

BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S PRODIGAL SUMMER: A STUDY IN ECOFICTION

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Abstract

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* is a strong exemplar of ecofiction, a literary genre that prioritizes ecological concerns and the interconnectedness of human and environmental life. In the Appalachian Mountains, the novel crosses three disparate narratives—those of a wildlife biologist, a young widow turned farmer, and two elderly neighbors—to probe questions of biodiversity, ecological equilibrium, sustainable farming, and human stewardship of the environment. Kingsolver's ecocentric fiction, which is full of scientific data and sensory description, subverts anthropocentric philosophies and promotes peaceful coexistence with nature. In her characters' individual transformations, she depicts nature not as a backdrop but as an engaged, generative force necessary to human survival. *Prodigal Summer* thus makes a valuable contribution to the genre of ecofiction, encouraging environmental sensitivity and precipitating a greater awareness of the interrelatedness of all living things.

Keywords: Ecofiction, Environmental literature, Biodiversity, Ecological balance, Sustainable agriculture, Interconnectedness, Regeneration, Conservation Ethics.

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) is a pioneering novel of postmodern eco-fiction, a form that blends environmental issues with literary narrative. It is a novel set in the southern Appalachians that tells the story of three interconnected narratives, which investigate the interdependence of human existence and nature. Kingsolver, an educated biologist and dedicated environmentalist, employs the novel as much to engage the reader as to promote

ecological sensitivity, biodiversity, and the importance of living in harmony with nature.

Since the beginning of human imagination, nature has been the integral component of literature. As a literary movement, eco-criticism examines the interactive nexus between literature and nature, laying stress on the intrinsic connection between human stories and nature. Such a movement has gained momentum, especially in American literature, as it tends to reflect profound association with nature. One such prominent figure in this category is Barbara Kingsolver, whose nature sensitivity is reflected in her works. Born and brought up on a Kentucky farm in a socially conscious and educated environment, Kingsolver has developed an intrinsic respect for nature that is reflected in her writing.

This paper explores Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer* from an ecological perspective. Rich in themes of nature and biological precision, the novel offers a strong picture of the symbiotic connection between humans and their natural environments. Kingsolver states that humans are not superior or distinct from nature but embedded in its very complex web. Using interconnected stories, the novel describes the importance of maintaining a respectful and sustainable relationship with the land.

Located in rural Appalachian country, on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina, the novel uses three intertwined narrative strands called "Predators," "Moth Love," and "Old Chestnut." Every tale is carefully linked to nature and echoes the characters' changing relationships with the environment.

The primary predator of the vanishing shell fish was the musk rat, which had over multiplied to plague the riverbanks during the past half century. What had maintained muskrats in balance, traditionally was the mink (now largely coats) the river otter (also almost extinct), and certainly the red wolf. There was no knowing how the return of the big hungry dog could contribute to restoring balance, even after two centuries of absence. (65)

In "Predators," we encounter Deanna Wolfe, a lone forest ranger and biologist residing in the Zebulon Mountains. Transcendent from the paraphernalia of modern materialism, Deanna spends her days defending the diversity of her environment. She is most troubled by the well-being of coyotes, a species judged and hunted by regional farmers. Coyotes, as a "keystone species," have an essential function to perform in ecological balance. Deanna is aware that eradicating such predators will upset the food chain and bring catastrophic results. Her ideological conflict with Eddie Bondo, who is also a coyote hunter, creates the thematic tension that highlights conflicting opinions on human presence in nature. Literary critic Mary Ellen Snodgrass well points out this dichotomy in her book, *Barbara Kingsolver: A Literary Companion*, explaining the tension between Eddie's hostility towards predators and Deanna's respect for ecological balance.

The second narrative, "Moth Love," presents Lusa Maluf Landowski, a scholarly entomologist whose origins are in war-torn Palestine and Poland. Widowed a short time after marrying Cole Widener, a local farmer, Lusa comes into possession of his farm and at first finds it difficult to adjust to country life. But her scientific knowledge of insects and ecosystems slowly creates a connection with the land. Lusa's love for nature is deep and profound, imagining the Zebulon Valley as a sentient and reliable friend. Her refusal to grow tobacco, a plant notorious for its evil uses, shows her dedication to environmental ethics and public health. Though viewed as an outsider by her in-laws, Lusa assumes her position as a steward of the earth, representing the curative power of nature and a woman's capacity to establish identity through ecological integration.

