



NARRATIVES OF WILDERNESS AND SURVIVAL: AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO PETER HELLER'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the complex human-nature bond that is portrayed in Heller's novels. It focuses on the depiction of wilderness in Heller's novels, not just as a setting, but as a character that can shape human survival, identity and spirituality. The study's themes of environmental degradation, rewilding and ethical obligations in human-nature relations are highlighted within an ecocritical perspective. The writer suggests that by combining the stories of wilderness and survival with his own, Heller is asking us to think of our place in the ecosystem anew. The novels enter the world of environmental ethics and the lived reality of ecological upheaval, and go beyond the adventure novel to stimulate a deep spiritual and moral examination. This ecocritical perspective shows how literature can help create greater empathy for natural worlds and how greater responsible human behaviours to the natural environment can be inspired. Overall, the book places Peter Heller's novels in the context of current ecocriticism, highlighting its potential to convey complicated conversations between people and nature in fiction. In this context, these stories speak into the heart of anthropocentric thoughts and offer the hope of a new vision of living in harmony, resisting and respecting nature, in a time of environmental predicament.

KEYWORDS : Ecocriticism, Resilience, Wilderness, Survival, Civilization

INTRODUCTION

The Dog Stars (2012) and The River (2019) are Peter Heller's novels, which are major works of 21st century environmental literature that blend adventure and survival with introspection on ecology and environment. Heller's writing is observational, and has been honed by years spent in the wild landscapes for which he has been an adventure journalist, with Outside and Men's Journal and National Geographic Adventure. His depictions of environments are both faithful and evocative, which places his work on a continuum with the best of North American nature writing, but also with current literary movements like post-apocalyptic fiction, climate fiction and eco-thrillers.

The Anthropocene era of climate change and biodiversity crisis has placed the question of human survival in changing environments on a new agenda, as it is now more pressing than ever for the years that are usually called the Great Acceleration. Ecocriticism, a discipline that focuses on the relationship between literature and the natural world, offers an approach to understanding the ways in which Heller's fiction resists anthropocentric perspectives and investigates interdependent processes between humans and nonhuman systems. It also opens the way for consideration of how narrative art can contribute to ecological ethics and to a broader environmental awareness.

The Dog Stars envisions a Colorado that is gradually reclaiming itself from humans after the human population is wiped out by a pandemic. An abandoned airport is the setting for the novel, which follows Hig, a small-plane pilot who lives with his dog Jasper and suspicious neighbour Bangley, as he learns how to survive not just physically but morally, in what is an examination of a powerful, indifferent, but important nonhuman world he must negotiate.

In contrast, The River is set in the present-day, largely unspoiled wilderness of northern Canada, but under growing threat. College friends Jack and Wynn set out on a canoe trip down the Maskwa River, with the threat of wildfire, violent strangers and erratic storms threatening the moments of beauty and companionship. This novel's focus moves from adaptation, which was dominant in the post-collapse era, to pre-collapse vigilance, highlighting the need to protect in the face of potential irreversible loss.

This article examines the blending of wilderness and survival

in the works of The Dog Stars and The River using the lens of an ecocritical perspective to offer deeper ecological and philosophical understandings. It aims to address how literature can be a powerful tool for exploring environmental themes and concerns through a critical analysis of Heller's narrative techniques, character portrayal and thematic themes. The article demonstrates the power of fiction to elicit sympathy for nature and to stimulate thinking about ecological accountability in the face of the continuing degradation of the environment.

Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene

Cheryll Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, and argues against anthropocentrism, which is the more common human-centred set of worldviews that treat nonhuman entities as resources for, or background to, humans. According to Lawrence Buell, environmental writing must be double-bounded, both by environmental accuracy and imaginative possibilities (Environmental Imagination 7), which means the best writing will touch readers' hearts and minds.

As popularised by Paul Crutzen, the Anthropocene is the era of the Earth in which human influence is as great as geology in driving the Earth's systems. In fact, says Dipesh Chakrabarty, this recognition blurs the boundaries between natural history and human history (Chakrabarty 206). The impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation are not a distant or slow-moving issue, but are part of our lived experience.

Human-Nature Relationships: From Domination to Coexistence

One of the main themes in the field of ecocritical studies is the transformation from an idea of nature being something to conquer to the understanding of nature as a partner in the life processes. There is a push for a mastery of nature narrative, which can be exploited for relationships with nature (Val Plumwood, 2002). She advocates, however, an ethic of mutuality and respect - one that is clearly reflected in the characters of Heller's protagonists. Heller's characters, in contrast to the typical survival story heroes who conquer the wilderness, seem to survive precisely because they mimic their surroundings' rhythms in their behaviours. The Dog Stars, for instance, is about Hig's keen knowledge of the seasonal

rythms of fishing and hunting, and in *The River*, Wynn and Jack show an understanding of the skills of paddling and sensitivity to riverine ecosystems.

