

# Harmony of the Wild: Embracing Deep Ecology in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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## Abstract:

Barbara Kingsolver, a distinguished American novelist, essayist, and short story writer, is renowned for her literary exploration of themes such as social justice, biodiversity, and the intricate relationship between humanity and the surrounding ecosystems. One of her notable novels, *Prodigal Summer*, published in 2000, immerses readers in the tapestry of a small Appalachian town during a single, sultry summer. Through three interconnected stories of love, loss, and family, the novel unfolds against the lush wilderness of the Kentucky mountains. *Prodigal Summer* stands as a testament to Kingsolver's ability in intertwining the human experience with the intricate beauty of the natural world.

This paper aims to delve into the manifestations of deep ecology in the novel *Prodigal Summer*, specifically seeking to unravel the intricate connections between humans and the non-human entities. Notably, discussions within the story focus on the lives of coyotes, moths, and chestnuts, which serve as a medium that advocates for the preservation of these species. Through various narrative threads, the author emphasizes the need for interconnectedness of all living and nonliving elements. *Prodigal Summer* emerges as a literary work with profound ecological considerations, and hence proposes a deep ecological reading of the novel.

**Keywords:** Deep ecology, Ecological Consciousness, Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*

## Harmony of the Wild: Embracing Deep Ecology in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

Barbara Kingsolver, a contemporary American novelist and environmentalist, explores the intricate challenges faced by both the natural world and its inhabitants in her novel *Prodigal Summer*. The novel sheds light on pressing environmental issues such as climate change, animal and species extinction, and the loss of biodiversity. The novel is set in a small town in southern Appalachia during a single, humid summer. The three interwoven stories, titled "Predators," "Moth Love," and "Old Chestnuts," follow the journeys of Deanna Wolf, a forest ranger; Lusa, a newly-married and widowed young woman; and Nannie Rawley, an advocate for organic farming, respectively. Through these protagonists, Kingsolver presents a multifaceted exploration of the profound connections between humanity and the natural world.

Deep ecology, a concept developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, asserts the fundamental equality of all organisms. Within the framework of deep ecology, humans are considered to hold no greater intrinsic value than any other creature; rather, they share equal importance within the biotic community. Naess posits that, from an ecological perspective, the right of all forms of life to exist is a universal, unquantifiable right. No single species possesses a greater entitlement to live and thrive than any other.

This foundational principle underscores deep ecology's emphasis on a holistic and egalitarian view of the interconnectedness of all life forms within the broader web of the natural world.

In his remarkable book titled *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Arne Naess introduced a set of principles that might help people to integrate into their own personal philosophy of life. Following are the eight principles propagated by Arne Naess as the 'Deep Ecology Platform':

1. The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy *vital* needs.
4. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
6. Significant change of life conditions for the better requires change in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating *life quality* (dwelling in situations of intrinsic value) rather than adhering to a high standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the forgoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes (29).

Deep ecology fundamentally adopts a bio-centric and eco-centric perspective, challenging the notion of humans as the center of the universe. The unwanted popularity of anthropocentrism paved the way for the emergence of deep ecology as a significant theory. This framework works to diminish the perceived importance of humans by highlighting the intrinsic value of nature and the environment. Kingsolver's eco-novel *Prodigal Summer*, invites a deep ecological interpretation of the narrative. The characters within the novel can be broadly classified into two categories: those who are ego-centric, prioritizing human interests over the environment, and those who are eco-centric. Among the central characters—Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Landowski, and Nannie Rawley—their deep ecological perspectives shine through as they passionately advocate for an ecosystem where non-human entities coexist harmoniously.

Deanna Wolfe, the forest range officer of the Zebulon National Forest maintains a deep-rooted relationship with the forest where she lives. Through her dedicated efforts in wildlife preservation, she unequivocally advocates for environmental protection. During her two-year tenure, the forest has experienced a remarkable restoration, evolving into an intact ecosystem under her stewardship. Her thesis on coyotes also denotes her interest in protecting the wild animals, especially the coyotes which are on the verge of extinction.

