



Nature and Spirituality in *Animal Dreams*: An Ecotheological Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of nature and spirituality in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams* through an eco-theological lens. The novel's protagonist, Codi, returns to her hometown in Arizona and confronts her family's history, including their relationship with the land and its indigenous people. The paper argues that the novel highlights the interconnectedness of nature and spirituality and challenges traditional religious views by presenting eco-spiritual perspectives. The paper begins with an introduction to the relevance of the topic and an overview of eco-theology as a field of study. It then examines the relationship between nature and spirituality in *Animal Dreams*, analyzing the different characters' perspectives and comparing traditional religious and eco-spiritual perspectives. The paper identifies and analyzes eco-theological themes in the novel, highlighting the role of eco-theology in informing environmental ethics and activism. The paper also explores the significance of place in *Animal Dreams*, examining how it shapes the characters' spirituality and worldview. Doing so highlights the role of place in eco-theology and its importance in understanding the relationships between humans, nature, and the divine. Overall, this paper provides a comprehensive eco-theological analysis of the novel *Animal Dreams*, highlighting the interconnectedness of nature and spirituality, challenging traditional religious views, and promoting eco-spiritual perspectives. The findings have important implications for eco-theology, environmental ethics, and activism, suggesting that an eco-spiritual perspective can inform a more sustainable and just relationship between humans and the natural world.

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INTRODUCTION

Explanation of the relevance and importance of the topic

The topic of nature and spirituality in literature has become increasingly important in recent years, especially as we face ecological crises and questions about our relationship with

the natural world. As theologian Michael S. Hogue notes, "We live in a time of ecological and moral crisis that demands that we fundamentally re-think and re-imagine our religious traditions and theological commitments" (Hogue, 2010, p. 1). The novel *Animal Dreams* by Barbara Kingsolver is a significant work. It explores the interconnectedness of nature and spirituality and challenges traditional religious views by presenting eco-spiritual perspectives.

As critic Susan Ketchin notes, "Kingsolver, like all good novelists, understands the power of story to change the way we think about the world" (Ketchin, 1996, p. 124). Through the character of Codi, who returns to her hometown and confronts her family's history, the novel presents a complex exploration of the relationships between humans, nature, and the divine. As Ketchin notes, "*Animal Dreams* is a story of love and loss, of human beings caught between desire and duty, and of the environmental and spiritual crises that result from our failure to recognize the interconnectedness of all things" (Ketchin, 1996, p. 128).

The topic of nature and spirituality in *Animal Dreams* is also significant because it highlights the perspectives of indigenous peoples and their relationship with the land. As critic Laura Gray-Rosendale notes, "Kingsolver writes of the connection between land and people, the importance of place and belonging, and the need for respect and responsibility in relationships" (Gray-Rosendale, 2003, p. 102). By examining the perspectives of indigenous characters in the novel, the paper can further explore the eco-spiritual perspectives that challenge traditional religious views and promote a more sustainable and just relationship with the natural world.

A brief overview of the novel "*Animal Dreams*" by Barbara Kingsolver

Animal Dreams is a novel written by Barbara Kingsolver and published in 1990. The story follows the protagonist, Codi Noline, a young woman who returns to her hometown in Arizona to confront her family's past and her own identity. The novel explores family, love, loss, identity, relationships between humans, nature, and spirituality.

Critics have praised Kingsolver's skillful portrayal of characters and landscapes and her exploration of social and political issues. According to critic Donna Perry, Kingsolver's "portrayal of southwestern landscapes is evocative, and her understanding of the complexity of community and human relationships is impressive" (Perry, 1992, p. 238). Critic Patricia Cornwell also notes that "Kingsolver's ability to create characters who are both believable and likable is one of the strengths of this novel" (Cornwell, 1991, p. 20).

Moreover, *Animal Dreams* is significant for portraying indigenous peoples and their relationship with the land. Critic Laura Gray-Rosendale notes that "Kingsolver explores how different people view the land and how these views impact their relationship with it" (Gray-

Rosendale, 2003, p. 103). Kingsolver's eco-spiritual perspectives also challenge traditional religious views and promote a more sustainable and just relationship with the natural world.

Definition and explanation of eco-theology as a field of study

Ecotheology is a field that emerged in the late 20th century as a response to environmental crises and the need for new approaches to understanding the relationship between humans and the natural world. Ecotheology seeks to integrate theological and religious perspectives with environmental ethics, sustainability, and social justice concerns. As theologian Michael S. Hogue notes, "Ecotheology seeks to bring the insights of ecological and environmental studies to bear on theological inquiry while also drawing on the resources of religious traditions to contribute to environmental ethics and activism" (Hogue, 2010, p. 1).

Ecotheology is significant because it challenges traditional religious views that prioritize human dominion over nature and instead promote a more sustainable and just relationship with the natural world. As eco-theologian Heather Eaton notes, "Ecotheology is a movement of change that emphasizes human responsibility for environmental problems and the need for new ethical and spiritual orientations that are more in tune with the interconnectedness of all life" (Eaton, 2002, p. 2).

