

Through the Looking Glass: An Environmentally Conscious Economy in *News From Nowhere*

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Abstract

This paper addresses central ecological problems that emerge in a society--and economy--built around capitalism and the mass-production of goods. When humans change the way they create products, how does this impact the worker and the environment? And furthermore, how does this ecologically sustainable approach impact humanity as a whole? I argue that, in *News From Nowhere*, William Morris's push for a more authentic means of production, in valuing the worker and avoiding waste, suggests a way of creating a more environmentally conscious and viable culture focused on bringing humankind back in connection with nature. I analyze Morris's utopia alongside environmental writings of his contemporaries, like John Ruskin (who was also writing from an Arts and Crafts movement perspective) and Karl Marx, as well as present day eco-critical theorists, such as Donna Haraway, Jason Moore, and Timothy Morton. This framework helps foreground Morris's novel as a possible solution to ecological crisis. The solution Morris proposes goes beyond solving environmental issues, like pollution. Rather, Morris also brings humans back in connection with nature and each other. Although *News From Nowhere* was written in the nineteenth century, the mass-produced, consumer society that Morris opposes is still with us today, perpetuating current environmental crises.

Keywords: William Morris, *News From Nowhere*, Sustainability, Ruskin, Marx, Moore

In *News From Nowhere* William Morris envisions a utopian society as the answer to the ecological crisis that was becoming evident in the Victorian age. Written in 1890, Morris's novel is set in the distant—for him, and other Victorians—future, not too long after 2003 (Morris 59). Through this proposed society, Morris expresses his grievances with the realities of Victorian life and suggests how society should change to improve humankind and the environment. This imagined world is largely focused around the means through which products are created, but alongside this focus on production is an ecologically mindful approach to the art of craftsmanship. Analyzing the novel alongside other works, such as writings by John Ruskin and Jason W. Moore, helps to give it a deeper contextualization in terms of its ecological importance. And further analyzing the novel with modern writers, such as Timothy Morton and Donna Haraway, who both write specifically about humans' place in nature, helps readers understand how an ecological approach will affect humankind. In *News From Nowhere* Morris's push for a more authentic means of production—that being one that is not wasteful and involves creating with purpose—emphasizes a more environmentally conscious culture focused on bringing humankind back in connection with nature.

John Ruskin, one of Morris's contemporaries, wrote on similar societal issues as Morris. "The Nature of Gothic" focuses on manufacturing and the effects of working under factory conditions on the worker. Ruskin stresses that "men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools" and that in order to do so "you must unhumanize them" (278). He classifies industrial labour as akin to slavery, which smothers workers' souls and diminishes their human intelligence (278-279). Ruskin addresses class division, as the working masses struggle for freedom in an "outcry against wealth" (279). He puts forth three rules to correct the class problems, one of which is "never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary, in the production of which Invention has no share" (280).

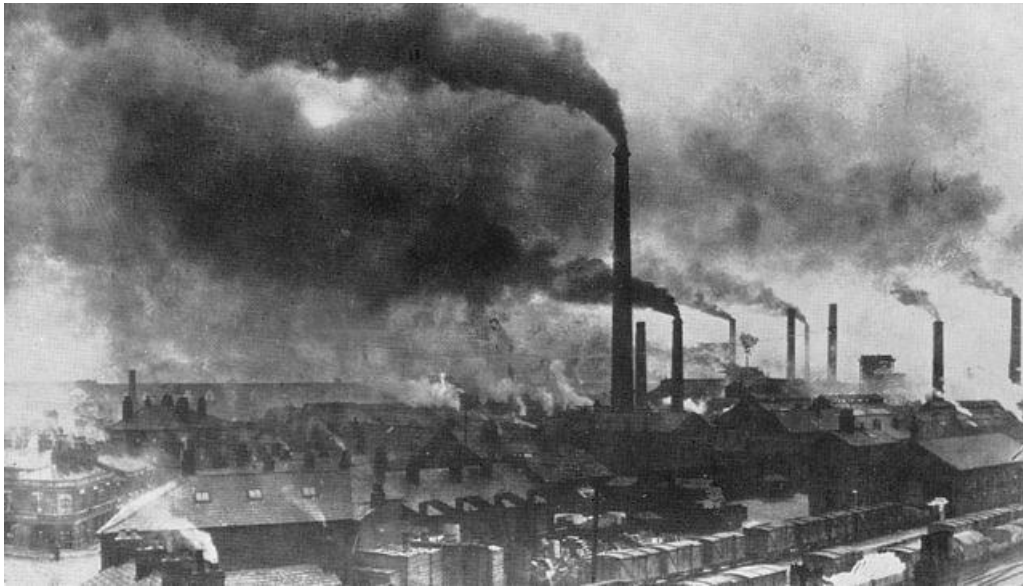
The concern for the working classes that Ruskin expresses is fundamentally in line with the problems with which Morris was grappling in *News From Nowhere*. In fact, the rule that Ruskin sets for society—objects only being produced if necessary—is a fundamental component of Morris's ideal society. On the topic of labour, Hammond, an elderly resident of Nowhere, explains to William Guest, a visitor in the utopia, that "wares" are made only "because they

