Task for *The Natural Way of Things*

Binary Oppositions

Binary oppositions are paired words or concepts that are completely opposite in meaning to each other. A group of theorists called the Structuralists thought that in Western culture we make sense of reality by imposing on it a framework of these opposites. For example, in popular culture thriller books or films, the main characters could be constructed within this simple set of binary oppositions:

Good guy	Bad guy
brave white heroic light virtuous	cowardly non-white villainous dark evil

The interesting thing is that although the terms in the two columns are opposites there is no reason to group all the terms in one of the columns together. For example, there is no particular reason to think that a white character should have all of the other qualities also listed in the 'good guy' column. However, by habitually thinking in this binary way we finally create a sort of cultural 'common sense'.

This sort of binary thinking obviously operates in the field of gender representation. In a traditional fairy tale like, for example, *Rapunzel* the main characters have these (and more) opposing qualities:

Prince	Rapunzel
handsome active mobile assertive tenacious	beautiful passive immobile non-assertive supportive

Obviously in a novel about gender relations, Charlotte Wood would be careful not to create male and female characters in such a binary way.

Allocate to pairs of students a character in the novel and ask them to show how the representation of that character undermines a simple male/female set of binary oppositions. Use the table below to apply to the characters assigned. Note that more terms have been added to this table, including the very important opposition of "culture" and "nature". Traditionally "culture" has been associated with patriarchal society and "nature" with the feminine. Does Charlotte Wood challenge this binary?

Male characters	Female characters
handsome active mobile assertive tenacious brave heroic aggressive rational achieving **Associated with "culture"**	beautiful passive immobile non-assertive supportive nurturing soft placatory emotional cheerful **Associated with "nature"**