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Healing the Land, Healing the Future: A Transformative Ecocritical Study of “A Worm to the Wise”

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Abstract

In this paper, we will look at the intimate relationship between healing the earth and healing ourselves through an ecocritical approach. The paper sheds light on how the soil reclamation process evolves into a potent symbol of reconnecting human emotions, values, and relationships in a world devastated by climate through the story A Worm to the Wise by Marissa Lingen. The narration reveals that it is not only a scientific challenge but also a personal and emotional experience of a person to restore the Earth. The story revolves around Augusta, who is a young journalist and starts off at a soil reclamation farm, at first necessity. But with time spent attending to the land, she gradually learns to feel more responsible, purposeful and part of nature. The broken land she works on is symbolic of the greater evil that humans have caused to the Earth, and her increasing commitment points to the fact that people can be a part of the solution. Just as Augusta gets to know how to cherish the soil, she also reinvents her place in a climate-changed world. This transformation makes the story important in terms of ecology and the way it contributes to the healing of man, particularly during crisis. The article states that inner healing and environmental restoration go hand in hand. It highlights the ecological accountability that contributes to reconstructing inner strength and community values through the metaphor of soil reclamation.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; soil reclamation; environmental healing; human–nature interconnection; ecological accountability; climate crisis; sustainability; narrative and ecological consciousness.

Introduction

Climate crisis has come to be one of the largest issues of our times since it impacts both the ecosystems and communities and the planet in general. In the era of loss and change of environment, literature has been a very strong instrument that is utilized to perceive and react

to these problems. Humanization of climate knowledge through literary texts is one of the ways that make the reader develop an emotional connection to nature, be aware of the consequences of human activities, and be morally responsible to the environment.

The sub-theme of this paper, Healing the Land, Healing the Future: A Transformative Ecocritical Study of *A Worm to the Wise* is concerned with spreading ecological awareness and ethical practices through literature. The story illuminates the fact that the relationship between humans and nature is very fragile with the help of symbols, images and such themes as worm, land, soil, etc., which is used throughout the story. The narrative describes how the tiniest life has its necessary job to play in the ecosystem balancing.

In this study, the story is evaluated with an ecocritical approach since it examines the ecological degradation, healing of the environment, and human accountability. The purpose of the study is to demonstrate that the story is not only an awareness-raising tool, but also one that inspires the readers to engage in sustainable and responsible ethical behaviors, as it is an expression of how literature can transform attitudes toward land and future.

The study explores the following research questions:

1. In what manner does *A Worm to the Wise* depict the nexus between humans and the natural environment, and what narrative means are used by it to underscore environmental degradation and the necessity to heal it?
2. In what way does the story advance environmental values and moral accountability, particularly through the role of nature in imparting its environmental message?
3. What does the story imply about the importance of land healing as a condition for healing the future?

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze *A Worm to the Wise* through the lens of eco criticism in terms of its representations of nature, environmental breakdown, and ecological restoration.
2. To examine how the narrative develops ethical responsibility for the environment and puts forth ecological awareness.
3. To explore the broader role that literature plays in promoting issue of sustainability and environmental awareness.

Literature Review

Eco criticism, or green criticism is an interdisciplinary method of literary criticism which is interested in the relationship between literature and nature. Some of the ecological crises that have greatly endangered life on earth include climate change, environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity; literature scholars consider the impact of texts on human beings and how these texts can be utilized in creating awareness about these ecological issues. The author of this paper will review some of the most salient ecocritical theories and important research by scholars on environmental literature, ecological ethics and environmental healing and environmental sustainability topics. This research also determines the research gap and the story "A Worm to the Wise" is vindicated in terms of an ecocritical perspective.

Theoretical Foundations of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism was originally a term used by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology" (1978). According to him, ecocriticism is a combination of Greek words *oikos* meaning the house, and *kritikos* meaning the judge. Later in 1990s, ecocriticism became a formalized and defined critical movement in the study of literature by Cheryle Glotfelty. Glotfelty described ecocriticism as the idea of studying the connection between literature and the physical world with an emphasis on ethical accountability of literary criticism during a time of ecological crisis. This

approach challenges the anthropocentric values by advancing a mindset that integrates different opinions that acknowledge the interconnectedness of human beings with the other natural world beyond human beings.

One of the theorists of ecocriticism has been regarded as Lawrence Buell. In his book *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), he identifies ecocriticism as the study of the interaction between environment and literature in a spirit of following environmentalist praxis. Buell believes that literature can create ecological awareness and needs to be studied to identify how it relates to environmental realities. The analysis of texts working with themes of ecological consciousness and healing has a solid background in his theoretical approach. Following the initial work by Buell, Painark (2025) explores how characters in modern fiction go through the processes of depriving egocentric selves by becoming ecologically involved, and eventually, emerge as ecocentric selves whose behaviors protect the natural environment. The analysis of healing narratives is directly informed by this framework of transformation: that of an uninvolved observer into an engaged participant.

