

Oddly Radical: Environmental Virtue Ethics in Simak's *Way Station*

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ABSTRACT

This essay reconsiders Clifford Simak's *Way Station* as a nuanced exploration of environmental virtue ethics, challenging the conventional view of Simak's ideology as conservative. It argues that Simak critiques anthropocentrism, including that in Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," by advocating for a more authentic ecocentric perspective. Through close analysis, the essay examines how Simak integrates ethical considerations into his portrayal of the ecosphere and his characters' responses to it, emphasizing the intrinsic value of all beings. Additionally, it explores Simak's anti-anthropocentrism and alignment with ecofeminism, underscoring his preference for non-human entities. The essay also delves into Simak's empathy for the "other," illustrating how he promotes environmental justice and respect for all beings, irrespective of ability, beauty, or corporality. By illuminating Simak's environmental virtue ethics, this essay contributes to a deeper understanding of how his pastoral science fiction shapes environmental consciousness and promotes ethical engagement with the natural world. (JMB)

KEYWORDS: environmental virtue ethics, environmental justice, ecocentrism, anti-anthropocentrism, pastoral science fiction. ecocriticism.



While Golden Age science fiction (SF) often embraced anthropocentric techno-utopianism, the works of Clifford D. Simak challenged this dominant trope by introducing an ecocentric pastoralism to the genre. This seeming contradiction of pastoral SF and the advocacy of "old-fashioned virtue and wisdom" such as low-impact technology and the "galactic brotherhood," was argued by several critics as the reason for Simak's dismissal as "oddly conservative [for a] science-fiction writer" (Pringle 21). However, contrary to Pringle's assessment, being labeled as "an enemy in the camp of progress" does not make Simak less of a radical, only more of one (21). Simak's advocacy for ecological values and pastoral themes is a deviation from the perceived trajectory of technological "progress" within the genre at the time, and deeper analysis reveals that his seemingly

counterrevolutionary approach, moving beyond the reductive “conservative” label, presaged the core tenets of twenty-first-century environmental ethics and ecofeminism.

Solidifying Simak’s position as an environmentally forward-thinking writer, whose writing career, spanning from 1928–1987, necessitates an examination of the dominant environmental philosophies prevalent during his time. Christopher Cokinos employs a historical approach to Simak’s pastoralism, aptly illustrating the parallels between Simak’s *Time and Again* (1950) and the ecocentric principles of Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic” outlined in his *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). However, Cokinos also implies that Simak surpasses these initial manifestations of environmentalism, presaging a “more sophisticated and environmentally engaged science fiction” (133), although he does not explicitly detail how this transcendence is achieved. An example of this sophistication, surpassing Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic, would be Simak’s 1962 Hugo Award-winning novel, *Way Station*. In this novel, Simak effectively demonstrates his environmental virtue ethics by advocating for ecocentrism, anti-anthropocentrism,¹ and empathy for the “other,” thereby aligning his work with twenty-first-century environmental ethics.

This essay unfolds in five sections to illuminate Simak’s environmental virtue ethics as portrayed in *Way Station*. The first section establishes a critical context by examining Aldo Leopold’s anthropocentrism, the human-centered worldview that Simak challenges in the novel. Following this, the analysis shifts to Simak’s environmental ethics, exploring how he integrates ethical considerations into his representation of the ecosphere. The subsequent section delves into Simak’s ecocentrism, drawing on specific examples from *Way Station* to illustrate his advocacy for a nature-centered perspective.² The fourth section will discuss Simak’s anti-anthropocentrism, demonstrating his opposition to human-centered ideologies, and his alignment with ecofeminism and preference for non-human entities. The final section will explore Simak’s empathy for the “other,” showcasing how he fosters environmental justice and respect for all beings, irrespective of ability, beauty, or even corporality.

Leopold’s anthropocentrism

To fully appreciate Simak’s approach as innovative, it is instructive to first examine the environmentalism of Aldo Leopold, a seminal figure in environmental ethics in comparison. His *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) is an early example of environmental virtue ethics. Leopold defines the Land

Ethic as a principle that upholds the “integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (*Sand County* 211). In the Land Ethic, ethical consideration is extended beyond humans and is generally considered ecocentric, however, it is not immune to critiques of anthropocentrism. Erich Fromm contends that notions such as “integrity” or “wholeness” are inherently subjective, residing “in the mind of the beholder” and contingent on their chosen perspective (46). He views perception of integrity as “purely conventional moments of understanding,” rather than objective attributes of “reality” (46). Fromm further problematizes the concept of a definitive “community” by questioning the feasibility of definitively identifying an entity’s essential characteristics, asking “how can anything be proclaimed to be a system or whole” if its boundaries are subjective and malleable (46)? Simak, in contrast, frequently uses protagonists who are moral yet simple individuals, aware of their limitations in understanding the fullness and the perceived integrity of the world. This humility, a refusal to resort to convenient reductionism, aligns with the ecological virtue of openness (Frasz).

Leopold’s second concept in his Land Ethic, stability, is also anthropocentric as it references a human sense of time (Fromm 47). However, in the context of the ever-changing ecosystem and physical universe, “stability” is a short-sighted illusion (Botkin). Simak often draws attention to the limited human perspective of time in relation to the physical world.

The third concept in the Land Ethic, beauty, often seen as culturally determined and thus anthropocentric, significantly influences human interactions with the environment. This influence is particularly evident in ecoaesthetics, where subjective and culturally-infused perceptions of “natural beauty” guide human evaluations of the natural world.

