



Ecocriticism: A Critical Reading of *Max Porter's Grief is the Thing with Feathers*

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Literature in Terms of Environment

Ecocriticism is all about the following:

The relationship between literature and the physical environment.

Synthesizing literary criticism with the natural sciences, and literary studies with the environmental philosophies.

Cheryll Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) explains:

Ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii)
"ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii) "attempting to see literature inside the context of an ecological vision" (115)

William Rueckert not only coined the term 'ecocriticism/' but also anticipated the conceptual problem of bringing literature and ecology together.



The Question of Ecocriticism within Literary Texts

Its interdisciplinary nature allows for:

- 1) Providing a comprehensive examination of how literature engages with ecological themes and the human-nature relationship.
- 2) Reflecting and shaping human perceptions of nature.
- 3) Evoking emotional responses and fostering empathy towards the environment.
- 4) Advocating ecological balance, and envisions sustainable futures.
- 5) Challenging the conventional boundaries between nature and culture, encouraging a holistic view that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms.



The Multidisciplinary Approach of Ecocriticism

In contemporary literary studies, ecocriticism intersects with various theoretical frameworks, including postcolonialism, feminism, and critical race theory, to address the complexities of environmental justice. This multidisciplinary approach highlights how environmental issues disproportionately affect marginalized communities and emphasizes the need for inclusive and equitable solutions. By examining the intersection of literature, ecology, and social justice, ecocriticism contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions of environmental challenges.



Zoo Criticism: A Sub-theory of Ecocriticism

Zoo criticism is one of the fastest growing subfields within ecocritical literary studies. It is concerned with how the relationship between human beings and animals gets reflected in literature.

- René Descartes' existential perspective about animals.
- Carol Adams *Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) and the term “absent referent”
- Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010):

“Postcolonialism’s major theoretical concerns: otherness, racism and miscegenation, language, translation, the trope of cannibalism, voice and the problems of speaking of and for others – to name just a few – offer immediate entry points for a re-theorizing of the place of animals in relation to human societies” (135)



Human-Animal Relationship

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the concept of zoo critique emerged as an innovative critical framework within the field of ecocriticism. Its purpose is to confront and contest various forms of animal cruelty and the resulting suffering experienced by these creatures. The emergence of this new genre of critique may be attributed to a deep-seated apprehension over all forms of cruel acts directed against animals.

Huggan and Tiffin demonstrate that zoo criticism is an attack on the Enlightenment-era narratives that posited a superior civilized species in opposition to the more primitive and wild ones.

When Animals Speak (2019)

Eva Meijer States:

Non-human animals are individuals with their own perspectives on life, who form relations with human and non-human others. In current human legal and political systems, and in many cultural practices, they are seen and used as objects. Animal rights theorists have challenged this since the 1970s, arguing that non-human animals are sentient beings, who are similar to humans in morally relevant aspects and who should therefore be seen as part of our moral communities. (12)



(Anti) Speciesism

While speciesism refers to the pervasive bias against animals, anti-speciesism means rejecting the idea that one species is superior to another.

The field of animal studies intersects with postcolonial studies in terms of theoretical considerations such as "otherness, racism and miscegenation, language, translation," and "the trope of cannibalism." These intersections provide valuable foundations for reimagining the role of animals within the context of human society.

Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*

It is a novella about death, melancholy, grief, and consolation. It tells the story of a husband/Father and his two sons. They are bewildered by the sudden and unexpected loss of his\their wife\mother. During this intense anguish, a Crow shows up to take many roles, namely babysitter, protector, and a therapist. This wild and sensitive creature threatens to remain with the injured family until they are no longer in need of him. Months pass and the balm of memory soothes the ache of loss. The Crow's efforts bear fruit when the family members start to heal and move on.

Source of the Novella


- Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers" : The poem highlights the capacity of humanity to hold on to hope. Using an extended metaphor, the poem paints a picture of hope as a mystical bird that lives in each heart. The poem suggests that optimism is ve

That Love is all there is,
Is all we know of Love;
It is enough, the freight should be
Proportioned to the groove.—

Emily Dickinson

Literary Representation: Grief

There's a **feather** on my pillow.
Pillows are made of **feathers**, go to
sleep.
It's a big, **black feather**.
Come and sleep in my bed.
There's a **feather** on your pillow too.
Let's leave **the feathers** where they
are and sleep on the floor. (9)

"**Feathers** between my 
fingers, in my eyes, in
my mouth, beneath
me a **feathery**
hammock lifting me
up a foot above the
tiled floor." (11)

The Empowered Crow

**Crow knocks the door and announces:
I won't leave until you don't need me anymore."
(11)**

"One shiny jet-black eye as big as my face, blinking slowly, in a leathery wrinkled socket... I wished I wasn't lying terrified in a giant bird embrace in my hallway."

Put me down, [Dad said]
not until you say hello

Put. Me. Down, I croaked, and my piss warmed the cradle of his wing.

You're frightened. Just say hello.

Hello.

Say it properly.

Hello Crow, I said. Good to finally meet you. (11-12)

- Verbal Language
 - Reversal of power relation.
 - Multiplicity of Roles
 - Destereotyping
-
- Inevitably I have to defend my position.... I care, deeply. I find humans dull except in grief. There are very few in health, disaster, famine, atrocity, splendour or normality that interest me (interest ME!) but the motherless children do. Motherless children are pure crow. For a sentimental bird it is ripe, rich and delicious to raid such a nest

Crow: A Teacher and Mother

"He could learn a lot from me. That's why I'm here." (26)

There is a fascinating constant exchange between Crow's natural self and his civilized self, between the scavenger and the philosopher, the goddess of complete being and the black stain, between Crow and his birdness. It seems to me to be the self-same exchange between mourning and living, then and now. I could learn a lot from him. (27)

- I loved waiting, mid-afternoon, alone in their home, for them to come back from school. I acknowledge that I could have been accused of showing symptoms related to unfulfilled maternal fantasies, but I am a crow and we can do many things in the dark, even play at Mommy. I just pecked about, looking at this, looking at that. Lifting up the occasional sock or jigsaw piece. I used to do little squitty shits in places I knew he'd never clean. (62)

Anti-Descartian Crow

Every time I sit down and look at my notes Crow appears in my office. Sometimes slouched on the floor, resting on one wing ('Look! I'm the Venus of Corvino!'), sometimes patiently perched on my shoulder advising me ('Is that fair on Baskin, really?'). Most of the time he is happy to sit curled in the armchair quietly reading, wheezing. He flicks through picture books and poetry collections, tutting and sighing. He has no time for novels. He only picks up history books to label great men fuckwits or curse the church. He enjoys memoirs and was delighted to discover the book about a Scottish woman who adopted a rook. (31)

Conclusion: Deconstructing Slave-Owner

The realization that animals we enslave, the animals we turn into things, the animals who slave for us that we might eat some luxury from their bodies, are alive, are as possessive of their lives as you or I, this realization would throw a wrench into the system. If this realization were reached, people would have to change an aspect of their life style, and this is why many people resist thinking about it, resist questioning the system, and fail to know the obvious which greatly pleases the slave-owner, those who directly profit from the lives of animals and from our passive and active acceptance of slavery and oppression. For if individuals did question it, and refused to participate any longer, the system would collapse.