Literary ecology was a term created by Joseph Meeker in his book *The Comedy of Survival* (1974; reprinted 1997) to refer to the investigation of natural, ecological and environmental themes in literature, in this instance to examine human history and ecological balance through literature. Meeker (1997) makes the point that comedy, as a literary mode, provides paradigms of adaptive survival that is unavailable to tragedy, an argument that is quite familiar to narratives of healing and not necessarily apocalyptic.

The author Greg Garrard, in his article, gives an overview of ecocriticism and outlines the major disciplinary areas such as wilderness, pollution, animals, apocalypse and sustainability. Garrard has made a significant contribution since it demonstrates how ecocriticism has evolved beyond the classic nature writing to encompass the current environmental issues around the world. Theoretical contributions made by him can be utilized specifically to interpret texts that respond to the environmental crisis and speculate on other possible ecological futures.

Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature

Ecocriticism is the application of ecological theory to literature with an aim of understanding the relationship between literature and environmental degradation, in simple terms this is a reading of the stories to understand why we are involved with environmental destruction. Scholars disagree on the vital roles of literature and the ways it builds and fosters ecological consciousness, because literature emphasizes the consequences of the abuse of environment by humans. Terry Gifford (in his posts pastoral and eco-poetry) is concerned with the ability of poetry to trigger an ecological consciousness and a moral communication with nature. According to Gifford (2014), poetic language can help this by allowing the reader to experience nature and be more aware of the ecology as poetic language makes the readers experience nature more slowly and emotionally.

The concept of environmental justice introduced by Joni Adamson advances the ecocritical analysis to a new level. She implies that it is impossible to create a boundary that separates ecological issues and cultural, social and ethical ones, particularly in the case of marginalized communities. This approach broadens ecocriticism by relating the issue of environmental degradation with the issue of responsibility and justice.

Further, according to the theory of material ecocriticism formulated by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, nature is an actor and can actually participate in meaning-making as compared to acting as a metaphor. According to Iovino and Oppermann (2014), material ecocriticism is concerned with how the physical world (soil, water, non-human bodies, etc.) is involved in the construction and co-construction of narratives. This theoretical orientation

applies especially to soil-based narratives like *A Worm to the Wise*. In a more recent dissertation, Tinajero (2023) suggests that soil remediation is a practice that should be conceptualized as an artistic, creative, and collaborative practice that opens up sensory experience with soil as dynamic and alive, beyond romantic ideas of restoring lost fertile soil to mutual transformation between human and more-than-human actors.

Place-selfhood has been a subject of a very well-developed relationship in ecocritical work. In her book *Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*, Donelle N. Dreese (2002) argues that landscape plays a central role in the formation of community and holistic well-being, and explores how authors who have been displaced reclaim a sense of home identity through mythic, psychic, or environmental means. The idea of reterritorialization of people as proposed by Dreese is the process of people reconnecting to place after having been alienated in certain ways, and thus it is the core of the psychological healing of the environmental story.

Following the approaches of environmental studies and environmental history, Gina Caison (2024) follows soil erosion as a material reality and a narrative form of the American literature, showing that the anxieties of land degradation expose the anxieties of disappearance based on settler colonialism, and also analyzes how Indigenous texts undermine colonial narratives by describing the material stakes of soil loss to their own communities. An interdisciplinary approach offered by Caison offers a framework to understand soil as both material and symbolic.

Healing, Sustainability, and Future-Oriented Ecological Narratives

The current focus of recent ecocritical literature has evolved from merely critiquing current ecological condition to finding ways to produce positive relationships with nature through literature that is based on healing, sustainability and hope. Though most works found within environmental literature derive their material from crisis, many scholars believe that there is an equally important need for the creation of a positive ecological ethic through narratives of healing and renewal. This will provide readers with a framework to understand their own actions as contributing to the healing of nature and therefore to creating a sustainable future for the world rather than only feeling sorrow over what has been lost.

The recent body of scholarly work about climate fiction and environmental education expands on this transformative orientation. For example, Bayes and Abbasi (2025) provide an examination of some contemporary Australian cli-fi narratives that challenge anthropocentric and patriarchal logics while promoting relational, justice-oriented approaches to climate issues. Additionally, through a posthumanist and ecofeminist analysis, they demonstrate how creating texts about characters in relational entanglements with climate, culture, and place can enrich the educational experience of climate change by fostering critical, ethical, and imaginative connections. Chiara Xausa (2025) contributes to feminist discourse surrounding the master narrative of the Anthropocene, as presented in her book *Intersectional Futures in Climate Fiction*, and analyzes how speculative fiction written by women and Indigenous authors creates transformative "world-making" possibilities that oppose colonizing epistemologies of dominance over nature. Distinguishing between world-building (associated with colonization) and world-making (providing transformative portals to futurity) is a concept that illustrates that healing narratives do not only provide warnings of dystopia, but also showcase human agency in collaborative recovery efforts.

In addition, Ecocriticism has an international and post-colonial perspective and is no longer concentrated in the West itself. Researchers Rangarajan and Selvamony stress the importance of both non-Western and indigenous histories; they illustrate that local wisdom can provide models for sustainable ecology and can be a challenge to Western hegemony as represented in literature.