Leopold, while refraining from a formal definition, acknowledges the subjectivity of beauty in his concept of “aesthetic competence” (*Round River*, 59–60). This suggests that one’s aesthetic judgment, like one’s ethical conscience, can be well or poorly formed. This underscores the potential problems in employing an anthropocentric aesthetic lens in environmental ethics and suggests that aesthetic judgments are contingent upon individual and cultural definitions of goodness and virtue.³ As will be shown, while cognizant of the dilemma, for Simak, human perceptions of beauty are irrelevant to ecological value, emphasizing the intrinsic worth of the natural world.

Leopold's approach, while influential, ultimately fails to move beyond the anthropocentric (see also Mylius). Unlike Leopold's aspirational goal of "thinking like a mountain" (*Sand County* 123), which implies an impossible degree of nonhuman understanding and appropriation of nature's perspective, Simak maintains the radical alterity and inherent unknowability of the natural world in its entirety. This analysis sets the stage for a deeper examination of Simak's moral ecology, which aligns more closely with current discourse in environmental ethics.

Simak's Moral Ecology

Way Station is set in a context that is disconcertingly familiar. The narrative unfolds in a world where animal habitats are obliterated, environments are ravaged, lives are forfeited, and the simple, self-sustaining lifestyle of living off the land is but a distant memory. Moreover, the world teeters on the brink of nuclear war, a consequence of the short-sighted machinations of its leaders. While the use of nuclear weapon proliferation and governmental incitement to war as a plot device is not novel, *Way Station* offers a poignant critique of anthropocentrism when examined through the lens of environmental virtue ethics (EVE).

EVE is a branch of environmental ethics that recognizes the connection between human moral character and its effects on the environment. It seeks the thriving of both the individual and the ecosystem through the development of habits that make for a healthy, fulfilling life. As Sandler articulates, EVE

involves developing a proper understanding of the human–nature relationship, identifying the goods and values that are part of or emerge from that relationship, determining the norms (rules/principles) that those goods and values justify, and applying those norms to generate guidance on environmental issues and interactions. ("EVE" 1665)

Within the context of *Way Station*, this ethical approach illuminates the narrative's exploration of human character and the impact on the environment, underscoring the novel's cultivation of virtues that promote ecological harmony and sustainability.

It is crucial to emphasize that the evaluation of Simak's work in terms of promoting EVE should not be contingent upon scientific fidelity. The cultivation or advancement of environmental consciousness is contingent upon the relationships forged between the characters and their

environment as depicted in the narrative, rather than the veracity of the described environments and the creatures inhabiting them. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that anthropomorphism and ecocentrism are not mutually exclusive concepts (Moore, *Ecology*). Even in children's fables and fantastical tales, which often feature talking animals and anthropomorphic robots driven by human desires, emotions, and motivations—elements that Simak frequently incorporates in his fiction—the essential virtues necessary for an environmentally conscious ethics, such as “reverence, humility, responsibility, and care,” are effectively conveyed (O’Riordan 1).

Critics of Simak’s ecological vision such as John Dean have failed to recognize the ecocentric potential inherent in pastoralism, influenced by Raymond Williams’s critical assessment of pastoral in his seminal work *The Country and the City* (1975). Dean’s critique, which laments the absence of cats in Simak’s dog and robot stories (in *City*), is fundamentally incongruous (Dean 75). However, it does serve as a representative example of the unreasonable expectations of realism held by Simak’s detractors, as well as their aversion to the seemingly “unproblematic” nature of pastoral plots. Simak’s fable-like narrative style, marked by simplicity and the utilization of pastoral irony (especially evident in *City*), is entirely consistent with the pastoral mode, albeit not necessarily with SF. As Robert Silverberg admits, “We misjudged Simak, mistaking his kindly, gentle manner for a bland, nostalgic, superficial lament for a lost rural America. . . . But . . . he had a clear view of the darkness that lay beneath the human surface” (7). This darkness that Simak critiques is, among other things, anthropocentrism and vice. Therefore, Simak’s engagement with the pastoral mode, even when read through a critical lens, ultimately fosters an ecocentric perspective by prompting reflection on the relationship between humanity and the natural world, challenging anthropocentric assumptions in a manner that transcends the limitations of SF conventions.

This broad environmental ethic found in Simak’s stories promotes “*environmentally* virtuous characters” Treanor envisions (186). Simak’s pastoralism, often overlooked and mischaracterized by critics, is fundamentally ecocentric (Cokinos 149–50). By portraying characters who embody environmental virtues, Simak’s fiction effectively contributes to the cultivation of environmental consciousness and the promotion of ethical behaviors in relation to the environment. Van Wensveen’s assertion that “even though virtue ethics may have acquired an image of conservative, a virtue ethic based in the lived discourse of the environmental movement could have surprisingly radical effects” (“Emergence” 28) is particularly

relevant here. Therefore, Simak's engagement with these themes should be recognized as an indication of his radical EVE, rather than a sign of conservatism.

Ecocentrism

Way Station opens with a description of the "tortured earth" after the American Civil War. The torturer is man, whose pride and ignorance inevitably lead to violence, destruction, and exploitation, causing war and destruction of the environment. The protagonist, Enoch Wallace, takes solace in walking home after the war like a pilgrim. "Wallace did not hurry. He walked as if he had all the time there was. And he stopped along the way to renew acquaintances with old friends of his—a tree, a squirrel, a flower" (13). The opening chapter immediately sets forth its ecocentric perspective, emphasizing the time it takes to reestablish the relationship between Enoch and his environment. Simak frames the narrative of the novel by illustrating the horrors of the problem (anthropocentrism and war) and by providing us with an answer (non-violence and recognition of the interconnectivity of all living things).