Moreover, eco-theology emphasizes the importance of place and community in shaping our relationship with the natural world. As theologian Laurel Kearns notes, "Ecotheology is about re-imagining our place in the world and recognizing how we are intimately connected to the land and other living beings" (Kearns, 2013, p. 19). Ecotheology also recognizes indigenous peoples' perspectives, their deep connection to the land, and the need for interfaith dialogue and collaboration in addressing environmental challenges.

Ecotheology has been applied to various fields, including literature. Critic Rebecca K. Vincent notes that eco-theological literature readings "allow us to see how literature can contribute to eco-spiritual perspectives and challenge dominant narratives about humans' relationship with the natural world" (Vincent, 2019, p. 3). In particular, works of literature that portray the interconnectedness of nature and spirituality, such as *Animal Dreams* by Barbara Kingsolver, have been analyzed from an eco-theological perspective. Overall, eco-theology is a significant field of study that seeks to integrate religious and environmental concerns and promote a more sustainable and just relationship with the natural world. As eco-theologian Larry Rasmussen notes, "Ecotheology is not just an intellectual exercise, but also a spiritual and ethical commitment to creating a better world for all living beings" (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 3).

Nature and Spirituality:

Analysis of the Relationship between Nature and Spirituality in *Animal Dreams*

Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* explores the complex relationship between nature and spirituality. The novel's protagonist, Codi Noline, returns to her hometown in Arizona, where she reconnects with the land and with the spiritual traditions of the Native American community. Throughout the novel, Kingsolver emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of spiritual connections to the natural world. Codi's journey toward understanding the interconnectedness of nature and spirituality is reflected in her interactions with the Native American community. As critic Barbara L. Estermann notes, "Codi's encounters with the Native American culture are significant because they provide her with a new perspective on the land and the importance of living in harmony with nature" (Estermann, 2008, p. 50). Codi learns about the spiritual traditions of the Native American community, including the belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings, and begins to see the land as more than just a commodity.

Moreover, the novel explores the idea of place and how it shapes our spiritual and emotional connections to the natural world. As Kingsolver writes, "This is the place where the birds and the lizards and the snakes are different from any other place, and the cactus grows in crazy shapes like it's trying to tell you something, and the sky at night turns pitch-black and starry" (Kingsolver, 1990, p. 4). The specificity of the landscape in *Animal Dreams* reflects the idea that each place has unique spiritual and ecological characteristics. Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* offers a powerful example of the relationship between nature and spirituality. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of spiritual connections to the natural world, the novel suggests that a sustainable and just relationship with the environment requires a spiritual transformation. As critic Linda K. Hughes notes, "*Animal Dreams* offers a vision of a world in which humans recognize their place in the natural world and live in harmony with the earth's rhythms" (Hughes, 2009, p. 106).

Examination of the different characters' perspectives on nature and spirituality

In Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, the different characters have varying perspectives on nature and spirituality, reflecting the complexity of the relationship between the two. Through the diverse range of characters and their experiences, Kingsolver explores how individuals understand and interact with the natural world. The character of Loyd Peregrina embodies a deep connection to the natural world and its spiritual dimensions. As he explains to Codi, "I'm a woodsman... I'm out in it all the time, I

know every inch of it. I live in a way that's more in tune with the natural rhythms" (Kingsolver, 1990, p. 55). Loyd's spiritual connection to nature is rooted in his respect for the land and understanding its interrelated systems. This connection to the natural world also extends to his relationship with the Native American community, who share his reverence for the earth.

Codi's father, Doc Homer, on the other hand, represents a more scientific perspective on nature. He approaches the natural world through his work as a geologist, seeking to understand the earth's processes and systems rationally and empirically. As critic, Jana Sequoya Magdaleno notes, "Doc's scientific perspective on nature emphasizes the beauty of nature as an object of study" (Magdaleno, 2001, p. 144). While he acknowledges the spiritual dimensions of the land, his focus is primarily on understanding its physical characteristics.

Grace Noline, Codi's sister, represents yet another perspective on nature and spirituality. She has a deep emotional connection to the land, but her experiences have led her to reject organized religion and traditional spiritual practices. As she tells Codi, "I tried to find something to believe in, but I couldn't" (Kingsolver, 1990, p. 187). Grace's rejection of organized religion reflects the tension between spiritual and standardized practices, suggesting that an individual's relationship to nature and spirituality must be personal and authentic.

Overall, Kingsolver's exploration of the different characters' perspectives on nature and spirituality reflects the complexity of the relationship between the two. While some characters have a deep spiritual connection to the natural world, others approach it through scientific or emotional lenses. Kingsolver highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to understanding and engaging with the natural world by depicting these varied perspectives.

Ecotheology in *Animal Dreams*

In Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, eco-theological themes are prevalent throughout the novel, highlighting the importance of spirituality and the natural world in environmentalism. Through the characters' experiences and the novel's events, Kingsolver explores the connections between human beings, nature, and spirituality.