Ecological Ethics

Together, ecocriticism and Anthropocene scholarship gives a powerful framework to read the novels of Heller as calls for ecological ethics. The concept of ecology ethics was expressed by Aldo Leopold with his land ethic (Leopold 1949), which brings the scope of moral concern to encompass soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. The principle of ecological interdependence is found in the stories Heller tells, and the stories show how one must recognise and appreciate interdependence in order to survive.

The Dog Stars and *The River* are part of this imagined realm, one that calls into question anthropocentric notions like those of Earth, and imparts imaginative latitude in thinking about the role of humans in planetary processes. It enriches the literary analysis and emphasizes on the pressing cultural work fiction can contribute to the crisis of environment.

Wilderness as Character in *The Dog Stars*

The Colorado of *The Dog Stars* is a character in the story, rather than a setting. The voice of Hig interacts with the weather, the light and the time of year, giving us as reader a sense that it is a character in its own right, rather than a setting factor, and as such we feel the changing weather, and we get a sense of what is scarce, what is abundant, what is dangerous, what is safe. The grass was higher than I'd ever seen, bending under seedheads (Heller 45) suggests ecological recovery without human involvement a process Monbiot describes as rewilding ecological processes (Feral 28). In the area here nature plays the role of sanctuary/hazard, Buell remarks, the environmental double bind (Buell 286). Hig likes to fish in a clear stream and the long grass also conceals steps that may be taken by an aggressor. The land is beautiful in all of its ways, reminding him that he is a child of God.

In nonhuman life, there is isolation, which accentuates Hig's ecological self (Heller 81) and accentuates feelings of loneliness at the same time. His friendship with his dog Jasper is a friendship between two species that benefits Hig's morale, and introduces new layers of complexity to the survivalist logic, especially when the safety of his dog is as much at stake as his own.

The background of the outdoor reportage writer comes across in Heller's writing, which is a prose catalogue of the birds, like the way the wind feels as it passes through your fingers, or the way the weather fronts come in on a visual plane, like the way the geometry of their flight feels. The specificity which Buell speaks of as required condition for environmental writing (Future 63) to make place palpably real as if to bring the nonhuman to the fore.

Survival Narratives and Ecological Ethics in *The Dog Stars*

Hig's survival code is Leopold's land ethic (Leopold 204) which is take what you need, leave what you can, and maintain the integrity of the community of life. Others can fish a stream indiscriminately while Hig will not overfish a stream, but will let a spawning run pass by. In the economy of scarcity take only what you can use, leave the rest (Heller 97) is a subversive moral rule.

Ecological literacy is also very important to survival, as Heller demonstrates. Hig reads the wind's direction to forecast the weather, observes small changes in bird sounds to alert for predators or intrusion, and records the seasonal changes and edibility of plants. The skills are similar to Berkes' description of local, adaptive, and sustainable (Sacred Ecology 56) traditional ecological knowledge.

However, tactical skills aren't the only thing Hig must add to his life. The geese and the aurora don't come in handy, but they provide his purpose; Buell's environmental sublime (Buell 145). These moments bring us through to the reality of connection and to relationship it's more about surviving than it's about eating and/or drinking ammunition in case of a crisis.

The River as a Metaphor for Flow and Fragility

The narrative of *The River* is centered on the watercourse of the Maskwa and is constantly referred to as a metaphor. Richard White's metaphor of *The River* as an organic machine (White 58) is relevant, as it is both a machine of nature and a machine that transports provisions, animals, and humans, but is also influenced by climate, topography, and people. Calm, smooth bends welcome both of the main characters, Jack and Wynn, into a peaceful moment but the tides and the wind quickly overturn the ease.

The opening of the novel sets a rhythm to the paddling and the watching: the paddling and the watching are the rhythms; the only disquiet is the wildfire smoke on the horizon. This juxtaposition represents the tension and the change typical of the Anthropocene wilderness life. But the fluidity of *The River* is also used as a device in the book, marking the way from camaraderie to danger, as Jack and Wynn are physically pushed into both wild beauty and human danger by the river.

They show a high degree of respect for leave no trace principles, whereas some other travellers they meet show no respect. As the novel's symbol of vulnerability, the passing of smoke from distant wildfires functions as a slow-moving and irresistible emblem of impending disaster, in line with Nixon's definition of slow violence (Nixon 2). There's no getting away from the impact, despite its source being hundreds of miles away, but environmental disruptions know no borders.