are needed” and not for a “vague market” (Morris 142). Morris views the problem of “vagueness” as originating from a couple different sources, both of which are reflected in his novel. One of these violates Ruskin’s rule on production that we should “Never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary” (280). In this sense the vagueness of the market comes from the products being created for an unnecessary purpose. The second aspect of the “vague market” emerges in light of Moore’s critique of capitalism and the global perspective of his framework. The Victorians were beginning to shift their resources away from the local to a global market and Morris directly challenges this idea. Morris links the ideas of “World-Market” with “cheap production” (139); he writes that Nowherians (referring to the people who live in Morris’s utopian future), “have long ago dropped the pretension to be the market of the world” (115). Thus, the vagueness here refers to not knowing where the products you are using come from. Morris proposes people will find meaning through this new mode of useful work and unalienated market system.

As Ruskin suggests work in the Victorian era is a form of slavery, Morris proposes that all the work Nowherians do is an “exercise of the mind and body more or less pleasant to be done: so that instead of avoiding work everybody seeks it” (142), essentially freeing the person from slavery. A consideration of the various roles of the “neighbours” in Morris’s utopia and the importance placed upon them helps illuminate this view. One instance of this is the character Henry Johnson, also referred to as Mr. Boffin, who acts as the dustman in Nowhere. Morris devotes a paragraph to describing the dustman with positive attributes, such as having a “splendid figure,” being “exceedingly handsome,” and “as happy as a child” (70). This description creates the image of someone who should be admired, despite the possibility that Victorians would deem this work less valuable than other roles. The problems that Marx identifies with industrial forms of labour, which cause man to become estranged from himself (75), are not present in the characterization of Henry Johnson. Even further, Marx explains that through “estranged labour” man will also become estranged from nature (75). Instead, Morris’s dustman is dressed so elegantly that “the sun flashed back from him as if he had been clad in golden armour” (70). The direct link of human with nature, in this case the sun, suggests the worker in Nowhere is not estranged from nature. Marx further expands this idea when he states that “Nature is man’s inorganic

body...Man lives on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die” (75). Similarly, by doing valued work Morris’s dustman is able to maintain his vitality and energy, shown through his association with the sun. Morris’s proposed society aims to humanize the worker and place value on what they do.

This valuing of labour extends beyond the production of goods and can also be seen in the role women have in Morris’s socialist society. When Guest asks Hammond about the so called “woman question” in the utopian world of *Nowhere*, Hammond responds by telling Guest that he must view “housekeeping as an unimportant occupation” and that it can bring “great pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house skilfully” (107-108). Here Morris seems again to place the blame on Victorian society for not valuing household labour, forcing “‘advanced’ women of the nineteenth century” (108) to deem housework unimportant and unfulfilling. This is a claim that Ruskin sees in men “pained by the scorn of the upper class,” and who therefore find labour to be “degrading” (279). This is a claim that Morris agrees with and identifies as the reason that so-called “advanced” women would not want to do the work for which they are suited. In Morris’s utopia there is an equitable amount of value on diverse roles and tasks in society, whether it be a housekeeper, dustman, sculler, or a craftsman. This view goes beyond Ruskin’s call for conscious crafting, but is still aligned with his “outcry against wealth” (279) by placing value on people outside of the upper class. Morris thus allows the individual’s authenticity and integrity to remain intact while producing goods—since work itself enables the workers to keep their authenticity and integrity complete.