Encountering Eddie Bondo, the hunter, in the forest unsettles Deanna, as she suspects his arrival is driven by a desire to hunt coyotes. Eddie, embodying a patriarchal figure, serves as a symbol of humanity's pursuit of sexual and material gratification. Despite their ideological differences, Deanna and Eddie find themselves sharing a few days in Deanna's forest cabin. This unexpected connection underscores the inescapable interdependence that binds all living things.

Deanna's compassionate concern for non-human creatures enriches the novel's deep ecological undertones. In a moment of hunger, she returns to her cabin, only to discover that mice have opened and consumed most of the jars of food. The significance of this incident is underscored by her understanding expressed in the lines, "She could blame the mice if she wanted to, little devils. But they were only doing their job, which was the same as everybody else's: surviving" (Kingsolver 67). This passage not only highlights Deanna's unique empathy but also subtly hints at the transformative change within her body—her pregnancy, which she is unaware of. Instead of assigning blame or anger, Deanna empathetically equates the mice's appetite with her own, revealing a deeper connection between all beings in their shared struggle for survival. Her empathetic feeling also highlights the deep ecological concern—an intimate identification with all forms of life.

Deanna is committed to preserving the natural balance of the forest ecosystem. That is why she supports the rights of the animals to kill their babies in the wild, without any intervention of humans. She says: "I'd never kill just for fun. May be to eat, if I was hungry, but never a predator. . . . To kill a predator is a sin" (Kingsolver 180-181). When Deanna doesn't express much regret for killing the turkey, Eddie wonders. He asks her why this is the case since she had previously prevented him from squashing a spider in the outhouse with his shoe. She explains that a spider is a predator, and killing it would result in an increase in the number of flies, worsening the situation. "This signifies the idea proposed by Naess that "The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes" (qtd. in Garrard 23).

Deanna notices the blacksnake that has taken the life of her beloved phoebe bird's babies. Despite the snake departing after consuming her beloved birds, she tries to console herself thinking it as the rule of the forest. Though the incident deeply upsets her, she feels a kind of great relaxation to her mind as she reflects, "the world was what it was, a place with its own rules of hunger and satisfaction. Creatures lived and mated and died, they came and went, as surely as summer did. They would go their own ways, of their own accord" (Kingsolver 368).

"Snakes have manners, at least they stay out of your way" (Kingsolver 269). This point is worth to be noted as it points to the anthropocentric attitude of man. While the other creatures keep themselves away from humans, they try to invade and inhabit their domestic places to dwell in. By doing so, man is actually denying them the right to lead a comfortable life, for which they are equally rightful.

The protagonist in the second story is Lusa Landowski, a young widow who possesses the image of an eco-warrior, and argues for environmental justice. It is her deep love towards nature that prevents her from tobacco farming. Though she knows it well that tobacco is the crop that brings her the maximum profit, she turns her face against it. She is highly appreciable to say that she has decided not to plant tobacco for the coming year. Besides she plans to rear goats which will provide the consumers with something better for their health. "Bookchin, for instance, insists that humans have a "second nature" (culture) which gives them not only the right but the duty to alter, shape and control "first nature" (the nonhuman world)" (qtd. in Glotfelty 23).

Lusa's conversation with Jewel about the abundance of cherries depict that they are in plenty, particularly the sweet cherries of the double trunked tree above the apple orchard. Jewel remembers that their father must have planted that tree before his marriage because it was already big when they were kids. This indicates the detachment of new generation people from farming and the related practices. Our ancestors were more conscious and bothered about the future generation and they had a good relation with

nature. They lead a life which was very close to nature and they lived in harmony with ‘live and let live’ policy.

The conversation between Lusa and Jewel underlines the importance to plant trees. It is humanity’s responsibility to preserve and plant trees for the future generations. If individuals possess the right to utilize these resources, it is equally their duty to conserve and propagate them for the benefit of the future generations. The story serves as a reminder that we were capable of utilizing the natural resources not because we were great, but great were our forefathers. Another thing the author highlights is that human beings are not the sole creatures in this planet, but there are a number of other creatures. For the proper running of a balanced ecosystem, those creatures as well are necessary. The facilities which we enjoy now are not because of our efforts, not the contribution of our own, but the great contribution of our ancestors.

