

Ecocriticism and Animal Studies: The Position of Fauna in Environmental Narrations

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ABSTRACT

This paper will closely consider the point of intersection between ecocriticism and animal studies in relation to the representation and function of fauna within environmental narratives. We throw light on the theories that have been proposed in this direction, together with the discussion of various works of literature. We consider how portrayals of animals in literature shape our knowledge about environmental problems and inform our relationship with the natural world. The research underlines the importance of the incorporation of animal standpoints in ecocritical examination and debates in view of consequences for ecological awareness and nature preservation.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Narrations, natural world, Fauna, Animal Studies.

Introduction

In the last couple of decades, ecocriticism and animal studies have gained much attention as a trend that has evolved from a rising concern with the environment and the welfare of animals. The interest points to an increased societal sensitivity to environmental destruction and to the ethical aspects of human-animal relationships. Ecocriticism is a branch of learning that deals with the complex interaction between literature and the physical environment, as Glotfelty and Fromm have claimed. Ecocriticism goes beyond the study of nature in literature and into how literature can shape and reveal values, ideologies, and issues pertaining to the environment. Ecocriticism does engage with how the literary text shapes our understanding of the natural world and how these may or may not facilitate environmental consciousness and activism. On the other hand, animal studies take a closer look at the complex network of interactions between human and animal life, often taking critical attention to these relations from an anthropocentric axis. Waldau defines the field as one that "deals with the ways in which animals figure in human culture and the ways in which those representations then inform real-world treatment and

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perceptions of animals." The field interrogates the ethical dimensions of human mastery over animals; it questions moral justifications for practices in factory farming, animal testing, and habitat destruction. Animal studies focuses on revising anthropocentric worldviews and calls for more humane and ecologically sustainable relations with nonhuman species by examining the ways in which animals feature in literature, art, and media. The confluence of ecocriticism and animal studies is providing a particularly distinctive and powerful analytic frame. This interdisciplinary approach creates a deeper sensitivity toward the nuanced sense of environmental narratives, not only with respect to the ecological context in which they operate but also with respect to the role played by animals within such a narrative. In this perspective, literature does not just reflect the human experience but works as a medium through which voices and experiences of the non-human may find their way into the human circle. The intersectional perspective moves away from human-centered views and invites the reader and scholar into the connectedness of life forms and the moral consequences of our interaction with the natural world. It is at the intersection of ecocriticism and animal studies that scholars can better understand how literature might influence and reflect societal attitudes towards the environment and animals. This combined approach therefore highlights the recognition of agency in non-human species for a more inclusive ecologically responsible worldview. By doing so, it contributes to a greater cultural shift towards environmental awareness and respect for all life forms' intrinsic values.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism

Indeed, ecocriticism as a branch of literary criticism began to find its feet during the 1990s with pioneering work by scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. These scholars spearheaded the incorporation of ecological perspectives into the study of literature, presenting new ways in which texts might be critically addressed to foreground environmental themes.

In her seminal anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, which she published in 1996 and co-edited with Harold Fromm, Cheryll Glotfelty defines the term as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Glotfelty makes a conscious effort to point out that ecocriticism tries to broaden the scope of the scholarship practiced in literary studies by bringing the environmental contexts of all literary works into critical consideration. She urges scholars to explore exactly how literature represents nature

and how those various representations affect the way people perceive the natural world around them.

Further work by Harold Fromm reinforces ecocriticism as a profoundly interdisciplinary field; he emphasizes the need to relate scholarship in literary studies to ecology and cultural studies, suggesting that literature can and must play a significant role in changing cultural perceptions about the natural environment. Fromm's work motivated a return to the literary canons with the aim of finding writings that deal with environmental interest, and called for research into how literature can express and create ecological awareness. "

Lawrence Buell, another key figure in ecocriticism, took these ideas further in his seminal book *The Environmental Imagination* as far back as 1995. Buell popularized the idea of the "environmental imagination." This is an articulation of perceptions whereby literature and other cultural forms shape perception about nature and environmental concerns. He argued that literature forms, rather than simply reflects, our perception about the natural world, and that the environmental imagination bears strongly on how a society perceives and responds to ecological dilemmas.

Buell's scholarship underlined consideration of how literature can contribute to environmental awareness and activism. He probed that there might be, in a literary text, an ecological consciousness which can enable the reader to critically reflect upon his or her relationship with the environment and encourage him or her towards meaningful action due to ecological crises. In the process, his exploration underlined the power of the environmental imagination in reshaping environmental ethics and public discourse.

