

# Analysing the Structure, Plot and Protagonists of *The Natural Way of Things*

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## Introduction

In Charlotte Wood's (2018) *The Natural Way of Things*, twelve young women who were involved in different sex scandals have been captured and imprisoned for unknown reasons at a secret compound somewhere in Australia. In this essay, I will analyse the novel's structure and plot in relation to narrative tension, discuss the comparative importance of its two protagonists, and analyse their character arcs.

## Structure and Plot

Jacqui Ross (2020), *The Natural Way of Things* follows a three-act structure. Part one, *Summer*, comprises the first act; part two, *Autumn*, and most of part three, *Winter*, comprises the second act; the power returning starts the third act; and Verla's realisation and escape comprises the climax (pp. 2-5). However, that doesn't feel right to me. To me, it seems that while the plot thread of the girls being kidnapped for Hardings fits this structure, the novel as a whole follows a five-act structure<sup>1</sup> with the climaxes of several plot threads occurring in acts three and five. Here, I shall discuss where I consider the novel's events to fall within a five-act structure, given which events afford narrative tension and the tension's magnitude.

As Ross outlines (p. 2), act one corresponds to the first section, *Summer*. The inciting incident – the girls being tricked and captured for Hardings – occurs before the novel. The reader is introduced to Verla and Yolanda as they wake in captivity before being shaved and marched with the other girls by Boncer and company to the compound. The reader learns about the other ten girls through the protagonists' perspectives, as well as Verla and Yolanda's backstories as they settle into their new environment.

Part two, *Autumn*, opens the second act. More backstory is provided and the drama slowly escalates. Teddy reveals that Hardings isn't coming, and Yolanda finds rabbit traps. From the midpoint crisis of the power failing (p. 3), the drama escalates faster, and the focus shifts from whether the girls will be rescued to how they'll survive with no power and an increasingly dangerous Boncer. Yolanda becomes a hunter, Verla experiments with mushrooms, and Hetty is sacrificed to pacify Boncer given Teddy and Nancy's sexual relationship. In part three, *Winter*, the mushroom-and-rabbit stew is introduced, Verla finds the death cap mushroom, and Nancy and Hetty commit suicide.

Verla finds her white horse's corpse and concludes that Andrew never loved her. She chooses poisoning by death cap, but Boncer eats it instead and dies. Ross lists this as the second act turning point (p. 4), but I consider the dead horse and Verla's realisation to be the second act turning point and the eating of the death cap through to the girls' realisation that Boncer won't recover to be the third act and first climax, in particular the climax of the survival and mushroom-poisoning plot threads.

Wood builds the narrative tension surrounding the girls' survival to its peak as Verla considers how it will only be "a matter of time" until Boncer rapes them all, and that she's "lost the will to survive" (Wood 2018, p. 283). She wonders "if Yolanda will come and cry at her bedside" as she dies (p. 284), and braces herself to eat the death cap. Boncer "snatche[s] her plate away" (p. 284) and eats

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<sup>1</sup> The five-act structure was fresh in my mind from being covered in *Writing Fiction* only a few weeks ago (Low 2020, p. 32), so my brain might have gotten stuck on it. However, the events of the novel do (in my opinion) align cleanly with the five acts, and applying those rather than their three-act structure relatives does allow the novel's two climaxes (and the plot thread climaxes they encompass) to be allocated to different acts.

the death cap, and Verla is “shot back from death into living, forced up and up, bursting through its surface, gasping, into air” (p. 285), releasing the narrative tension. Wood resuscitates it as Verla doubts whether the death cap will actually kill Boncer. After he sickens, recovers, and then sickens again, she realises he will die, releasing the narrative tension regarding the uncertainty of his death and their safety, and ending the third act.

The narrative tension drops as the girls roam freely and rifle through Boncer’s belongings and Boncer dies, signalling to me the opening of the fourth act, rather than the second act’s conclusion and the climax’s beginning (Ross 2020, p. 5). The power returns, “Boncer dies quietly, alone” (Wood 2018, p. 294), Joy “plough[s]” the spear gun into Teddy (p. 295), and they deduce from the power’s return that “Hardings is coming” (p. 296), which everyone is elated by except Yolanda (p. 298).