Lusa gives a long description of how the monarch butterfly saves its caterpillars from the birds by making them eat poison. The ‘monarch butterfly lays its eggs on the leaves of the plant named ‘butterfly weed’ and the caterpillars eat its leaves when they hatch out. She says,

The caterpillars eat the poisonous leaves and their bodies turn toxic. So, if a bird eats them, it vomits! It’s kind of a trick the butterfly plays on the birds to keep her caterpillars from getting eaten . . . . But the birds learn their lesson, so most of them don’t get eaten. It’s a scientific fact. Birds avoid eating the caterpillars of monarch butterflies (Kingsolver 292).

The conversation between Lusa and Crys highlights the importance of trees and the intricate ecological balance they contribute to. Lusa points out the potential financial gain from cutting down the trees, but she emphasizes the broader consequences of such an action. Lusa also details the essential roles trees play in supporting a myriad of life forms, from bugs to birds. She underscores the delicate balance of the forest, explaining that the diverse array of trees and plants, each with its specific purpose, creates a complex, interdependent system. The passage serves as a powerful illustration of the serious consequences that altering natural environments can have on the delicate harmony of an ecosystem.

The fierce experience of loneliness becomes the guiding force for Lusa to adopt Deanna’s conclusion that solitude is the human presumption. This perspective also gets supported by the ‘Old Chestnuts’ story, which portrays Nannie’s extreme happiness at Deanna’s impending motherhood. All these indicates the universal truth that interconnectedness is an essential facet of human existence. Everything is interconnected and it equates with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology that “Everything is connected to everything else” (qtd. in Glotfelty xix).

Lusa’s stance on cutting trees also is noteworthy. Despite being a city girl, her deep affinity for nature prevails. She is never ready to cut the trees in her yard at any cost. She knows the pivotal role of trees in an ecosystem and considers them as the lungs of the earth. She is a moth scientist and possesses a wealth of knowledge about the biotic communities. She knows well how much a tree contributes to the wellbeing of the living things around it and the benefits often taken for granted, to live a better life. Her comments about the threat of using insecticides in both the garden and the field are noteworthy. In her opinion, spraying insecticide is like dropping a bomb in the city, just to get rid of a few people. She praises her goat farming, emphasizing that she doesn’t have to use any chemicals to raise them. Through her commitment to goat farming, she demonstrates how she refrains from using insecticides and pesticides and, thereby save those insects. The goats are mainly meant for religious feasts conveying her desire to provide something good for the people, physically as well as spiritually.

Lusa mentions the critical need of a specialised diet that each creature has and the potential danger if they don’t get it. She humorously states: “If their food die, they die. They can’t just say, ‘Oh, never

mind, my tree went extinct, so now I'll just order a pizza” (Kingsolver 351). Lusa is capable of expressing great things with a touch of humour and simplicity. Though it seems amusing at the peripheral level, the underlying fact is clear to the readers.

Lusa's nature love and the habit of giving value/considering very minute things as something great is beautifully brought to the reader, with her act of preparing pickles with the peaches which are in plenty in her orchard. She is never ready to waste anything that nature offers her. She considers it to be a sin to throw away the offerings of nature. She says thus: “The truth is, I like doing it. I won't have to spend money on food this year. And it seems like hard work is the only thing that stops my brain from running in circles” (Kingsolver 404).

In the story, "Old Chestnuts," Garnett Walker, a retired agriculture teacher with a passion for cultivating blight-resistant American Chestnut trees, finds himself in conflict with his free-spirited and enigmatic neighbor, Nannie Rawley. Their primary disagreement centers around organic versus inorganic farming methods, with Garnett advocating for traditional pesticide and insecticide use, while Nannie, his organic-minded adversary, staunchly opposes such chemicals

Garnett's letter to Nannie is very significant as it unveils his egocentric perspective towards the environment. The questions posed by Garnett, revealing his anthropocentric stance, include pondering whether humans should consider themselves merely as one species among many. He questions if humans hold no more special authority in the world than, for instance, a Japanese beetle or a salamander. The letter challenges the idea of living in harmony with nature, raising thought-provoking inquiries about the value of various species in the ecosystem.