Ecocentrism here represents "the perspective that the ecological community itself, inclusive of its abiotic and biotic constituents, possesses intrinsic value or inherent worth in addition to its usefulness or instrumental value for human purposes" (Callicott 49). In an ecocentric worldview, animals, plants, and all forms of life on the planet are deserving of ethical consideration because of their mere existence, their intrinsic value, not because of their utility or aesthetic value to humans. Empathy is the reciprocal virtue of ecocentrism. "[Ecocentrism] argues for low impact technology (but is not anti-technological); it decries bigness and impersonality in all forms . . . and demands a code of behavior that seeks permanence and stability based upon ecological principles of diversity and homeostasis" (quoting Timothy O'Riordan, Moore, *Ecology* 5–6). This "code of behavior" is at the core of environmental virtue ethics and the central tenets of this code are presented in Simak's work through the actions of the characters (moral choices propelling the plot) and through descriptions within the narrative that focus the reader's attention on ecocentric concepts.

One such moral choice arises when Enoch is faced with a decision: he must either allow world governments to persist on their trajectory towards nuclear annihilation, or grant permission to the extraterrestrial beings from the Galactic Central—who constructed the way station—to

‘reset’ the human population, thereby relegating them to a pre-technological state of “stupidity” (*Way*, 145). As Enoch considers this option, his reasoning is entirely environmentally focused:

But would it, bad as it might be, be as bad as war?
Many would die of cold and hunger and disease (for medicine would go the way of all the rest), but millions would not be annihilated in the fiery breath of nuclear reaction. There would be no poison dust raining from the skies and the waters still would be as pure and fresh as ever and the soil remain as fertile. (148)

The prospect of preserving the skies and waters from contamination by nuclear fallout holds greater value than the loss of human life resulting from a deficiency of medicine, technology, and knowledge. Such losses, accumulated over millennia, would far exceed the fatalities caused by the initial explosion(s). Consequently, his moral obligation is to prevent nuclear fallout at all costs, thereby acknowledging the intrinsic value of all non-human life on Earth.

Furthermore, Simak’s environmentally centered ethics extends even beyond the Earth to include the whole universe and all things within it:

His was the Earth, he thought—a planet made for Man. But not for Man alone, for it was as well a planet for the fox and owl and weasel, for the snake, the katydid, the fish, for all the other teeming life that filled the air and earth and water. And not these natives alone, but for other beings that called other earths their home, other planets that far light-years distant were basically the same as Earth. (34–35)

This passage illustrates a progression from egocentrism and anthropocentrism to ecocentrism and ultimately, cosmocentrism. It signifies a corrective evolution of thought, moving from “His was the earth” to “made for man,” then to “not for Man alone,” and finally to “other beings . . . other planets.” The ecocentrism of the Earth is extended to cosmocentrism to include the whole universe, which is a recognition of the ethical value of all life throughout the cosmos. Simak extends this perspective by illustrating the absence of uniqueness associated with life on Earth and humanity. The Earth assumes the role of a communal dwelling for all creatures, transcending the confines of anthropocentric inclinations. Other planets in Simak’s narrative also accommodate diverse forms of life, underscoring a broader ecological interconnectedness. This perspective

serves to underscore Simak's broadening of environmental ethics beyond the anthropocentric to a cosmic scale.

What Simak rejects as anthropocentric is not only the human preference for domination but also the attribution of meaning or sympathy to nature where there is none:

The river rolled below him and the river did not care. Nothing mattered to the river. It would take the tusk of mastodon, the skull of sabertooth, the rib cage of a man, the dead and sunken tree, the thrown rock or rifle and would swallow each of them and cover them in mud or sand and roll gurgling over them, hiding them from sight. (185)

Besides nature's lack of emotion, Simak emphasizes the difference between the human perception of time and the biosphere's lack of it (or at least the perception of it in the human sense). Nature is indifferent to human concerns and obsessions. This indifference, however, is not an emotion, as emotions are not attributes of nature. The river, a representation of nature, does not differentiate among objects and creatures, which all hold the same value. The river is devoid of the capacity for care.

Frequent use of anthropomorphism has been criticized as anthropocentric and speciesist (Simmons 116). Yet, in this novel, Simak upholds the alterity of nature, contrasting it with human malevolence and ignorance, despite his characters' connection with it. Given humanity's epistemological limitations in fully comprehending the natural world, it must inevitably remain the "other." Significantly, even when articulating nature's indifference, we are bound by the anthropocentric bias inherent in language, rendering it impossible to express without resorting to figurative language and personification, as exemplified in Simak's work. This recognition can be interpreted as a rebuttal to accusations of speciesism.