Healing, Grief, and Wilderness in *The River*

The genre of *The River* is external conflict, but it is also an internal journey of healing and of reckoning. Jack's background in losing his brother gives him a somewhat elusive attitude toward life, one that is sometimes pessimistic and even fatalistic. Wynn's optimism is grounded in his assured sense of biophilia (Wilson), the love of life and change in the ecosystem that he is attuned to. Together, they read *The River* in a different way - Jack his eyes searching out dangers, Wynn noting the glint of fish under the canoe.

Moments of being in nature provide relief from fear and grief, the lifting of the morning mist, a moose grazing among the trees along the shoreline or the layered song of unseen birds. The episodes are used to illustrate Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia, the emotional pain resulting from the changes in the natural world that can be offset by a close interaction with a still viable landscape, for a period at least.

The theme around which the rest of the story is organized - warn or help the camp downriver that might be in danger - mirrors dilemmas in the field of environmental ethics concerning when and how to intervene in delicate systems. Jack and Wynn's choice to act, despite the risks, affirms a stewardship ethic based on responsibility, not just self-preservation. Heller sees acts of violence towards other people and towards a threatened ecosystem as part and parcel of the definition of survival.

Exploration of *The Dog Stars* and *The River*

When two of these novels are connecting, a thematic thread emerges in Heller's writing. *The Dog Stars* is a story of nature's post collapse regeneration, with the role of human beings as adaptive integration. Nature is untouched, but also threatened with harm, in *The River*, and the role of the humans is to prevent and care for that nature.

In either, there is a need for ecological literacy, restraint and moral choice. Human and non-human agencies play out one another in each of the environments in which Hig, Bangley, Jack, and Wynn must contend. However, the tone is different; *The Dog Stars* is elegiac, tinged with loss and the quiet hope for a better future, *The River* is urgent, an appeal not to let conditions that make post-collapsed worlds possibly come to pass.

These narratives constitute two extremes of Anthropocene fiction stories, both dealing with living after ecological disaster and both attempting to prevent it, from an ecocritical standpoint. Heller takes both poles of this continuum and creates a new narrative of survival, one that goes beyond reacting to a catastrophe to taking a proactive approach to the environment.

Challenging Anthropocentrism in Heller's Fiction

In both novels, Heller's emphasis on nonhuman agency serves as a means of subverting the notion of human agency. In both novels, the nonhuman agents are foregrounded in order to undermine the idea of human agency. Weather cycles, animal migrations and the growth of plants dictate the pace of Hig's life as much as any human interactions in *The Dog Stars*. In *The River*, the currents and winds, storm systems and even the slow infiltration by wildfire smoke influence events along with human actions

Heller's account of the wilderness landscape as neither the benign background nor just a hostile landscape, but a dynamic and complex community with its own imperatives is a reply to the romantic, human-serving conceptions of environment that Timothy Morton represents by ecology without nature (Morton 15). The presence of the dog Jasper, which brings his instincts and companionship to affect Hig's survival, and the Maskwa River, whose ebb and flow and obstacles direct Jack and Wynn's pace and decisions, are evidence of Jane Bennett's idea of vibrant matter.

These are all distinct from anthropocentric elements as they are cast as actors instead of props and thereby the idea of survival is remediated as a negotiation with forces not brought under the control of humans. Resisting Anthropocene in his fiction is not about taking control of nature, but about coexisting with it, living alongside it, accommodating it and respecting its independence.

CONCLUSION

The Dog Stars and *The River* are two parallel, but related, stories of life in a world of extreme ecological pressures, wilderness as an actor in the story, and wilderness as a builder of its own life. The natural world in both novels is an ecological presence; a presence that effects human destiny; a presence that demands a consideration of moral responsibility actions; a presence that is a refuge and danger. Against this background of the adventure-model story of survival, survival in which mastery is the end goal, Heller's story of survival floats, and his books frame it as an adaptive and relational process with a humility, attentiveness and ethical responsibility to the non-human world. By restructuring this way, he inspires a biocentric point of view that stands in contradiction with anthropocentric thoughts and shows the dependence of the human and ecological systems. His characters are not those of the conquerors of nature, but the actors of nature and those who must deal with the fears of the Anthropocene - and the vulnerabilities, losses, and renewals. In addition, they refer to the concept of environmental grief, as well as the concept of environmental strength and moral responsibility - implying that moral responsibility is a prerequisite to survival. The stories' focus is on an identity formed in relation to, and influenced by the land and memory and meaning they share, making them a part of the conversation of ecocriticism. Through this, Heller's fiction

explores the ways in which humans manipulate and use nature and a philosophy of ecological consciousness, caring and living with others, in this world, where the climate crisis is quickly getting more intense.

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