to rock him, to feel the comfort of his little body in her arms, but a fear had obsessed her that in the dust-filled air he might contract pneumonia." (Sinclair Ross, the lamp at noon, p. 1)*

This passage clearly shows how the ecological disaster transforms maternal nurturing into a source of purpose and connection into anxiety and constraint. Ellen is not even able to hold her child for comfort, as each maternal action becomes potentially dangerous in dusty air. Her maternal desire to is foiled by agents

beyond her control in the environment, a particular psychological distress that mothers feel when they are unable protect their children from environmental threats.

### ***Environmental Determinism and Mutual Destruction***

Ross's story produces a complex understanding of environmental determinism (Livingstone, 2011), according to which the devastated landscape is both a product of and the cause of human relations and states of mind. The dust storms that tear the farm are both literal descriptions of farm failure and metaphors for the disintegration of Paul and Ellen's marriage. This environmental determinism operates in still other respects for Paul and Ellen, symbols of their own relations to the earth and forms of gendered agency. The environmental relationship that Paul enjoys is one of oppositional positioning which nonetheless continues to have moments of identification:

*"It was ruthless wind, blackening the sky with his earth, but it was not his master. Out of his land it had made a wilderness. He now, out of the wilderness, would make a farm and home again."* (Sinclair Ross, *the lamp at noon*, p. 7)

The possessive "his earth" and "his land" is symbolic of Paul's sense of ownership and responsibility a highly masculine relation to environment, this ownership gives Paul a foundation for perseverance in the face of environmental disaster, as he can narratively position himself as redeemer of the land.

Ellen, however, relates to the environment primarily through its invasion of the domestic scope:

*"There was dust sifting everywhere. Her own throat was parched with it. The table had been set less than ten minutes, and already a film was gathering on the dishes."* (Sinclair Ross, *the lamp at noon*, p. 1)

To Ellen, the dust does not represent the collapse of agricultural fertility but the impossibility of domestic order and the protection of her child. Denied the masculine narrative of struggle with and eventual triumph over nature, Ellen has no model for enduring the present disaster except in flight.

Ellen's madness at the end is her complete rejection of an unbearable reality:

*"I'll take him again. Such clumsy hands - you don't know how to hold a baby yet. See how his head falls forward on your arm."*  
(Sinclair Ross, *the lamp at noon*, p. 8)

Her recurring delusion that the child lives is a "psychic/traumatic rupture"—the mind's refusal to acknowledge catastrophic loss (Deutsch, 2014; Garvey, 2017). This psychologic discontinuity allows Ellen to exist in another reality where her motherhood has been maintained even as the material child has been removed by ecological processes.



## B. Environmental Symbolism To Represent the Dual Pressures of Environmental Calamity and Patriarchal Imprisonment

### *The Wind as Voice; Environmental Agency and Female Expression*

Ross's depiction of the wind in "The Lamp at Noon" establishes a problematic metaphorical connection between female expression and environmental forces. The wind depicted in ever anthropomorphic language is also a manifestation of Ellen's inner conflict and a substitute voice that expresses what Ellen cannot.

The wind is described with human-like qualities in the first paragraph:

*"Demented wind fled keening past the house: a wail through the eaves that died every minute or two." (Sinclair Ross, the lamp at noon, p. 1)*

Terms like "demented," "keening," and "wail" simultaneously bring life to the wind as a distraught female presence.

The prose continues with increasing particularity:

*"There were two winds: the wing in flight, and the wind that pursued. The one sought refuge in the eaves, whimpering, in fear; the other assailed it there, and shook the eaves apart to make it flee again. once as she listened this first wind spring inside the room, distraught like a bird that has felt the graze of talons on its wing; while furious the other wing shook the walls, and thudded tumbleweeds against the window till its quarry glanced away again in fright." (Sinclair Ross, the lamp at noon, p. 2)*

The division of the wind into pursuer and pursued creates a predator-prey relationship that serves to echo Ellen's own experience of being hunted by something beyond herself. According to Mortensen-Smith (2021), "Ross's anthropomorphized wind creates a female environmental voice that speaks the distress Ellen herself cannot properly express within the confines of her marriage" (p. 120). The connection between Ellen's mood and the wind's behavior suggests what McMichael (2022) calls "metaphorical of ventriloquism"—the displacement of female distress onto environmental forces when direct expression is socially prohibited. When Ellen pleads with Paul to stay with her, she says in so many words associates her mind with the wind:

*"Don't go yet. I brood and worry when I'm alone. Please, Paul—you can't work on the land anyway.'. 'Paul—please stay—' The eyes were glazed now, stretched a little as if with the force of her fear and pleading. 'We won't fight any more. Hear it! I can't work—just stand still and listen—'" (Sinclair Ross, the lam at noon p. 3)*

Ellen's "just stand still and listen" to the wind suggests that in the sound of the wind she hears a verification of her unutterable anguish which she is sure Paul will recognize. When he waves away her fear "In here safe and quiet you don't know how well off you are. If you were out in it grappling with it swallowing it" he does not appreciate that the wind has already broken through her psychological space.