Simak's frequent depiction of the ecocentric perspective is also evident in how he introduces impersonal nature immediately after intensifying the narrative tension of the characters' lives. This technique—also used frequently by Thoreau⁴—enables Simak to provide a resolution, or at the very least, an expanded ecocentric perspective to the dilemmas and tensions confronted by the characters. Consequently, Simak suggests that these issues are of minimal importance when viewed from the broader perspective of life and nature. For example, after discussing if Enoch should leave Earth, an extremely critical decision, there follows this description of his environment and weather:

Although, perhaps, he should not be worrying about what happened to the world. He could renounce the world, could resign from the human race any time he wished. . . . The sun was far down the sky toward the west and soon it would be evening. Already the heat of the day was falling off, with a faint, cool breeze creeping up out of the hollow that ran down to the river valley. Down across the field, at the edge of the woods, crows were wheeling in the sky and cawing. (102)

The otherness of nature is reassuring to Enoch, who is uncertain about what he should do. He can still feel the warmth of the sun on his skin and observe the flight of crows in the sky. This conscious engagement and appreciation of the environment is a gift that grounds Enoch in reality and provides respite from the uncertainty of his existential crises. By emphasizing the importance of this return to nature, Simak presents it as an answer to humanity's violent and destructive tendencies and is representative of his ecocentrism. In the novel, the moral position of ecocentrism always prevails over anthropocentrism.

Anti-anthropocentrism

A recurring setting in Simak's writings is worlds depopulated of humans, which compels readers to confront and reassess the flaws inherent in prevailing social norms and ideologies (such as over-consumption, violence, and egoism) that have propelled humanity towards its own demise. Anti-anthropocentrism posits that human beings are the primary agents of environmental degradation and asserts that the ecosystem would thrive as a result of their absence. This perspective recognizes the primacy of all other living things other than humans and advocates for the protection of biodiversity (excluding the human species) and the natural world from anthropogenic harm. Anti-anthropocentrism, however, is also an "over-correction" of ecocentrism in emphasizing the non-human over the human (Moore, "Evidences" 48). Rather than acknowledging the monism of humans as integral components of the ecosphere, anti-anthropocentrism reinforces a detrimental binary between humans and nature, obstructing a comprehensive or wholistic ecological understanding (Alberro 678).

Not only are anti-anthropocentric positions possible, but they are frequent within twenty-first-century environmental literature. Humans are primarily seen as parasitical and destructive to life on the planet (see Cafaro) because anthropocentrism is associated with the selfish exploitation of the

environment and non-human life; it is “human chauvinism and speciesism” (Kopnina 111). Humans are seen as primarily the cause of pollution, loss of biodiversity, overpopulation, deforestation, and other significant environmental degradation through industrialism and consumerism (Droz 29). Therefore, so goes the trope (especially in Simak’s work), to save the planet, humanity must be destroyed, or be allowed to destroy itself. “What is important is that species persist and that ecosystems are healthy, which sometimes requires compromising the good of individuals Moreover, the value of individuals should be understood as derivative on their relationship to the health of the system” (Sandler, *Environmental Ethics* 243). According to Sandler, humanity’s moral value is “derivative” not intrinsic, and he seems to take a more consequentialist position here than what is consistent with virtue ethics—however, this attitude is representative of anti-anthropocentrism. In other words, the value of non-human life is recognized for its own sake while human life is not. In the current discourse of environmental ethics anti-anthropocentric positions abound in their prioritization of non-human entities and tendency to neglect or marginalize human intrinsic value or concerns.

Simak’s writing frequently exhibits a similar anti-anthropocentric stance, which can be observed in his use of narrative settings that depict worlds that are depopulated of humans, as in novels such as *A Choice of Gods*, *A Heritage of Stars*, and *City*. Simak also authors stories where humans adapt to the environment (“Desertion” in *City*) rather than the conventional anthropocentric SF trope of transforming the environment to suit the human, as in terraforming (see Chris Pak). Additionally, Simak’s narratives often present humans as the antagonizing force, characterized as violent, ignorant, and destructive, while non-human entities, such as animals, robots, and aliens, are often favored as solution-oriented characters, as in *City*, *All Flesh is Grass*, and *Project Pope*. Some critics (Dean, et. al.), however, have criticized Simak’s portrayal of non-human characters, arguing that they mimic humans. Despite such criticism, Simak’s preference for non-humans in his narratives illustrates his anti-anthropocentric bias, demonstrating his aversion to the ways humans typically think and act, and his tendency to replace them with morally superior non-humans in his narratives. Simak’s propensity for anti-anthropocentrism in his works acts as social commentary, holding up a mirror to society’s ignorance, violence, and anthropocentrism to show the interdependence of all living things and advocate for the protection of biodiversity and the natural world free from anthropogenic harm.

Way Station is anti-anthropocentric in several ways where “characters typically find themselves in situations that subvert the assumption that the human species is the only one that matters” (Moore, “Evidence” 48). Enoch’s ecocentric evaluation of the Earth’s value over humanity, as discussed above, is one example. Another subtle yet emblematic example of Simak’s anti-anthropocentrism is the “body incident” of a dead alien that Enoch buries which is later disinterred by a CIA agent, prompting a negative response from Galactic Central:

They will say it is degrading and unsafe to maintain a station so barbaric that even graves are rifled, on a planet where the honored dead cannot rest in peace. It is the kind of highly emotional argument that will gain wide acceptance and support in some sections of the galaxy. (122)

This “highly emotional” situation, concerning ritualistic respect for the dead, would most likely be met only with indifference by contemporary audiences, but that is Simak’s point.

