

# Exploring Ecological Harmony: A Leopoldian Analysis of Nature in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000)

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## Abstract

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000) is set in the Appalachian Mountains, and weaves the themes of human-animal relationships, biodiversity, ecological dynamics and ecological consciousness. This article explores Kingsolver's portrayal of nature in *Prodigal Summer* through the lens of Aldo Leopold's seminal work *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (1949), focusing in particular on Leopold's concepts of integrity, stability, and beauty of nature. Through this investigation, the article analyses how Kingsolver's characters navigate ecological integrity, and address environmental ethics and the conservation of the natural world. It uses literary analysis to demonstrate how the novel embodies Leopold's idea of a land ethic based on respect for the natural processes, the integrity of ecosystems, and the inherent beauty of the natural world. In the process, this paper uses the novel's depiction of ecological themes to frame modern environmental discussions for a better perspective on how humans connect to the environment.

## Keywords

Ecological harmony; integrity; stability; ecological consciousness; biodiversity.

*Prodigal Summer* (2000) by Barbara Kingsolver interweaves the story of human's relationship with nature, setting it in the Appalachian wilderness. This article looks at the way Kingsolver's depiction of the natural world dialogues with the ecological theories of Aldo Leopold. Specifically, it analyses how Leopold's ideas of integrity, stability, and the beauty of nature are portrayed in the novel and how these themes are expressed in the way characters relate to the natural world around them.

Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (1949) identifies three elements of a living organism that are essential for the proper function of the ecosystem. He states, "A

thing is right when it tends to preserve the *integrity*, *stability*, and *beauty* of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224-225, emphases added). How is it possible to conserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of nature and the biotic community? Ecologically conscious people can promote these values through education, leading by example to foster awareness. Barbara Kingsolver, in her diverse roles as a novelist, biologist, political activist, poet, and essayist serves as a living example of advocating ecological integrity, stability, and beauty of nature through her writings.

Ecological integrity denotes a state of being whole. The stability of nature can be attained by preserving its natural diversity. An ecosystem which

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has only one species in large numbers cannot have stability. Further, nature in itself is beautiful, reproductive, alive, and useful. Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* emphasizes its beauty, not merely as a background for the fiction but through the structure and progression of the whole novel. The three sections of the novel - Predators, Moth Love, and Old Chestnut Tree - signify the importance Kingsolver attributes to nature in her fictional universe. Coyotes, luna moths, and chestnut trees become the protagonists that drive the plot of the novel.

The question that we ask in this paper is the way Leopold's integrity-stability-beauty triad frames an understanding of nature and the biotic community in Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*. Aldo Leopold, an American ecologist, has authored several books, which include *Round River*, *The River of the Mother of God*, *Game Management*, *For the Health of the Land*, *Think like a Mountain*, *The Farmer as a Conservationist*, and *Water: Science and Society*. In his book *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold presents his belief that the integrity, stability, and beauty of an ecosystem are essential for the survival of nature. He argues that all parts of the ecosystem, from the smallest microorganisms to the largest animals are connected and dependent on one another for survival.

The idea of nature's interconnection first emerged in the mind of the German writer, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his famous work *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767). The translated version of the same book titled *Selected Prose Works* highlights that "In nature, everything is connected, everything is interwoven, everything changes with everything, everything merges from one into another." (399). Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Bloom echo this in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) by highlighting the sayings of Commoner,

We must remember Commoner's First Law of Ecology: 'Everything is connected to everything else.' The biosphere (or ecosphere) is the home that life has built for itself on the planet's outer surface. In that

ecosphere, there is a reciprocal interdependence of one life process upon another, and there is a mutual interconnected development of all of the earth's life systems. (112)

This emphasizes the complex web of relationships that exist between living and nonliving things such as air, water, soil and minerals, demonstrating the dynamic and comprehensive nature of ecological systems.

The novel *Prodigal Summer* (2000) written by Barbara Kingsolver, is a portrayal of the Southern Appalachian highlands. Kingsolver gives readers a fascinating look at ecological life and human-nature interconnectedness as she skillfully weaves the lives of her characters with the colourful natural environment around them. Kingsolver explores the themes of love, grief, renewal, and the delicate balance between people and the environment. *Prodigal Summer* narrates the interconnected story of three women in a rural town in Kentucky. The first story is about Deanna Wolf, a forest ranger who works for the US Forest Agency and has spent nearly 25 months in the Zebulon forest to research the Coyotes. The couple Lusa Landowski and Cole Widener are protagonists of the second narrative. Lusa, who marries Cole and moves to his family's tobacco farm, which is next to the national forest area where Deanna works, is an entomologist who had taught at the University of Kentucky. In the novel, Lusa attempts to save the family's farm after Cole dies. In the third narrative, Nannie Rawley cultivates organic apples and has frequent conflicts with her neighbour Garnett Walker, who tries to chemical weeds away in order to keep his farm clean. His primary concern is to cross-pollinate chestnut trees into an American chestnut tree.

Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* thereby foregrounds the three elements of Leopold's biotic community expressed in his *A Sand County Almanac*, through her characters. What is integrity? The Oxford Dictionary defines integrity as, "the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles" (Oxford 909). It also defines it as "the state of being whole and undivided" (Oxford 909).

The concept of ecological integrity is mainly the interdependence and interconnectedness of all living beings within an ecosystem. Commoner states in *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man & Technology* (1971): “Because the global ecosystem is a connected whole, in which nothing can be gained or lost and which is not subject to overall improvement, anything extracted from it by human effort must be replaced” (42).

In *Prodigal Summer*, Eddie, the hunter, doesn't agree with Deanna's ideas about saving the coyotes that, he claims, are a threat to humanity. Eddie considers the coyotes his enemies for they have killed the sheep. But Deanna insists on the importance of carnivores in the ecosystem. Peter Wenz in “Leopold's Novel: The Land Ethic in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*” (2003) states in this regard that “Killing carnivores removes predators of species, such as deer, that tend to overpopulate and harm ecosystems by over-eating the plant layer near the base of the pyramid” (108). He also says that “[r]eplacing native species with exotics - domesticated species or wild species from elsewhere - can also degrade ecosystem” (108). Wenz compares Leopold's concept of the eradication of wolves with the eradication of coyotes. If the hunting of coyotes is not regularized, then the number of rodents will increase and it will affect the ecosystem. Deanna conveys this to Eddie when she says, “If you shoot him, Eddie, that's what you have taken down. A big chunk of his mother's whole life chance at replacing herself. And you've let loose an extra thousand rodents on the world that he would have eaten. It's not just one life” (Kingsolver 320).

Deanna is also concerned about the extinction of the coyotes, and blames her own people for killing them. Kingsolver says, “The farmers she'd grown up among would sooner kill a coyote than learn to pronounce its name. It was a dread built into humans via centuries of fairy tales: give man the run of a place, and he will clear it of wolves and bears” (26). Deanna identifies that the extinction of coyotes could disrupt the integrity and balance of the biotic community and lead to harmful consequences for other species and the ecosystem as a whole.

Nannie, the protagonist of the second narrative, similarly cautions her neighbour Garnett Walker against spraying chemicals. Concerned about the ecosystem, she says,

When you spray a field with a broad-spectrum insecticide like Sevin, you kill the pest bugs and the predator bugs, bang. If the predators and prey are balanced out to start with, and they both get knocked back the same amount, then the pests that survive will increase after spraying, fast, because most of their enemies have just disappeared. And the predators will decrease because they have lost most of their food supply. So in the lag between sprayings, you end up boosting the numbers of the bugs you don't want and wiping out the ones you need. And every time you spray, it gets worse. (Kingsolver 275)

Peter Wenz highlights the way

Kingsolver updates Leopold by applying the biotic pyramid idea to organic farming. Nannie Rawley protects her crops from insects with Integrated Pest Management (IPM), cultivating pest predators instead of spraying insecticides (109).

Kingsolver insists on the idea of being whole that Aldo Leopold emphasizes in his land ethic as well. Deanna says, “I don't love animals as individuals, I guess that's the way to put it, ... I love them as whole species. I feel like they should have the right to persist in their own ways” (177). Kingsolver's concept of integrity in nature suggests valuing the entirety of the animal species rather than individual animals. It also denotes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements within the ecosystem. Loving animals as whole species implies recognizing and valuing the integrity of ecosystems, where each species contributes to the overall health and functioning of the environment.

Leopold's construct of stability is understood as an act of being balanced and stable.

Stability is possible when there is diversity. Nature's stability can be attained by supporting its diversity.

Kingsolver's protagonists demonstrate how to maintain the stability of ecosystems. All her characters are aware of the balance of the environment. Lusa for instance tells husband when he tries to remove the honeysuckle, "You're nature. We shit, we piss, we have babies, we make messes. The world will not end if you let the honeysuckle have the side of your barn" (Kingsolver 45). Nannie Rawley on the other hand is a certified organic apple cultivator. She is sincere and true to her passion of cultivating organic foods and a "sworn friend and protector of all creatures great and small, right down to the ticks, fleas, and corn maggots, evidently" (86). Nannie's passion for nature is evident when she:

declared war not only on the country's Two-Four-D but also on the Sevin dust and other insecticides Garnett was bound and obligated to put on his own seedling trees to keep them from being swallowed whole by the army of Japanese beetles camped out on Nannie Rawley's unsprayed pastures (86).