Furthermore, Buell's own concept of "toxic discourse," in his later work *Writing for an Endangered World*, investigated means through which literature depicts environmental degradation, pollution, and destruction to human or nonhuman life at the hands of industrialization. An inquiry into toxic discourse showed Buell how literary portraits of environmental harm instigate urgency and mobilize environmental activism-which would, thus, illustrate the ethical dimensions of ecocriticism.

Besides these grounding contributions, ecocriticism has continued to work out a wide range of methodologies and subfields, including but not limited to ecofeminism, animal studies, and postcolonial ecocriticism. For example, a primary concern of ecofeminism is the structural relationship between environmental degradation and the oppression of women, specifically

how patriarchal structures propagate ecological and social injustices. Another offspring is animal studies, which researches the representations of animals in literature and ethical consideration of human-animal relationships. In its turn, postcolonial ecocriticism discusses the critique of environmental consequences of colonialism and globalization by underlining the necessity of decolonizing environmental thought.

These eclectic approaches follow in ecocriticism from the field's commitment to address the complex and multi-facet nature of environmental problems. It is the continuous interrogation of the ways in which literature engages with ecological themes that places ecocriticism in opposition to traditional literary paradigms and primarily in advocacy of a more ecologically inclusive and sensitive critical scholarship.

Animal Studies

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opposition to traditional literary paradigms and primarily in advocacy of a more ecologically inclusive and sensitive critical scholarship.

Intersection of Ecocriticism and Animal Studies

Meanwhile, ecocriticism and animal studies combined in what Oppermann calls "animal-centric ecocriticism." This is important because it means a critical turn from traditional environmental narratives that have been predominantly anthropocentric-centered on human experiences and concerns. By changing this focus onto the subjectivity and agency of animals, animal-centric ecocriticism tries to develop a more holistic view in respect to ecosystems and interspecies relations.

While the anthropocentric traditional approach tends to depict animals in environmental discourse as passively being a resource or symbols for demonstrating human values and emotions, the perspective does tend to naturally constrain the dimensions of environmental narratives and denies any intrinsic value and experiences to non-human beings. Animal-centric ecocriticism rebels against this paradigm by demanding to consider animals as agents within an ecosystem who have their active presence, points of view, needs, and contributions.

As Oppermann explained, "acknowledging animal subjectivity as sentient life implies a cognizance of animals as aatar, as being capable of experiencing their lifeworlds both in continuity with and differently from human modes of experience". It thus offers new perspectives on reading texts where the animals are not just some sort of backdrop or metaphor but an important figure even with their own stories to tell. Animal-centric ecocriticism deploys animal agency within environmental discourse to foster a rethinking of the operation of ecosystems, underlining interconnectedness at the heart of any notion of species.

The approach also fosters ecological sensitivity regarding the web-like linkages present within ecosystems. By incorporating the experiences and agencies of animals, environmental narratives can more precisely frame the dynamic and mutually interacting nature of the natural world. This move also keeps step with more general ecological positions-including the centrality of biodiversity and a view that all forms of species life play a role in fostering the health and stability of ecosystems.

Such ecocriticism focused on animals has, in turn, pointed to new texts that deconstruct the old narratives of the dominating culture and offer more inclusive and empathetic representations

of animals. Animals' perspectives on environmental change are a common feature of such texts, which enlarge the reader's comprehension of ecological crises. While in this way they fight the anthropocentric bias that has traditionally characterised environmental literature, they also appeal for a more considerate weighting of life in general.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach, grounded in literary analysis, to explore how contemporary literature addresses the impact of climate change on the animal kingdom. The methodology involves a combination of close reading and theoretical analysis, aiming to uncover the nuanced ways in which literature reflects and critiques the ecological challenges posed by climate change.

Selection of Texts

The selection of literary texts is guided by specific criteria to ensure a comprehensive analysis:

- **Inclusion of Animal Perspectives or Characters:** The primary criterion for text selection is the presence of animal perspectives or significant animal characters within the narrative. This focus allows for an exploration of how literature anthropomorphizes or portrays animals in the context of climate change, reflecting on their agency, subjectivity, and experiences. Texts where animals play a central role in the narrative—either as symbolic representations or as key players in the storyline—are prioritized.
- **Environmental Themes or Issues:** The selected texts must engage with environmental themes, particularly those related to climate change. This includes narratives that address the consequences of global warming, habitat destruction, species displacement, and other ecological concerns. The emphasis is on works that do not merely mention the environment but deeply integrate environmental issues into the fabric of the story, reflecting the complexities of climate change.
- **Representation of Geographical and Cultural Contexts:** To provide a diverse and holistic view, the texts chosen for analysis represent a range of geographical and cultural contexts. This criterion ensures that the paper covers a wide array of perspectives, acknowledging that climate change impacts different regions and cultures in varied ways. By including literature from different parts of the world, the analysis highlights the global nature of climate change and its universal implications for the animal kingdom.