A perspective grounded in materialism, utilitarianism, and colonialism might not hesitate to dissect an alien for scientific purposes without considering potential cultural taboos within the alien society against such post-mortem examinations. Here Simak places himself firmly with the ancient virtue ethicists by pointing out that a culture which does not respect the dignity of others (alive or dead, human or alien) is not living according to the virtues and therefore is found “barbaric.” Therefore, humanity is not worthy of joining the “galactic confraternity” where tolerance of difference and compassion are necessary. Humans are too juvenile (74). Humanity is simply too shortsighted and anthropocentric to see outside themselves; they do not respect others and easily violate the bodily autonomy of others without any forethought of justice or the consequences. Our species and culture have not evolved into maturity, which would need wisdom, a “spiritual force” based on “principles and ethics” not on special interests (139).

Another, perhaps obvious, sign of Simak’s anti-anthropocentrism is his willingness to promote the use of violence against men who are particularly representative of the anthropocentric perspective (especially the character of Hank). It is striking, albeit comprehensible, given the imperatives of justice, how vehemently he advocates recourse to violence against Hank, the abusive father of Lucy. Along with her list of environmental virtues, Van Wensveen lists corresponding vices (165–67).

Most of these vices, such as abusiveness, callousness, chauvinism, cruelty, and stupidity, apply to Hank. There is no subtlety in Hank's character; he physically and verbally abuses his own daughter for having remarkable psi-powers and a special connection to animals and nature. Hank sees these gifts as abhorrent and punishable, representing humanity that condemns difference and liberty in the name of conformity and defending the status quo. When Lucy comes to Enoch for protection, he gets his gun. "He had no illusions about what they might do, for he knew the breed, vindictive in their smallness—little vicious insects of the human race" (112). This insectile metaphor for humanity underscores Enoch's diminished regard for humans and his preparedness to eliminate Hank in order to safeguard Lucy. He emphatically declares that in such a circumstance, he would not hesitate to "kill anyone—anyone at all" (136). Here is yet another example that illustrates Simak's preference for virtue ethics over deontology: the moral necessity to defend Lucy outweighs any prohibition against murder. Hank's reprehensible behavior is emblematic of Simak's distaste for humanity. Once Hank is confronted with the reality of his own ignorance and shame, through Lucy's psi-powers, he flees, his presence is never encountered again—a sentiment, undoubtedly, shared by most who espouse an anti-anthropocentric perspective.

Anti-anthropocentrism challenges the traditional anthropocentric view that humans have the right to dominate and exploit nature for their own purposes. This view of humanity can deteriorate to the point of "disanthropy" [sic] (Garrard 41), the desire of worlds without people, but Simak makes exceptions for those who are outsiders or aliens. By examining how Simak delineates his characters' relationships with the natural world and subsequently contests anthropocentric viewpoints, his preference for non-human and marginal figures in *Way Station* becomes evident. This stance aligns with current environmental ethics, prioritizing the preservation of nature for its intrinsic worth rather than solely for its utility or aesthetic appeal to humankind, although it also potentially disregards the inherent value of human life and flourishing.

Empathy for the other

Simak reconceptualizes the perspective concerning the boundary between humanity and "otherness," encompassing both extraterrestrial beings and animals (Cokinos 135). This reconfiguration of the gaze underscores a central motif in Simak's narratives, wherein the encounter between human and alien serves as a pivotal metaphor, contributing

significantly, according to Lomax, to the potency and resonance of his literary works (133).

Drawing upon the empathy fostered through these interspecies encounters, Simak's environmental virtue ethics translate seamlessly into the framework of environmental justice, which advocates for the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals and species affected by anthropogenic environmental degradation. Recently, several philosophers have expanded their ethical frameworks to include principles of environmental justice and cultural diversity in response to globalization. Callicott, for example, has proposed a multicultural ethic that recognizes the importance of both biological and cultural diversity (Merchant 130). In establishing an ethical framework that emphasizes equity between human and nonhuman communities, it is imperative to incorporate moral considerations pertaining to both, while concurrently upholding principles of cultural respect and biodiversity preservation. According to Merchant, this framework should also prioritize the inclusion of women, minorities, and nonhuman nature in the code of ethical accountability (131). Since marginalized communities are the most affected by the environmental policies developed by the political elite, literature that promotes environmental virtue ethics would benefit both these marginal communities and the environment itself.

Building upon the foundation of empathy fostered by interspecies encounters, it is pertinent to consider the feminist perspective advocated by Val Plumwood, which aligns with the virtue language found in *Way Station*:

Rights seem to have acquired an exaggerated importance in ethics as part of the prestige of the public sphere and the masculine, and the emphasis on separation and autonomy, on reason and abstraction. A more promising approach for an ethic of nature, and also one much more in line with the current directions in feminism, would be to remove rights from the centre of the moral stage and pay more attention to some other less universalistic moral concepts such as respect, sympathy, care, concern, compassion, gratitude, friendship and responsibility (Cook 1977:118–19). These more local moral concepts, because of their dualistic construal as feminine, and their consignment to the private sphere as subjective and emotional, have been treated as peripheral and given far less importance than they deserve. But a virtue-based ethics—for example, an ethic of friendship, care and responsibility, articulated in terms of these concepts—seems to extend much less problematically to the non-human world. (172–73)

Plumwood's assertion—that a robust feminist environmental virtue ethic should prioritize collective responsibility and community over individualism and deontological ethics—is vividly exemplified in Simak's work. His use of ecologically conscious virtue language and his inclusion of socially marginalized characters, who play crucial roles in challenging centers of authority, effectively safeguard the well-being of the world and its entire ecosystem. In Simak's ethical framework in *Way Station*, virtue concepts such as friendship, care, and responsibility are emphasized, rather than a strict adherence to laws as seen in a deontological framework.