The last chapter comprises the fifth act of the novel, but also as the third act of the captured-for-Hardings plot thread that the girls have forgotten about but is now focused on as Wood increases the narrative tension again. “[P]oor insane Yolanda” (p. 305) leaves before the bus arrives, failing to persuade Verla to join her. Wood introduces Perry, who is not violent and coarse like Boncer, but “shaven, fatherly, [and] in a clean blue uniform” (p. 301), refers to the girls not as “sluts dogs fat slags bitches slurry” but as “[y]ou poor, poor girls” (p. 302), and doesn’t threaten them but gifts them with bags of makeup. The contrast against Boncer’s abusiveness is disarming, and he quickly gains their trust.

The girls dig into the makeup despite Verla’s warning, demonstrating their naivete and desire to return to society. Perry finds Boncer and Teddy’s corpses inside the house, then gets the girls into the bus, pushing Verla “with too much strength, too expertly, too fast up the steps” (p. 307). As the bus leaves, Verla realises that Perry isn’t their saviour but another jailor and that there’s worse coming, and decides to eat the remaining death cap. As Verla imagines herself eating the mushroom and thinks her goodbyes to Andrew and Yolanda, Wood brings the narrative tension to its second peak, this time for the captured-for-Hardings plot thread and Verla’s internal conflict between hope and despair (see below). Hearing Yolanda’s voice, Verla changes her mind and tells Perry to let her off the bus. He refuses, so the girls gang up on him and force the bus to stop, exhibiting the strength they developed during their captivity. Once Verla escapes, the narrative tension fades again. After a moment’s contemplation, she sets out to find Yolanda.

Wood sets up a climax for the third act relating to the girls’ survival in the compound and Verla’s death caps, and then has a surprise second climax in the fifth act relating back to the girls’ capture for Hardings and Verla’s character development and mental state. Two sets of components allow her to do this: the multiple plot threads and antagonists. Firstly, Wood weaves into the novel multiple plot threads, advancing them – in particular, those that comprise the two climaxes – at different rates, having some culminate sooner than others. Secondly, she ties multiple antagonists to those plot threads, and some are presented as more obviously dangerous than others. Whenever Hardings is mentioned in the first half of the novel, Hardings is merely the orchestrator in the shadows. Conversely, Boncer and starvation are very immediate, direct threats, so once both are removed, the girls and (many) readers are lulled a false sense of security. Once Hardings finally arrives in the form of Perry, it’s been half a book since Teddy revealed that Hardings wasn’t coming and the girls’ and the novel focuses entirely on the immediate threats of starvation and Boncer (to whom primary antagonist-ship was assumed to have passed). The girls forget they were captured *for* Hardings, and with false smiles and concealed daggers, not at gunpoint, and don’t think to suspect Perry. Verla only realises his complicity, that the girls aren’t yet safe, and that the main, original threat to them is not rotting inside the house as Wood’s subtle hints (i.e. Yolanda’s departure, Perry “slipping into the house” (p. 306), “too much strength, too expertly, too fast” and “You poor girls” (p. 307)) build up.

## Protagonists

Wood tells *The Natural Way of Things* primarily through the alternating perspectives of Verla and Yolanda, her two protagonists. However, they aren’t given equal prominence, with Verla serving as the primary protagonist and Yolanda the deuteragonist. The novel is written primarily from a third

person limited perspective, but the tense varies according to the chapter's perspective character. While Verla's chapters are present tense ("In a patch of sunlight Verla sits on a wooden folding chair and waits" (p. 7)), giving them as much immediacy and intensity as can be achieved with a third person perspective, Yolanda's chapters are past tense ("She got out of the bed and felt gritty boards beneath her feet" (p. 3)), giving them a more removed feel<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, Verla is the focus of the climaxes in the third and fifth acts. In the third act, her decision to kill herself rather than let Boncer rape her brings about the climax of the survival plot thread, with Boncer's paranoia accidentally realising the goal of her plan for the death caps. In the fifth act, her realisation that they're still in danger and the resolution of her internal struggle with hope and despair brings the captured-for-Hardings plot thread to its climax as she demands to be let off the bus. Conversely, while Yolanda's development as a hunter eliminates the threat of starvation, those subplots reach their resolutions by the beginning of the fifth act. Although she briefly urges Verla to leave with her and it's her voice that sways the outcome of Verla's internal struggle, the narrative tension is focused primarily on Verla's choices, and Yolanda doesn't take any actions beyond those mentioned above with the intention to directly interact with or affect the outcome of either climax.