Nannie's response, deeply rooted in ecological perspectives, reflects her strong connection with nature. She believes that humankind shares a special place in the world, akin to a mockingbird or a salamander, each perceiving themselves as the center of everything. Every life form has its unique significance, and the loss of any species would be a tragedy for another creature depending on it. Nannie emphasizes the importance of unseen elements in nature and the potential consequences of trying to control them. She highlights the intricate relationships within the ecosystem, portraying fruits as more than just sustenance but as a vital part of a tree's existence. She concludes by underscoring God's provision of green herbs for all living beings, encompassing the interconnectedness of all life.

In their conversation regarding the application of herbicide, the disparity in viewpoints between Garnett and Nannie becomes apparent. Nannie challenges the notion of "Good fences make good neighbours," asserting that it is people who are bothered about fences, not nature. Her claim is that the wind caused the weed killer on Garnett's side to drive over into her orchards. Their conversation unfolds as follows:

Garnett: “one application of herbicide on my bank will not cause your apple trees or anybody else's to drop off all their leaves.”

Rawley: “Not to drop their leaves, no. but what if some inspector came tomorrow to spot-check for chemicals on my apples? I'd lose my certification.” (Kingsolver 88)

While Garnett supports the use of herbicides and pesticides in his orchard, Nannie Rawley takes the opposite stance. She adheres to organic farming and wholeheartedly supports it. She takes pride in being the first organic grower certified in Zebulon County. She had been pursuing her organic farming for the past fifteen years. She had declared war against the insecticides such as Two-Four-D, the Sevin dust and so on. Nannie is always ridiculed by Garnett for her compost piling. As Garnett has a tendency to make fun of Nannie for everything she does, he doesn't give ear to Nannie's words.

Garnett finds that Nannie is a happy woman most of the time and Garnett, on the other hand, a gloomy man. Garnett ponders upon his deceased wife, Ellen, who died of cancer and, his grandchildren whom he had never tried even to see. He wishes for his wife to be alive to see their grandchildren together. Here, a common thread runs through the characters' mindset as they want themselves to be in a community. This feeling underscores the age-old notion that man is a social animal'. Later, it is seen that Nannie and Garnett together share their happiness as both of them are going to get relatives.

Nannie says Deanna is coming to stay with her. "I've inherited a relative. Two of them, in fact" (Kingsolver 427). When Garnett expresses doubt about Deanna's pregnancy, Nannie declares: "I don't know, and I don't care. I don't care if the daddy's a mountain lion, I'm going to have a grand baby!" This reflects her extreme happiness in gaining relatives, after leading a life of loneliness for so many years. This makes Garnett think: "Women and grand babies, there was nothing on this earth to beat it. Like Ellen fretting on her deathbed over that child of Shel's" (Kingsolver 428). Later, Garnett reveals to Nannie that his grandchildren are about to visit him with Lusa, to see him and his great Chestnut trees. Garnett also expresses his relief, stating that he no longer has to worry about the future of his chestnut trees even after his death. Now, he can teach them how to bag flowers and make crosses, ensuring a long life for his beloved chestnut trees. Gradually, an unspoken affection develops between them. They both find considerable ease in expressing their genuine thoughts, leading to a deep connection between the organic farmer and the inorganic farmer, ultimately fostering a close friendship. Arne Naess states, "The maxim 'live and let live' suggests a class-free society in the entire ecosphere, a democracy in which we can speak about justice, not only with regard to human beings, but also for animals, plants and landscapes (173).

The three characters—Deanna, Lusa and Nannie—reject an ego-centric worldview and instead acknowledge their intrinsic connection to nature. They refrain from seeking absolute control over the environment, recognizing the importance of allowing non-human elements to thrive. They admit the fact that they are part of nature and never lament to have the environment fully in their control. The novel delights the readers with major environmental concerns such as animal preservation, afforestation, organic farming, and interdependence. The three distinct plotlines converge towards a conclusion that underscores the inherent and formidable power of nature.

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