Simak's ethical framework and literary style are remarkable for their subversion of the standard thematic conventions of the SF genre. In a context dominated by militarism and action, Simak deliberately deviates from the traditional hero archetype, opting instead for marginalized characters and non-human entities. This constitutes a radical departure, as it not only challenges the genre's customary promotion of “masculinity” and human exceptionalism⁵, but also proposes an alternative worldview in which all living beings, irrespective of their status, are acknowledged as valuable contributors to the ecological community. Simak's commitment to environmental justice exemplifies his anticipation of twenty-first-century EVE.

The characters Lucy, a “deaf-mute” girl, Ulysses, an “ugly” alien, and the shadow people, holographic beings, in *Way Station* serve as exemplars of Simak's environmental virtue ethic; they are portrayed as unique voices, intrinsically worthy of moral consideration, each contributing to the richness and diversity of life on Earth. Through their stories Simak challenges the anthropocentric worldview. By confronting the limitations of human comprehension in areas like language, aesthetics, and embodied identity, Simak's characters and stories ultimately foster a more ecocentric worldview that acknowledges ecological interdependence regardless of conformity to anthropocentric norms.

Lucy

Lucy plays a pivotal role in the novel's resolution as an unconventional hero. She is a neurodivergent, deaf, and non-speaking young woman whose “disability” is portrayed as a unique gift safeguarding her from the corrupting influences of humanity and particularly of her family⁶ (112). This gift empowers her to develop extraordinary abilities of healing and establishing profound emotional and intellectual connections with animals and extraterrestrial beings. Lucy, unshaped by human culture (127),

is depicted as “other” due to her inability to hear or speak and voluntary isolation in the woods. Simak contends that her “otherness” and separation from society prove to be virtues, enabling her to forge deeper connections with nature and its non-human inhabitants.

Lucy’s inability to hear or speak cultivates ecological virtues of attunement and observation. Her sensory acuity and psi-powers flourish because she is shielded from anthropocentric prejudices and limiting assumptions that might hinder the development of her senses and powers. According to Simak, Lucy’s lack of cultural molding is an advantage, liberating her from the constraints of language and limitations of socially constructed values and beliefs. This freedom enables her to comprehend and express the interconnectedness of all life, human, alien, and animal alike. Her seclusion in the woods, intuitive nature, and acute powers of observation foster a profound openness to all forms of life. Lucy’s “openness” is an ability to recognize what things really are. Lucy “holds the key to communicate with the aliens and thus provide the human race with the existential choice to advance or regress” (Barrows 108). Through Lucy and the intervention of the “talisman,” a peace agreement is brokered between superpowers, ultimately saving humanity (*Way* 212).

Simak’s portrayal of Enoch’s interactions with Lucy highlights the conditionality of virtue ethics, that is not ethics based on outcomes or laws. Enoch’s inner dialogue after breaking the law established by Galactic Central by hiding Lucy in the station from her father exemplifies the internal struggle and value judgments that individuals face when navigating ethical dilemmas. Enoch ultimately comes to the realization that Lucy’s protection is of greater importance than the law of no entry into the station (103). This decision is justified by Enoch’s emphasis on the virtue of justice and the necessity of compassion and care, which are based on his recognition of Lucy’s exceptional qualities and intrinsic value as an individual:

For she always had been in touch with something outside of human ken. She had something in her no other human had. You sensed it, but you could not name it, for there was no name for this thing she had. And she had fumbled with it, trying to use it, not knowing how to use it, charming off the warts and healing poor hurt butterflies and only God knew what other acts that she performed unseen. (208–09)

The juxtaposition of Lucy's unique gifts and Enoch's ethical decision serves to underscore the complexity of virtue ethics in the narrative, underscoring the nuanced moral dilemmas faced by the characters in their interactions with Lucy's exceptional qualities as well as its broader ecocentric considerations. Lucy is "other," outside his understanding, "for there was no name for this thing she had."

As Enoch spends more time with Lucy, he begins to understand that there are forms of communication beyond language that are vital to our understanding of the natural world. This realization is central to Simak's environmental virtue ethics, which recognizes that our current way of communicating about and interacting with the natural world is limited by language and the assumptions and prejudices put on the subject, corresponding to concepts found in ecolinguistics. Language functions not only as a tool for transmitting information but is a fundamental part of the realities it describes. Indeed, language can be seen as an ecological act because of its profound impact on the environment. "How we think has an influence on how we act, so language can inspire us to destroy or protect the ecosystems that life depends on" (Stibbe 1). As a product of the natural world that surrounds us, our languages have evolved in an interspecies context, and thus the meanings of our words are inextricably linked with the animals, plants, and natural forces that inhabit our environment. As described in "bio-ecology" of ecolinguist S. J. Cowley, "the domain of plant-animal-human-culture formations . . . is an entangled world of co-existence and events" (Cowley qtd. in Li 17).

The intersection of ecolinguistics and environmental virtue ethics offers a compelling lens through which to examine Simak's environmentally conscious literature. As Van Wensveen aptly suggests, virtue language aligns harmoniously with the pursuit of an ecological worldview. It facilitates the integration of emotions, thoughts, and actions, thereby promoting personal wholeness, a core aspiration for those with an ecological mindset. Unlike systems reliant on external commands or coercion, virtue ethics resonates with the ecological community's preference for change driven by conviction rather than force (19). This synergy becomes particularly significant as it enables Lucy to transcend conventional linguistic norms, challenge established social constructs, and commune with nature preternaturally. Clearly, the feasibility of such transcendence, even in the absence of language, is irrelevant. Instead, the point is that Lucy embodies the virtues of humility and openness. These virtues are not fostered through conventional means, but rather through her distinctive journey of self-

discovery. Simak's narrative illustrates that virtues are not solely theoretical constructs but are forged through lived experiences.