Comparative Analysis

To further enrich the study, a comparative analysis is conducted across the selected texts. This involves comparing how different authors and genres approach the theme of climate change and its impact on animals. The comparative analysis allows for the identification of common patterns, as well as unique approaches, in the portrayal of environmental issues. By examining these similarities and differences, the paper sheds light on the broader literary trends and movements that are emerging in response to the global ecological crisis.

Impact on Environmental Consciousness

Portrayals of animals in environmental narratives have the potential to profoundly shape readers' environmental consciousness, influencing how they conceive and act upon the natural world. As Garrard says, such representations might well challenge entrenched anthropocentric worldviews in which the needs and desires of humans are commonly put above those of other species. In that sense, shifting to an ecocentric view, in which life, in all its manifestations, is intrinsically worthy, literature can promote a closer relationship between the reader and the natural world.

The *Lives of Animals* novella was published by J.M. Coetzee in 1999; Coetzee chose animals as a means to fathom some seriously abusive behaviors and practices against their own kind. The story takes the form of a series of lectures given by the protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, who questions the ethical implications of making use of animals for food, experimentation, and other forms of exploitation. Coetzee uses the character of Costello to enunciate a moral argument that challenges readers to reconsider their attitudes toward animals. In this novella, the contentious examination of the commodification of animals brings up a spiritual question for the readers: the moral relationship between humans and the natural world. Coetzee takes away from this equation the top-down structure of human life as being of most importance and instead inserts a cry for a more compassionate and decent way of approach to our relationship with other species. This narrative strategy at once raises awareness about animal rights and invites readers to assume an ecocentric worldview.

Another significant example of how imagination about the reader-environment relationship can be refigured through animal imagery is Gary Snyder's poetry collection *Turtle Island* (1974). Snyder's environmental discourses are very richly entwined with animal imagery combined with an indigenous angle of perception. It, therefore, creates a poetic world that strongly

underlines the interdependence among all forms of life. In his poems, animals are usually not portrayed as remote or extraterrestrial creatures but are integral parts in a shared ecosystem. He invites the readers to hold the view that a human being belongs to a complex web of life, where survival and well-being of all species are interdependent.

One of the hallmarks of Snyder's work is his anallagmatic approach, underlining the interdependence and interconnectedness of everything that lives. Unlike more dominant Western approaches, this one denies the binary distinctions between human and animal and suggests, instead, that all life forms are part of a continuous, interrelated whole. For instance, "The Dead by the Side of the Road" records Snyder's meditation on roadkill, reflecting on what human activity does to wildlife. Instead of merely listing the animals as victims, Snyder uses their deaths as a poignant reminder of the price paid by modernity and the ecological awareness that needs to be brought about. Blurring the line between human and non-human experiences, Snyder urges one toward holistic thinking on environmental issues, to make them consider the broader implications of natural-world actions.

Indeed, Snyder's use of animal imagery is strongly related to the exploration of Indigenous worldviews, since most of them emphasize great respect for nature and the recognition of people as part of the natural order. In *Turtle Island*, Snyder informs these perspectives in offering a vision of ecological harmony in which human beings live in balance with the environment rather than dominating it. This environmentalism, which is inspired by the native inhabitants, resounds throughout the volume and stands as a model for readers that is imbued with respect for all life forms.

Works like *The Lives of Animals* by Coetzee and Snyder's *Turtle Island* wield literature as an effective tool in challenging dominant narratives on human superiority and instil an ecocentric worldview that is far more inclusive. These texts raise awareness of the ethical implications of human actions in view of animals and the natural environment but also allow the readers to develop the will to reimagine their place within nature. Such stories invite the readers into a vision of a more caring and responsible attitude toward environmental care, taking into consideration the value of all forms of life intrinsically.

Enhancing Ecocritical Analyses with Animal Studies

Animal studies integrated into ecocritical analysis open up new pathways toward an understanding and framing of environmental narratives. A concept such as this replaces a vision

which was decidedly anthropocentric with one that treats the agency and subjectivity of animals as always relegated to a subsidiary position in environmental thought. Val Plumwood (2002) calls for a paradigm shift toward one in which animals are treated not just as passive subjects but also as active agents within ecosystems. This necessary recognition provides a much-needed nuance in the power relations operating within these systems and allows deeper understandings of how such hierarchies—so very often dominated by the human-centric view—can be deconstructed.

Plumwood's emphasis on animal agency disrupts this conventional narrative with people at the top of the ecological hierarchy. By bringing animals to the forefront of environmental discourse, ecocritical analysis is enriched, paving the way toward a more equitable consideration for all species. Such practice, apart from challenging the usual binaries between human/animal and culture/nature, urges the readers and scholars alike to contemplate the interconnectivity of all life forms and the consequences implied in both literature and environmental ethics.