## Character Arcs

In parallel with the survival and captured-for-Hardings plot threads, Verla and Yolanda both have personal subplots tied to their internal conflicts and character development. Verla's focuses on her hope and despair and how she will escape the compound, while Yolanda's focuses on whether she is strong enough to survive, her transformation into a hunter, and walking away from society.

### Verla

At the beginning of the novel, Verla thinks to herself that when Andrew discovers "his staff's treachery" and her capture, he will arrange for her to be "released" from the compound (p. 57), demonstrating naïve confidence in his love for her. By the end of the first act, Verla has realised that "she will not be released", "[t]here are no petitions, no Facebook protest groups, no legal challenges, no private negotiations" (p. 93), and tells herself that Andrew has been duped and doesn't realise what's happened to her. Her rationalisation demonstrates that she's in denial and giving Andrew the benefit of the doubt, and that her hope of escape has begun to fade. Turning the page, Wood introduces Verla's white horse. Her thought that "[i]t will come" for her (p. 95) suggests that her hope of being rescued has been transferred from Andrew to her white horse, which for Verla is the incarnation of such hope.

After the power fails, while out with Yolanda, Verla finds her first mushroom and, despite and because of Yolanda's warning that "[i]t might be poisonous (p. 180), she begins testing them. Her willingness to play "[r]ussian roulette" with the mushrooms (p. 181) indicates her growing despair and suggests a small degree of desperation. At this stage, she still ascribes to the mushrooms – the death cap in particular – her ambition and hope for Boncer's poisoning. Consequently, they represent her desire to escape.

At the beginning of part three, *Winter*, Verla's ambition to poison Boncer is reiterated when she adds mushrooms to their rabbit stew for the first time, intending to acclimatise Boncer to them. Unfortunately, Boncer sees through this, asking "[h]ow stupid do you think I am?" (p. 241). When she does find the death cap, Verla is elated, describing herself as "in love" with it as "[a] pleat of blue [opens] up in the clouds" (p. 249), symbolising her reinvigorated hope and ambition. However, this doesn't last, as she "has not seen [her horse] in weeks" and wonders where it is (p. 258). Although she's beginning to worry and doubt, she hasn't yet succumbed to despair, still believing her horse "will carry her out to her rightful life . . . to Andrew" (p. 258). That is, until she finds its "submerged, decomposing ribcage" (p. 281).

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction is also symbolic of how by the end of the novel Yolanda has left society and her old self behind, and could be seen to be looking back on her old self and her old life, while Verla doesn't necessarily have the same mindset and her survival after the end of the novel is less certain than Yolanda's.

Realising that Andrew won't rescue her and never loved her, her hope of survival has now (literally) died, and she decides that suicide by death cap is preferable to being raped by Boncer. But this path is "snatched" away (p. 284) when Boncer – who, fittingly, embodies the girls' lack of free will – eats the death cap. Verla's hope is restored as she thinks, "[a]t last", Boncer will die, but she immediately asks "[w]ill he, though?" (p. 285). This marks the beginning of a rollercoaster of hope and despair for Verla. Boncer's apparent good health causes Verla to despair, feeling she has failed and that "[e]xistence ha[d] never been less tolerable", until Izzy says "[h]e's vomiting" (p. 289). When the power returns, the girls seize freedom within the compound, but when Perry comes and takes them away, Verla realises that the worst is yet to come.

As she prepares to eat the death cap again to escape through death, she thinks of Yolanda, who she has noted is stronger than her numerous times (pp. 13, 94, 153, 193). When "Yolanda speaks back" and Verla hears "the fresh, living rhythm of a beating heart" (p. 310), she draws on Yolanda's strength, thinks "I refuse" (p. 311), and gets off the bus. That thought encapsulates not only her refusal to remain captive, but her refusal to be ruled by despair and escape through death, even if her fate is uncertain, resolving her internal conflict between hope and despair regarding how she will escape.