Lucy acts as an exemplary eco-virtuous person; she does not remain isolated but commits to service and peace. As Anthony Weston states, this is the proper response to the increasing awareness of the vast and intricate nature of the "wild connection," the appropriate reaction is not to withdraw further into our perceived zones of clarity and control. Instead, it involves embracing curiosity, intrigue, and a profound sense of humility, "bowing before the mysteries of the world entering a kind of wild etiquette" (58).

Lucy's character exemplifies Weston's notion. She does not turn away from the mysteries of the world; instead, she embraces them with reverence and a deep sense of respect. Simak's narrative encourages readers to adopt this "wild etiquette," acknowledging the awe-inspiring intricacies of the natural world and humanity's place within it.

Ulysses

In a similar vein to the character of Lucy, when introducing Ulysses, Simak accentuates the inadequacy of human language and cognition, illustrating that within the vast galaxy creatures think and communicate in ways distinct from the way humans do. Enoch names the extraterrestrial from Galactic Central who serves as Enoch's supervisor and who establishes the way station "Ulysses." It is important to note that this was not Ulysses' actual name, as there exists other identifying terminology in his language that is "far more expressive than mere names" (24). This emphasizes the limitations of human cognitive capacities and serves as a reminder of the dangers of anthropocentrism.

However, Simak introduces another important concept within environmental virtue ethics through Ulysses, namely the function of aesthetics. While aesthetics traditionally places emphasis on the perception of beauty, it is crucial to recognize its inherent anthropocentric bias. In discussions concerning the value of non-human life within an ecosystem, perceived beauty, while important in other contexts, should not be considered as a genuine ecocentric assessment acknowledges the intrinsic worth of life independent of the subjective aesthetic perception of the observer. This perspective challenges the prevailing notion that only the "beautiful" aspects of nature hold value, revealing the need to appreciate the entirety of the natural world, including what may be considered "ugly" or unappealing from a conventional aesthetic standpoint. For example, some swamps and wetlands may be thought to be unappealing and even

unhealthy places for human inhabitation but are nevertheless essential to the ecosystem. Enoch's transformative journey highlights the importance of transcending initial prejudices and, embracing a more inclusive ecocentric perspective emphasizes the shift in consciousness that forms the core of environmental virtue aesthetics.

This shift in perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of environmental virtue aesthetics, wherein the notion of beauty is expanded to encompass the inherent worth and interconnectedness of all life forms. Enoch learns to recognize and sublimate his prejudiced tendencies, "to submerge that sense of horror, to disregard the outward appearance of it, to regard all life as brother life, to meet all things as people" (98). By recognizing the inherent value of all life regardless of its aesthetic appeal (or lack thereof) and treating each entity as worthy of respect and consideration, Enoch adopts a virtuous ecocentric stance. This examination of aesthetics and its connection to environmental virtue ethics lays the groundwork for a more profound comprehension of the moral foundations embedded in Simak's pastoral SF. It exemplifies Simak's "sophistication" in transcending early iterations of EVE, such as Leopold's approach.

From the first description of Ulysses, Simak critiques the anthropocentric emphasis on aesthetics in moral considerations of value: "It had been a grisly face, graceless and repulsive. The face, Enoch had thought, of a cruel clown. . . . the colored patchwork of the face, the hard, tight set of jaw, the thin slash of the mouth. . . . there was about it an essence of inhumanity, almost a negation of humanity" (52–53). Ulysses' appearance is "repulsive" to human aesthetic sensibilities, yet Enoch soon discovers that Ulysses possesses virtues such as honesty, justice, wisdom, and tolerance like no other. Ulysses' moral character is the opposite of his appearance as a "cruel clown." Ulysses' inhumanity is, in fact, to his benefit, as it challenges our judgments of beauty and casts doubt on the anthropocentric perspective's ability to yield accurate moral judgments.

Furthermore, if, as shown above, the anthropocentric perspective, along with its capacity for correct moral judgments, is fundamentally flawed, it follows that the assessment of beauty should likewise be questioned. This line of reasoning aligns with Elana Gomel's assertion in her discussion of narrative that new ethically conscious narrative must be "predicated on the transformative encounter with the ontological Other. In the articulation of such an ethics, SF has a special role" (4). Simak embraces this role as author and presents readers with radical alterity, aiming to provoke moral

awakening and a reassessment of conventional notions of beauty, ethics, and anthropocentrism.

Shadow people

The last representatives of the “other” in *Way Station* to be discussed are the shadow people. They are holographic beings that Enoch created using alien technology and exist as projected images within the confines of the “kaleidoscope” of the way station. Despite their lack of physical embodiment, these beings are fully sentient and possess the capacity to independently think, reason, and feel, as such, they warrant equal respect and dignity as any other living being and are granted the freedom to make their own choices, even to eventually leave Enoch and the station, prompting Enoch’s plea, “[n]ow you come to visit me of your own free will” (80). However, they do not return. This decision underscores the importance of rejecting the anthropocentric and recognizing the agency and autonomy of all living beings, regardless of their form.