In this vein, such an integration within an ecocritical framework of animal studies is well represented by Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001). This multilayered, elaborately intertwined narration of human and animal histories in extreme conditions has dissolved the species boundary between Pi Patel and Richard Parker—the Bengal tiger—into a survival story and one of interdependence, questioning the rigidity of species distinction.

In *Life of Pi*, Martel puts the reader in a position whereby he must evaluate the tiger's perspective as equal to that of the human protagonist. Richard Parker is not a background against which Pi struggles for survival; rather, he is the axis around which the story revolves, its directions changing with his actions and being. By giving the tiger's actions and responses—fragmentary, furtive, partial—Martel insinuates a form of animal agency analogous to human experience. The tiger's presence puts Pi, and in turn the reader, in a position of realization of interspecies dependence and the vulnerability shared between them against environmental adversity.

This enables Martel to explore the themes of survival, interdependence, and the fluidity of species boundaries. Through this novel, the reader is called to revise such a simplistic view of animals as either "others" or merely symbols in their life intrinsic and complex values and agency. In this regard, *Life of Pi* does more than simply enhance the reader's knowledge of the

natural environment; it fulfils Plum wood's request for an inclusive environmental discourse that recognizes the subjectivities of the animal.

It is in the integration of animal studies into the insights of ecocriticism that works such as *Life of Pi* contribute to a greater ecological awareness than is permitted by the ideologies of human exceptionalism, obliging readers to confront an interconnectedness of life and a need to show respect for the agency of animals in environmental fictions. This shift of perspective is itself one that will help derive a more holistic and ethical perspective from literature to environmental stewardship, with greater understanding of the complexities of life on Earth.

Conclusion

Where ecocriticism and animal studies intersect, new avenues with which to explore the role of animals in environmental narratives are opened, allowing a re-evaluation of how fauna is valued in the greater scheme of ecological discourse. It is important because it manages to reevaluate traditional anthropocentric worldviews, which throughout history have placed man at the center of environmental concerns-usually at the expense of nonhuman life. By incorporating animal perspectives, writers and scholars challenge such dominant narratives through the empowerment of readers by acknowledging and relating to feelings from other-than-human beings, thus cultivating an ecologically deeper and more holistic view of environmental issues. In literature, depictions of animals are not merely representations of the natural world but also serve as one of the most powerful influences regarding how readers think about environmental consciousness and ethics. The agency and subjectivity of the animals' portrayal often free them from their conventional position of passivity within the environment to active participants in the action. For example, it can make a fundamental difference in the reader's way of considering the natural world; it urges one to consider animals not as resources or symbols but as living beings in their own right. It is such portrayals that can evoke a deeper sense of empathy and responsibility toward the environment, hence leading to more ethical and sustainable behaviors.

Furthermore, embeddedness of animal perspectives in environmental narratives can also serve as a critique of human dominance and exploitation of nature. Through the elaboration of animals as complex, sentient beings, literature may provide a form of resistance to the exploitative means with which human beings have practiced, which also have brought on environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity. This manner of approach does not only

address ethical implications of human beings' actions but also advances the righteousness of respect between humans and other life.

The tendency of this interdisciplinary approach to continue evolving, especially with digital media and interactive narratives, is immense. These technologies offer new ways in which the bridge between human and animal perspectives might be filled, allowing immersive experiences that would bring the readers much closer to the realities of nonhuman life. For example, virtual reality and augmented reality can place the user within an animal's experience of the world, creating empathy and knowledge in a way that more conventional media cannot. Perhaps interactive narratives, in which users make decisions from the perspective of an animal, will further disrupt anthropocentric worldviews and promote an expanded environmental ethic.

The role played by animal narratives in shaping public policies and conservation efforts is another very rich field of investigation in the future. While literature remains a medium for influencing public opinion and cultural values, representations of animals in environmental contexts do hold the capacity to impact policymaking and conservationist strategies considerably. Understandably, how such narratives shape public attitudes toward conservation may provide important insights into crafting more effective and inclusive environmental policies. This aspect of the intersection of ecocriticism and animal studies has yet to be fully explored but indeed holds great potential for practical applications in environmental stewardship.

As environmental challenges grow increasingly complex, it is now more important than ever that a combination of the fields of animal studies and ecocritical analysis work together to foster an even more inclusive and effective approach toward environmental stewardship. It should be an integration that does not violate the agency and subjectivity of non-human animals, but rather creates a relation with nature that is sustainable and just. The next steps involve respect for the intrinsic value of all beings and foster an appreciation for the interdependence of living things toward an environmental ethic characterized by valuing and protecting the diversity of life on Earth.

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