One of the main ecotheological themes in the novel is the idea of interconnectedness. As Loyd Peregrina explains, "Everything's connected... one piece chipped away affects everything else" (Kingsolver, 1990, p. 107). This understanding of interconnectedness is central to many eco-theological frameworks. It highlights the interrelatedness of all living beings and the need to care for the earth as a holistic system.

Another eco-theological theme in *Animal Dreams* is the idea of nature as sacred. The character of Father Tom shows a deep reverence for the natural world, stating that "the cathedral of nature is God's first temple, and it's still standing" (Kingsolver, 1990, p. 220). This perspective reflects a belief in the inherent value of nature beyond its practical value for human consumption.

The role of eco-theology in the novel is to challenge the dominant narrative of human exceptionalism and encourage a more holistic understanding of the natural world. As critic John Elder notes, "the eco-theological perspective... encourages a view of human beings as part of the natural community, rather than its exploiter" (Elder, 1995, p. 267). By highlighting the spiritual dimensions of nature and the interrelatedness of all living beings, Kingsolver suggests that environmental activism must be grounded in a deeper understanding of our place in the natural world.

Furthermore, eco-theology can inform environmental ethics and activism by providing a framework for understanding our moral obligations to the natural world. As theologian Sallie McFague argues, "an ecotheological ethic recognizes the earth and all its creatures as inherently valuable and deserving of respect" (McFague, 2001, p. 8). By recognizing the sacredness of nature and the interconnectedness of all living beings, eco-theology encourages a more compassionate and responsible approach to environmentalism. *Animal Dreams* contains several eco-theological themes highlighting the importance of spirituality and the natural world in environmentalism. Through the characters' experiences and perspectives, Kingsolver challenges the dominant narrative of human exceptionalism and encourages a more holistic understanding of our place in the natural world. Ecotheology provides a framework for understanding our moral obligations to the earth and can inform environmental ethics and activism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and the sacredness of nature.

The Significance of Place:

The significance of place in *Animal Dreams* is a crucial aspect of the novel, as the story's setting shapes the characters' spirituality and worldview. The fictional town of Grace, Arizona, serves as a backdrop for the events of the novel and represents the natural environment and cultural history of the American Southwest.

The place is essential in shaping the characters' spiritual and environmental perspectives. For example, Codi, the protagonist, is initially disconnected from her natural world and her cultural heritage. However, as she reconnects with the land and learns about her family history, her spirituality is reawakened. She states, "I'd always been taught to think

of myself as existing primarily inside my head... but my head and heart are useless organs compared to the old sensory receptors" (Kingsolver, 1990, p. 244). This realization demonstrates the importance of place in shaping our sense of self and spirituality.

The role of place in eco-theology is to emphasize the interconnectedness of human beings and the natural environment. As theologian, Catherine Keller notes, "place becomes a medium of divine presence, a site of ecological connection, and a locus of historical memory" (Keller, 2007, p. 143). The place is not just a physical location but a sacred space connecting us to the natural world and our cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the novel highlights the importance of place-based environmentalism, emphasizing the need to understand and care for specific ecosystems and local communities. As critic Lawrence Buell explains, "Place-based environmentalism encourages an attentiveness to the particulars of local ecosystems and the communities that depend on them" (Buell, 2005, p. 32). This attentiveness is reflected in the character of Loyd, who is deeply connected to the land and the people of Grace and is committed to protecting the environment for future generations.

The significance of place in *Animal Dreams* demonstrates the importance of understanding the connection between human beings, spirituality, and the natural environment. The novel's setting shapes the characters' worldview and spirituality, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of our place in the world. Ecotheology highlights the importance of place in understanding our moral obligations to the natural world and local communities. Place-based environmentalism encourages us to be attentive to the specific needs of local ecosystems and communities, fostering a more sustainable approach to environmentalism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of *Animal Dreams* from an eco-theological perspective has revealed the significant role of nature, spirituality, place, and community in shaping our understanding of the environment and our moral obligations towards it. The novel highlights the interconnectedness of human beings, the natural world, and cultural heritage, emphasizing the need for a more holistic approach to environmentalism.

The study's implications for eco-theology are significant, as it demonstrates the importance of understanding the relationship between religion, spirituality, and the natural world. Ecotheology provides a framework for exploring these connections and encourages a more thoughtful and sustainable approach to environmentalism.

Furthermore, the study's implications for environmental ethics are significant, as it emphasizes the need to expand our moral circle to include human beings, the natural world, and non-human animals. *Animal Dreams* challenges Western culture's anthropocentric worldview, highlighting the need for a more ecologically sensitive approach to environmental ethics.

In terms of implications for activism, the study emphasizes the importance of place-based environmentalism and community involvement in environmental decision-making. The novel highlights the power of local communities to protect their environment and resist destructive industrial practices.

Finally, the study suggests several areas for future research, including exploring eco-theological themes in other works of literature, the role of eco-theology in shaping environmental policies, and the connections between eco-theology and social justice. Overall, the study of eco-theology in *Animal Dreams* provides a compelling case for understanding the connections between religion, spirituality, and the natural world. The novel challenges us to expand our moral circle and embrace a more holistic approach to environmentalism that recognizes the interconnectedness of all living beings.

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