Research Gap

Although ecocriticism has been used to analyze both major literary works and Environmental literature at length, less significant works like "A Worm to the Wise" have not received much of a scholarly study so there is an apparent absence of effort in terms of examining the theme of ecological healing and how it may contribute to a sustainable future despite the overall disaster of environmental degradation and ecological crises which the majority of researchers have discussed in rather pessimistic or apocalyptic manner. While there are already strong literacies in place for the analysis of place-based identity formation as well as material ecologies as well as transformative climate narratives, much still needs to be done to explore these issues. First, although the area of soil is acknowledged in the field of American Environmental Literary Studies (see Caison, 2024), there is still a lack of scholarly studies that explore the connection between soil reclamation, personal healing, and community values within contemporary climate fiction. Second, existing literature about the theme of transformation in climate fiction has largely focused on Novels; this makes "A Worm to the Wise," which utilizes the compressed form of short fiction, an excellent opportunity to explore how this compressed/short form achieves ecocentric transformations. Finally, there are very few studies that attempt to explore how literary texts can motivate readers to act more responsibly towards the environment through optimistic and healing stories. This disjunction sheds light on why the present article investigates the ecocritical approach applied to "A Worm to the Wise", and the development of an ecocentric perspective on the restoration of the environment and the promotion of ecological ethics for the future. The investigation will examine how the story depicts the process of "learning to appreciate the soil" as both an ecological practice and as a means of psychological transformation, with the aim of extending the present discourse concerning climate fiction's potential to envision solutions for both crises and responses, and for both injuries and repair.

Research Methodology

This study implements a qualitative research approach which is founded on textual analysis. The paper is dedicated to the analysis of the story *A Worm to the Wise* in the Ecocritical approach, which deals with the interactions of literature and the natural world. Since the research is interpretative in nature, there is no numerical data or experiments.

The main source of this study is the story *A Worm to the Wise*, which is under close analysis to find the ecological themes, symbols, imagery, and ethical issues connected to the healing of the environment. The secondary sources are scholarly articles, reference works, websites, and critical essays regarding the ecocriticism and environmental literature. These references offer theoretical background and aid in the understanding of the text. Themes, including degradation, healing, responsibility and sustainability are analyzed in a thematic approach and are connected with ecocritical theory.

Analysis and Discussion

This paper critically examines *A Worm to the Wise* using an ecocritical approach to determine how the text discusses environmental degradation, ecological healing and human responsibility. The novel shows how man and nature have a weak bond. In the story by Marissa Lingen, the ecological awareness, ethical responsibility, and interdependence are foreshadowed in character

of Augusta, whose thoughts and actions in the novel represent the general human tendencies of neglect, realization, and moral awakening.

First, Augusta is an anthropocentric mentality. Her lack of concern about nature, especially the worm and the land, reflects the way that humans in the modern world tend to ignore tiny non-human creatures. The worm is also used as an effective allegory of ecological interdependency, highlighting the fact that even the tiniest creatures are very crucial in ensuring the ecological equilibrium.

The level of consciousness of the narrator, Augusta, increases as the story unfolds, indicating the change in her attitude towards indifference and ecological consciousness. The term to the wise implies that consciousness and moral insight are necessary to the healing of the environment, which supports the ecocritical perception of literature as a moral guide but not as a source of information.

The land is depicted as frail yet open to re-energizing, which supports the notion that the harm on the environment could be mitigated by responsible and sustainable actions. Ecocritically, in material terms, the land is dynamic and reactive, and indicates the aftermath of human activities. This is in line with the ecological consciousness as conceptualized by Terry Gifford where nature is portrayed as dynamic and purposeful as opposed to a silent and inanimate setting.

Moreover, the story presents ecological healing as an ethical responsibility to the next generation, which is consistent with the idea of Joni Adamson that the problems related to the environment cannot be discussed outside of ethical and social issues. Instead of providing direct solutions, the story challenges readers to get into self-reflection on how they relate to the natural world.

By altering Augusta and bringing in the symbolic use of the worm and the land, *A Worm to the Wise* breaks the anthropocentric assumptions and creates empathy towards the ecology. The narrative highlights how renewing the environment is necessary to achieve a sustainable future and how literature can motivate people to be conscious and act responsibly.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, the study shows that *A Worm to the Wise* is an important tool in creating environmental awareness given its discussion of issues of environmental degradation, repair, and human responsibility. Viewed through an ecocritical approach, the story focuses on the interrelatedness of man and nature, and land is presented as something vulnerable and renewable. The symbols of soil and worm emphasize the role of small things in ensuring the ecological balance.

The opinions of authors like Buell, Gifford, Adamson and Iovino explain how literature can be used as a guide towards ethical and environmental awareness. The book urges readers, especially the young individuals, to think critically on how they relate to nature and embrace sustainable practices.

On the whole, this discussion confirms that less known texts such as *A Worm to the Wise* contribute to the ecocritical discussion. These narratives move the field beyond the apocalyptic and show how literature can be actively used to form environmental thinking and practice by focusing on ecological healing, ethical consciousness, and hope.

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