The third story, "Old Chestnut," is about the opposing philosophies of Garnett Walker and neighboring Nannie Rawley. Garnett, a retired educator, is set on bringing back the American chestnut tree, which was decimated nearly to extinction by a fungus blight. He uses chemical pesticides in his attempts, oblivious to the larger environmental cost. Nannie, on the other hand, is a staunch believer in organic agriculture and environmental responsibility. Their arguments over pest control techniques are part of a broader discussion regarding contemporary agricultural practices and their implications. Through Nannie, Kingsolver reveals the health risks of chemical use, pointing out how such chemicals impact human life as well as ecological equilibrium. Ellen, Garnett's wife, and Rachel, Nannie's daughter, both experience health problems potentially caused by pesticide exposure, further emphasizing Kingsolver's criticism of industrial agriculture.

Kingsolver employs each story to express an overarching eco-critical theme: the inarguable interconnectedness of all life. Deanna's defense of coyotes, Lusa's growing connection with the earth, and Nannie's promotion of organic living all work toward this vision. The novel's final chapter, related from the viewpoint of a coyote, powerfully reinforces the theme that all life forms belong to a larger ecological fabric. This is similar to Aldo Leopold's philosophy in *A Sand County Almanac*, that ethical behavior is that which maintains the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community."

Kingsolver demands a transition away from the exploitative and mechanistic conception of nature toward one based on respect and interconnectedness. She rejects the idea that humans are the superior species and instead says we are but one component in a huge web of ecology. With *Prodigal Summer*, she challenges readers to rethink their role in nature and to accept the imperative for sustainable living. Overlooking these realities, as Rachel Carson cautions in "A Fable for Tomorrow," may take us to a world of silence beyond nature's music—a spring without birdsong.

In *Predators*, Deanna Wolfe, a lone biologist and forest ranger, dedicates herself to defending coyotes, a much-maligned and frequently hunted species by local farmers. Her ecological wisdom discloses the importance of predators in sustaining ecosystem equilibrium. Coyotes, as a keystone species, control the population levels of prey animals, thus maintaining the health of vegetation and larger ecological webs. Deanna disallowing the killing of predators challenges prevailing anthropocentric ideologies. As she says, "to kill a natural predator is a sin" (Kingsolver, 323), summing up the ethical drive of the novel.

The philosophical conflict between Deanna and Eddie Bondo, a bounty hunter who wants to kill coyotes, represents the greater conflict between utilitarian and ecological perspectives. As critic Mary Ellen Snodgrass points out, "The hunter hates coyotes as passionately as his lover, biologist and forest ranger Deanna Wolfe, loves balance in nature and the role of all creatures in ecology" (Snodgrass, 53). Kingsolver's portrayal of this connection captures the necessity of communication between opposing ideologies in terms of the natural world.

The story known as *Moth Love* presents Lusa, an entomologist and urban-raised widow who inherits a farm from her husband. Initially alienated from rural existence, Lusa comes to form an intimate emotional and ethical connection with the earth. Her intellectual foundation in insect ecology allows her to see the intricacy of farm ecosystems. In contrast to her in-laws, who find her strange for enjoying moths and honeybees, Lusa believes that "the life of one species is connected to that of another," an idea based on ecological science.

Lusa's refusal to cultivate tobacco—a crop infamous for its health risks—reminds us further of her ecological integrity. Her transformation from stranger to fully accepted land steward is mirrored by her ultimate acceptance of her husband's name, Widener, as a symbol of her connection to the Zebulon Valley. With this, she establishes a feminist ecological identity that identifies her with the land, transcending society's traditional roles.

In conclusion, *Prodigal Summer* is a literary wake-up call that reminds us all of our duty to take care of and conserve the planet. Kingsolver's novel is an affirmation of the potential for fiction to shape ecological consciousness, and it calls us all to adopt a more balanced way of relating to the planet.

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