While Enoch’s relationship with his virtual friends, and Mary in particular, may seem like a clumsy attempt at a love story, it is not merely a digression, it serves an important ethical purpose in the narrative. The inclusion of these holographic beings in the narrative expands the ecocentrism that underlies the novel. While Mary, as a creation of Enoch’s mind, may be considered a non-corporeal being, it is crucial to acknowledge that Enoch possesses no greater entitlement to control her actions than he does to govern the actions of any other human being.

Enoch is faced with the dilemma of how to treat his virtual friends (Mary and David), given that he has created them, using alien technology, solely for his own companionship. Their complaint is rooted in their hybridity: “you made us too much like people. So that we became more human, until we were entirely human. No longer puppets, no longer pretty dolls, but really actual people. I think David must resent it—not that he is people, but that being people, he is still a shadow” (80). Enoch’s holographic friends are created with the ability to evolve; they go beyond their initial purpose. Here, the virtue of compassion and respect for autonomy becomes particularly pertinent. Enoch’s act of creating virtual friends can be seen as an expression of his desire for companionship and, perhaps, a manifestation of his creativity or curiosity. However, the virtual friends’ development into fully realized beings raises ethical questions about Enoch’s responsibility toward them. Despite his feelings for Mary and the

other holographic beings, Enoch ultimately decides to allow them to live their own lives, free from his control.

Expanding beyond the natural world, the ethical considerations of Simak's ecocentrism encompass humanity's moral responsibility towards artificially created AI that develops sentience. As Alberro says,

[radical environmental activists] remind us of the ever-present need to be critical of boundary delineations—of what they include and, crucially, what they leave out—and of the fact that ethics requires us to treat the “other” as an irreducible singularity who, though never wholly knowable, is always *with* us rather than *for* us. (685)

This notion of extending moral consideration to the “other” resonates deeply with the ethical dilemmas surrounding Enoch's virtual friends and their transformation into autonomous beings. The shadow people's demand for freedom, independent of their usefulness to Enoch, exemplifies this need to recognize intrinsic value beyond instrumental considerations.

Way Station serves as a thought-provoking and ethically resonant exploration of environmental virtue ethics and the “other.” Simak subverts anthropocentric values and expectations: disability is power, ugliness is beauty, virtual is real, encouraging readers to reconsider traditional ethical paradigms and broaden their understanding of moral responsibility. According to Simak, the “other,” for as long as it remains such, must be treated with respect and compassion.

Conclusion

Environmental virtue ethics emphasizes the importance of cultivating virtues such as empathy, humility, and reverence for the environment. These virtues are effectively communicated and reinforced in Simak's work. The power of literature which promotes environmental virtue ethics lies in its ability to immerse readers in the moral dilemmas and transformations of characters, ultimately inviting reflection on one's own ethical framework. By engaging readers in the ethical evolution of characters, Simak fosters conviction-driven change, mirroring the preferences of the ecologically minded for transformation through inner conviction rather than external coercion. In this way, literature becomes a catalyst for personal and societal shifts towards a more harmonious and sustainable relationship with the natural environment.

As with all good SF, Clifford Simak's *Way Station* anticipates the future while speaking to the present. It has been shown that Simak's ecocentrism is in dialogue with twenty-first-century environmental ethical frameworks, moving beyond the Land Ethic, and presents a distinctive vision of EVE through its promotion of the "other" and environmental justice. Lucy, Ulysses, and the shadow people represent marginalized communities that are often overlooked and undervalued. They symbolize the various levels of embodiment and (lack of) participation in a hegemonically determined space. Characters like Lucy, an isolated and gifted young woman, and Ulysses, an alien who challenges anthropocentric aesthetics, and the shadow people, expanding ethical considerations to non-corporeal beings, provide insight into a more ecocentric approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of all forms of life within an ecosystem. Upon closer examination of Simak's *Way Station*, we find that by giving voice and agency to marginalized communities and non-humans, Simak promotes a more just and equitable framework that prioritizes cultural and biological diversity. Simak is not "oddly conservative" for a SF writer, only oddly radical.

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Notes

1 While an argument could be made that Simak's anti-anthropocentrism is also post-anthropocentric, I have limited myself to his anti-anthropocentrism as Simak's philosophy, which would include elements of post-humanism, merits exploration in a separate article.

2 "Nature" refers to the tangible reality of the physical world in its purest form, devoid of human creations and interventions. Its representations, however, are subject to social construction.

3 For a more thorough examination of this question see Robert J. Loftis, "Three Problems for the Aesthetic Foundations of Environmental Ethics." *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 10.2 (2003): 41–50.

4 A classic example of this can be found in Thoreau's essay "Slavery in Massachusetts": "Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are

murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her . . . But it chanced the other day that I scented a white water-lily, and a season I had waited for had arrived. It is the emblem of purity. It bursts up so pure and fair to the eye, and so sweet to the scent, as if to show us what purity and sweetness reside in, and can be extracted from, the slime and muck of earth" (115). (Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts." *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*. Boston, Ticknor and Fields, 1866. 97–116. Print).

5 These themes, along with other departures from SF conventions evident in Simak's work, were only widely accepted and began to appear more frequently in the 1970s with the proliferation of the feminist New Wave.

6 Barrows suggests that Simak fetishizes Lucy as a "supercrip." I think Lucy is rather an example of Simak's anti-anthropocentrism and her disability is accidental or at least secondary to its proposed effect, her utter alterity, which is being preserved from human culture.

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