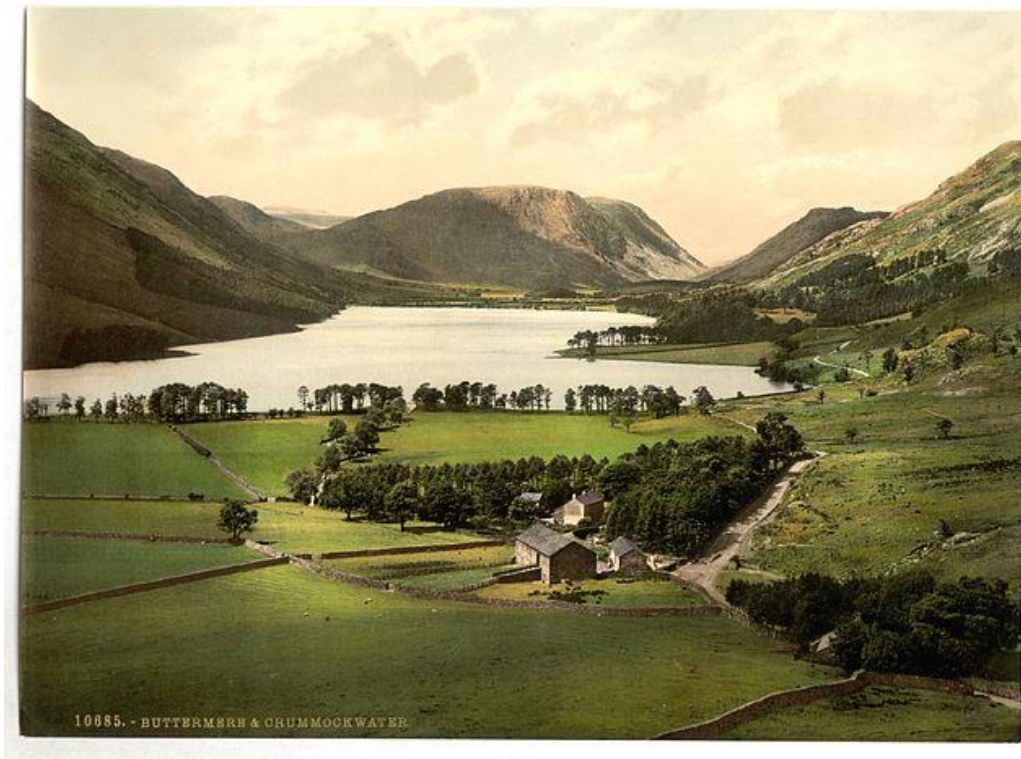
While Ruskin helps us understand Morris's views and opinions on the worth of production, Jason Moore's article, "The Double Internality: History as if Nature Matters," helps tie in the ecological importance of labour. Moore argues that "The economy' and 'the environment' are not independent of each other. Capitalism is not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is a way of organizing nature" (2). It is not a huge leap in judgement when Moore states that "species make environments," just as much as "environments make species" (7). This is a sentiment that Morris pushes in *News From Nowhere*, particularly the former claim. Although Morris largely features the improvements for the working class in his society, he also stresses the improvements he sees in the environment. This is evident early in the novel when William Guest is first transported to Morris's socialist future. In his initial viewing of the Thames, Guest is amazed by "how clear the water is" in comparison to its usual muddy appearance (56). He then goes on to admire the scene beyond the Thames: "The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer's works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of rivetting and hammering came down the west wind from Thorneycroft's" (58): a scene that is free of "grimy sootiness" (58). The restructuring of the way goods are produced in *Nowhere* not only impacts the workers, but also decreases pollution by creating a society that avoids wastefulness and creates products with an intended purpose. Morris was not the only Victorian

writer to protest the pollution of his era; Ruskin also made it a focus of his writing (as seen in “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century”).

William Morris proposes his socialist views as the fix for working-class happiness and solution to the ecological problems of his time. Moore and Ruskin help place Morris in an ecological context and help provide some historical context to problems that are still relevant today. Morris is clearly advocating for changes in society that will improve the environment, but the question remains: despite mankind’s tendencies to manipulate and control, what effect does nature have on man? After all, Moore points out that environments make the species just as much as species make the environment. Morris acknowledges precisely this point throughout his novel through the ways he shows the futuristic utopian society interacting with the environment and each other, along with how nature itself is represented.