The strongest underlying connection between Ellen and the wind is when Paul hears her voice in the wind when he hallucinates:

*"Until at last as he stood there, staring into the livid face before him, it seemed that this scream of wind was a cry from her parched and frantic lips. He knew it couldn't be, he knew that she was safe within the house, but still the wind persisted as a woman's cry. The cry of a woman with eyes like those that watched him through the dark." (Sinclair Ross, the lamp at noon, p. 6)*

This is what we refer as the breakthrough of repressed understanding the moment when a character unconsciously acknowledges what they have consciously denied. The wind is perceived as Ellen's voice by Paul, suggesting his unconscious realization of her frantic mental state. The wind's "lipless wailing" is a substitute for Ellen's voice saying what she cannot fully express within the confines of her marriage. Hence, environmental forces in prairie women's narratives often serve as externalized expressions of female rage, grief, and desperation that cannot be voiced directly in patriarchal domestic spaces. Ellen's final act taking the baby inside the storm symbolizes her final identification with the agency of the wind, preferring its wild freedom over domestication, even at ruinous expense.

### ***Narrative Structure and the Tragedy of Failed Communication***

Ross's narrative structure intensifies themes of loneliness and a communication breakdown through conscious use of perspective, speech patterns, and symbol imagery. Ross's narrative splits between Ellen and Paul's perspectives, tend to emphasize how they cannot even comprehend one another's experiences within close physical vicinity.

The narrative begins from Ellen's perspective, establishing her lone vigilance:

*"She lit the lamp, then for a long time stood at the window motionless. in dim, fitful outline the stable and oat granary still were visible; beyond, obscuring fields and landmarks, the lower of dust clouds made the farmyard seem an isolated acre, poised aloft above a sombre void." (Sinclair Ross, the lamp at noon, p. 1)*

This first-person point of view immediately establishes Ellen's psychological isolation, waiting and watching separate from Paul. The shift to her thoughts—"She mustn't. He would only despise her if she ran to the stable looking for him"—suggests her anticipation of Paul's disapproval, a sign of an established pattern of emotional withdrawal that culminates in the current crisis. When Paul comes into the story, Ross uses disclosing dialogue patterns that highlight communication failure:

*"The worst wind yet" he ventured, hanging up his cap and smock. "I had to light the lantern in the tool shed, too." "They looked at each other, then away. She wanted to go to him, to feel his arms supporting her, to cry a little just that he might soothe her, but because his presence made the menace of the wind seem less, she gripped herself and thought, "I'm in the right. I won't give in. For his sake, too, I won't." (Sinclair Joss, the lamp at noon, p. 2)*

The brief, straightforward dialogue followed by "They looked at each other, then away" establishes their emotional distance. Ellen's internal monologue reveals her conflicting desires for connection and self-assertion a conflict that prevents her from being able to say what she really feels. Here, Ross's use of juxtaposed dialogue and internal monologue reveals the gap between what characters say and what they feel, creating tragic irony as readers witness missed opportunities for understanding.

Ross's final scene is a tableau of tragic irony:

*"He gave her the child, then, gathering them up in his arms, struggled to his feet, and turned toward home. It was evening now. Across the fields a few spent clouds of dust still shook and fled. Beyond, as if through smoke, the sunset smouldered like a distant fire."*  
(Sinclair Joss, *the lamp at the noon*, p. 8)

The sight of Paul escorting Ellen and the dead child "home" is the ultimate futility of their conflict. The home that Erin was so anxious to vacate and Paul would not forsake is no longer important in the light of their shared tragedy. Thus, the return to domestic space after catastrophe in prairie women's narratives comes to mean not restoration but irrevocable change the house remains intact, but its meaning as home has been irretrievably altered. The final two lines "Beyond, as if through smoke, the sunset smouldered like a distant fire" call upon both natural cycle (sunset) and human destruction (smouldering fire), which is what we call environmentally inflected irony, where natural beauty co-exists with human tragedy. The dust the storm has passed, as Paul had forecasted, but this natural respite comes too late to prevent individual catastrophe.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis of Sinclair Ross's "The Lamp at Noon" illustrates how environmental catastrophe and patriarchal gender arrangements work in tandem to systematically deconstruct feminine agency, creating contexts whereby women's psychological well-being is sacrificed to masculine conceptions of perseverance and land ownership. The research shows that Ross constructs Ellen's deconstructing agency through extremely advanced use of spatial imagery that transforms the farmhouse from a sheltering must to psychological prison. The home ground, traditionally associated with women's sphere of control and power (Yasin, 2025), is redefined as a scene of confinement where Ellen's efforts at keeping things in line are rendered futile by the invading dust, symbolically standing in for the broader unattainability of maintaining traditional feminine roles during periods of environmental crisis.

The twin function of the dust storm as literal environmental disaster and symbolic signifier of patriarchal imprisonment reveals the interconnectedness of environmental and gendered oppression in prairie fiction (Rogers, 1970). Personification and anthropomorphic representation constitute an environmental voice that enunciates Ellen's repressed emotions and foiled agency, demonstrating the possibility of natural

forces to serve as avenues for women's expression when direct resistance is impossible within patriarchal household orders. The wind's subsequent alignment with Ellen's psychological state suggests the tragic results of ignoring women's intelligence and emotional well-being in the aftermath of environmental catastrophe.

The gendered isolation of labor in the context of ecological disaster heightens Ellen's psychic trauma by providing Paul with a tale of heroic battle while denying Ellen any proper vehicle for reaction to the catastrophe. This interpretation contributes to contemporary knowledge of environmental justice in that it demonstrates the manner in which ecological catastrophes hit most severely on oppressed communities, particularly women whose agency is already circumscribed by social structures. As climate change continues to produce extreme weather patterns that affect vulnerable populations, Ross's prophetic account has significant lessons to impart to us about the gendered dimensions of environmental crisis and the catastrophic consequences of failing to listen to women's voices in crisis response programs.

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