## Yolanda

At the beginning of the novel, Verla notes that Yolanda "is stronger than [her]" (p. 12), referring to the latter's physical grip yet foreshadowing how Yolanda's character development will focus on her defiance and adaptation to survive. However, it's also established at the close of the first act that while the other girls were "tricked" when they were taken, Yolanda "knew those arseholes wanted [her] gone", and "fought" (p. 91), demonstrating that she's already the most defiant and psychologically the strongest of the girls.

When Yolanda is sent to the storeroom to "[g]o get more food" (p. 87), she analyses what remains available to them, beginning the avoiding-starvation subplot. Yolanda being chosen for this sets up her relation to their food supplies and foreshadows her resolution of this problem. On a later trip to the storeroom (where she notes they're running out of food), she discovers a "large unopened box" of medical supplies (p. 119), realising that Boncer, Teddy and Nancy are unwilling to take even the smallest effort to keep the girls healthy. Her decision to "shit outdoors" because it was "less revolting . . . than that slimy dark [ablutions block] with its filthy blocked drains and its stench" (p. 127) signifies her lessening regard for civilised norms that no longer make sense in their current situation, and foreshadows her rejection of society.

In her last point-of-view chapter before the power fails, Yolanda realises where they can find rabbit traps to ensure they don't starve, but Boncer doesn't let her retrieve them alone. When Boncer tries to force himself on her, she warns Boncer she "will fucking kill [him]" if he comes near her (p. 143), finds the traps, and summons the strength and confidence to tell Boncer to "fuck off now" (p. 145). As such, the traps symbolise her strength and defiance, while her sitting for hours "gouging and drilling out the rust" that coats them (p. 149) demonstrates her determination to become a hunter. Her capturing of rabbits, working out "how to force a slit in the back legs with the knife" to carry them back (p. 162), getting the skinning right "[by] the last of the seven rabbits" (p. 168), and figuring out how to properly cure the rabbit skins (thanks to Hetty) mark her progress towards that goal, demonstrating that she is growing stronger and adapting. Her changing feelings and behaviour towards the rabbits, saying "[s]orry" and "[t]hank you" (p. 179) and looking at their faces when she collects their corpses, indicate her growing respect and affinity for the rabbits and the natural world.

Near the close of part two, *Autumn*, Yolanda discovers a rabbit trying to give birth, and tries to carry it to warmth and safety at the compound. It gives birth in her tunic, and she describes the kittens as "her own live born" (pp. 210-211), and herself as an "animal now . . . a creature moving as she should, held to the earth with purpose" (p. 211), signifying her relationship with nature is becoming closer than hunter-prey, that she is aligning herself with nature. But when she arrives and they "do not squirm" or "wriggle" (p. 217), having already died, signifying, Verla notes that "the ordinary girl Yolanda" is dead and "will never return" (p. 219).

Any remaining desire to return to civilisation and her old life soon follow suit when people fly over in a hot air balloon and mistake her waving for help as greetings. “[T]hat other world that had come so close, spinning away” (p. 240) symbolises that society has abandoned them. When she and Verla encounter a kangaroo snared by a rabbit trap, her suggestion that it would be “[k]inder” to hit it on the head” (p. 262) implies that she’s fully accepted the harshness of reality. Her behaviour throughout the remainder of the novel – hunting alone, avoiding the house, indifference to the other girls’ snickering – suggest that she no longer has use for the society and people that reject her, and this culminates in her avoiding the bus and escaping the compound alone, literally leaving society behind.

## Conclusion

To summarise, of the two protagonists, Verla is the focus of both climaxes and therefore the primary protagonist, making Yolanda the deuteragonist. Verla’s character arc focuses on her hope and despair and how she will escape the compound, while Yolanda’s focuses on whether she is strong enough to survive, her transformation into a hunter, and walking away from society. Their plot threads intersect such that *The Natural Way of Things*, in my opinion, follows a five-act structure, with climaxes occurring in the third and fifth acts.

## References

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