But her neighbour Garnett Walker proudly says, "Success without chemicals was impossible" (87).

Nannie is not only known for her organic cultivation but also for saving species from extinction. She tries all the possible ways to save salamanders, which become an endangered species. "She claimed there were ten or fifteen kinds of salamanders in Zebulon that were endangered species, and she was doing her part to save the environment" (Kingsolver 140). Her concern for salamanders comes through when she says that "anyone who went bass fishing with salamanders was an enemy of God's plan?" (141).

To insist on the concept of a completely balanced ecosystem, Nannie instructs Garnett Walker about the nature of herbivores. She says, "Predator bugs don't reproduce so fast, as a rule. But see, that works out right in nature because one predator eats a world of pest bugs in its life. The plant eaters have to go faster just to hold their ground. They're in balance with each other"

(Kingsolver 275). Predator bugs effectively manage the population of pest bugs despite their slower reproduction ability. This balance or stability ensures that neither the herbivores nor the predators dominate the ecosystem, maintaining harmony in nature.

The Leopoldian idea of beauty reflects in *Prodigal Summer* when Nannie Rawley insists that Garnett Walker look at and admire the beauty of nature. "Why does everything make you so mad? She asked finally. I only wish you could see the beauty in it" (Kingsolver 277). To this, Garnett asks "In what?" and Nannie replies, "This world! A field of plants and bugs working out a balance in their own way.... eating others and reproducing their own, that's true. Eating and reproducing, that's the most of what God's creation is all about" (Kingsolver 277).

For Deanna, when she is pregnant and is unable to sleep, the beauty of nature and the landscape engulfs her when she starts walking outside her cabin, and finds that "[t]he trees on the opposite side of the hollow were washed in the brilliant night. They glowed like a fairy forest or a hillside of white birches far from home. She breathed in slowly. This was what she had. The beauty of this awful night" (Kingsolver 299).

Lusa is very mindful about not harming the environment and so she preserves the beauty of nature by opposing the cultivation of tobacco. She also convinces the people around her about her interest in growing corn instead. Concerning the health of the humans as well as the environment Lusa says, "There's got to be something else I can make decent money on. The barn's got to have a new roof this year" (Kingsolver 108).

On seeing the fields dying because of insecticides, Lusa says, "Look at the beautiful creatures that die. It's like dropping a bomb on a city just to get rid of a couple of bad guys. See, that's what's great about my goats - I don't have to use any chemicals to grow them" (Kingsolver 299). Lusa also highlights the beauty of Garnett and Nannie's garden to Jewel by saying, "The kids might like to go over there; he's got a beautiful farm, he grows trees.

And there's an apple orchard right nearby, I saw" (Kingsolver 404).

Susan L. Fladerin, in *Thinking Like a Mountain: Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of an Ecological Attitude Toward Deer, Wolves, and Forests* (1994), comments on the explanations of Leopold's three dimensions of integrity, stability, and beauty of nature, when she says:

Yet he [Leopold] maintained a broad perspective on means and ends, grounded in the basic values of integrity, stability and beauty, a perspective that enabled his ideas to grow and change naturally during the course of his life, and in the process impart greater depth, breadth, and clarity to his philosophy (35).

Readers of Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* also confront their perspectives on nature while recollecting the words of the character Nannie. Nannie Rawley transforms the individual mind to be an integrated and ecologically friendly person. The narrator's reflections about Nannie are examples of one who aspires to have ecological harmony:

Nannie Rawley was proud to tell the world she'd been the first organic grower to be certified in Zebulon County, and she was still the loudest one . . . She was the sworn friend and protector of all creatures great

and small, right down to the ticks, fleas, and corn maggots, evidently (Kingsolver 86).

As Flader says, "These values, integrity (or coevolved diversity), stability, and beauty, were fundamental to Leopold's thinking from the beginning" (34). Both Leopold and Kingsolver lay their ecocritical foundations on these values. It is very important to understand the implications of Vandana Shiva's thoughts "We are part of nature, not her masters and owners" (21). Humans on earth are here to live with, and not to rule, other living beings. The primary purpose of each individual is to accomplish the words of Racheal Carson's dream that, "There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" (1).

In conclusion, Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* serves as an exploration of human-animal relationships, ecological balance, and the interconnectedness of all life in the Appalachian mountains. The novel emphasizes the significance of environmental awareness and the importance of harmonious relationships with the environment through the portrayal of its primary characters and the plot. To quote Vandana Shiva, "We need to recognize the rights of Mother Earth and therefore the intrinsic value of her species and living processes" (xx). Humans have to recognize the smallest details of nature and strive towards bringing ecological harmony.

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