Nowherians have not only changed their approach to the ethics of work, but also how they interact directly with the environment—leading them to oneness, or cohesion with nature. Both Morton and Haraway argue that humans have previously, and should still, view themselves as part of nature, but somehow this connection has been lost. They both argue that this separation is a major cause of ecological crisis and specifically our inability to solve it. Morton states that “there is no such ‘thing’ as the environment, since being involved in it already, we are not separate from it” (163). The problem, then, arises when humans stop seeing the environment as a part of themselves and instead as something to exploit and use to suit their needs, while intermittently worrying about nature—as an “it” that society is told to care for (Morton 141). Morris demonstrates that he does not believe humans should give up using natural resources; instead by returning to a cohesive relationship with the environment, we can use nature in a more conscious, sustainable way that does not cause harm. Morris conveys this when Hammond tells Guest that “we need a great deal of timber” (121), since they still need to build things. However, they make up for harvesting certain resources by not being “wasteful” of other areas, like “forcing-grounds for fruit out of season” (121). While Guest conveys the Victorian belief that such practices waste good, useful land that could be productive, Hammond challenges this idea by suggesting that it would instead be wasteful to cover it with factories (121). Instead, the land that they do not need is left alone. In so doing, they create things in a consciously

resourceful way and the land lets them use what they need—reflecting what Haraway would consider a symbiotic relationship. This, along with a more purposeful production process, leads to a more resourceful, creative, and adaptable, product. When Guest is shopping for a pipe, he is shown an elaborate one and his primary concern is that he will lose it (86). However, the child selling him the pipe attempts to quell his worries by stating that if he loses it he should not be concerned since “Somebody is sure to find it, and he will use it, and you can get another” (86). Although the pipe is admired for its beauty and craftsmanship it is not simply a commodity, it is something to use regularly until it is lost (and then continued to be used by another) as opposed to a mass-produced item that runs the risk of breaking or simply being replaced by another after a certain amount of time. Therefore, by focusing on an arts and crafts approach humans are environmentally respectful. The difference here is that, along the lines of Morton’s critique, humans are not attempting to save the earth as an “it”; rather, they seek to return to a more natural relationship that allows both humans and nature to flourish together.



This change in human interactions with nature extends beyond how the characters live and to Morris's portrayal of nature in his writing. Within *News From Nowhere*, Morris never attempts to aestheticize nature, or as Morton describes it, Morris does not fetishize nature (152). Nor does Morris attempt any sort of replication or attach any sort of emotions to the landscape in his descriptions of it. Morris directly addresses aesthetics but not in reference to nature; instead he describes a "new science of aesthetics," which is done practically with "gold and steel" (70). This explanation of aesthetics demonstrates Morris's own concern with attempting to understand nature in a systematic way. Morton would agree that aesthetics serve no purpose in representing nature; he stands by his argument that "if ecology is about collapsing distances (between human and animal, society and natural environment, subject and object), then how much sense does it make to rely on a strategy of reading that keeps reestablishing (aesthetic) distance?" (154). As Guest travels through the utopian landscape there

are descriptions of “blackbirds... singing their best amidst the garden-trees” and houses which “stood in a garden carefully cultivated, and running over with flowers” (89). Readers are given a vivid picture of the landscape, but Morris does not attach any feeling to it—which does not distance the reader—the characters are simply placed within it. Guest is not overcome with any sort of affect when he sees the birds or the flowers; he simply observes the scenery. Furthermore, architecture is not separated from the descriptions of nature (that being flora and animals and atmospheric conditions). When Morris first addresses the landscape, in the previously referenced passage, he draws attention to the buildings. When Guest visits “a region of elegantly-built...ornamented houses,” he discovers that homes are integrated within the cultivated gardens (89). Architecture restores the symbiotic relationship between man and nature and thus does not have to be classified as separate, or “other”, from nature—since in *Nowhere* mankind is no longer an “other” from nature. Humans build and create using the natural resources around them, so when these are accessed in a respectful way they can become part of the symbiotic relationship, even having attributes that make them appear “alive, and sympathetic” (Morris 59). Therefore, humans—as well as their creations—have once again become one with nature; they are nature.

Beyond this symbiotic, give and take, relationship that humans and the earth have achieved, a symbiotic relationship between humans also forms through community. Haraway offers many examples of the symbiotic relationships between organisms of various sizes (but all of equal importance) on this earth—including human to human relations. She frames her discussion within a story which helps “rethink the questions of evolution” (“*Staying with the Trouble*”). The people in the story use shells to hold water “that can be shared” and a “net bag that can carry food back to the camp” and can also “carry the baby” (“*Staying with the Trouble*”). Haraway claims that this is “The kind of sociality that comes from communities making their lives together” (“*Staying with the Trouble*”). This community is most obvious in Morris’s novel when the *Nowherians* refer to each other as “neighbour.” The use of this word shifts it away from its typical meaning of “A person who lives near or next to another” (“*Neighbour*”), and towards a more “biblical” meaning of “responsibility...towards others” (“*Neighbour*”). This collapsing of the boundaries between people is only the beginning of “communities making their lives together” (Haraway), and suggests a way to

examine how the characters in *Nowhere* live, and more specifically, how they are housed. Hammond explains to Guest that although they do still have “separate households” and live with people they like, “no door is shut to any good-tempered person who is content to live as the other house-mates do” (112), which is very much the “sociality” to which Haraway refers. Of course, there are some boundaries and limitations since not everyone will get along, as Haraway further states that this kind of community would be a “Utopia, certainly not absent [of] conflict” (“Staying with the Trouble”). Morris certainly does not believe his society will co-exist in perfect synergy but they do connect with one another in a way that allows them to live symbiotically.

Using Haraway’s idea of the “hive mind” to examine *News From Nowhere* allows this idea of community and oneness to be pursued even further. The hive-mind put into simpler terms is a “community or thinking with each other”. Beyond quality of craftsmanship, another major change in Morris’s proposed society is the abolition of proper government: “the whole people is [their] parliament” (122). Instead of having decisions made for them, Nowherians attempt to solve the problem together, since “the majority must have their way” (133). Here they put into action “thinking with each other” (Haraway “Staying with the Trouble”) by not acting independently and under a governing body and instead as an (almost) collective unit working for the greater good of one another. This notion of the hive-mind is emphasized when readers consider the fact that characters in the story seem to have an intuition towards one another, or the ability to know without being told. When William Guest first meets Dick, at this point just an unknown boat sculler, Dick seems to instinctively know Guest. He knows that he has been on a “journey” (57), and Dick is able to answer Guest’s thoughts (58). This kind of interaction, or understanding, is one that most people would think might come from an intimate connection formed out of a long-lasting relationship, yet Dick has only just met Guest. Moments like this are found throughout the novel and, taking Haraway’s argument into account, it seems Morris is doing this purposefully to emphasize that an ecological consciousness will benefit humans as well as nature. Another instance of this telepathic-like communication comes toward the end of the novel when Guest watches Ellen and notes that “she was really looking at things and let nothing escape her, and as I watched her an uncomfortable feeling that she had been a little touched by love

of... Dick, and that she had been constrained to follow us because of it, faded out of my mind" (223). Guest has no reason for knowing these things about Ellen, and yet he does. After spending some time in Nowhere and finding his place within the landscape, readers see how "environments make species," just as "species make environments" (Moore 7). Once humans use resources and create in an ecologically conscious way, and have achieved a cohesive relationship with nature, they can begin to be connected with all parts of nature.

Although *News From Nowhere* was written over a hundred years ago and focuses on social and ecological issues of that time, the novel remains highly relevant in the twenty-first century. Approximately twenty years has passed since the 2003 setting of the novel, and humans have yet to achieve any sort of solution to the ecological crisis that continues on. Humans have not moved away from a "vague" market to an ecologically sustainable means of production, and we have certainly not placed ourselves within the environment—instead of against it. Rather, we remain stuck at the same point as the Victorians. As humankind continues to be caught within the newly named geological era of the Anthropocene, we have to wonder how much we have complicated nature because of the way we treat it. As Morris points out "nature"—as people used to call it—as one thing, and mankind as another. It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make 'nature' their slave, since they thought 'nature' was something outside them" (219).

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