

An Ecocritical Reading of *Where The Crawdads Sing*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the ecocritical dimensions of Delia Owens's novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, focusing on the intricate relationship between the protagonist, Kya, and the marshland of North Carolina. Through an ecocritical lens, the marsh transcends its role as a mere setting and becomes a dynamic force that shapes characters and portrays the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment. The marsh serves as a guardian and provider for Kya, offering her solace, knowledge, and a sense of belonging amidst isolation. Moreover, the narrative delves into the allegorical significance of Kya's bond with nature, highlighting themes of resilience, survival, and interconnectedness. The paper also discusses the relevance of bioregionalism and Southern ecocriticism in analyzing the novel's portrayal of the southern landscape and the tensions between human development and environmental conservation.

Keywords : Ecocriticism, Marsh, Bioregionalism, Southern Ecocriticism, Crawdads

Introduction

The novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* extensively revolves around the principles of Ecocriticism as it explores the relationship between literature and the environment. Having strong ecological themes, the book will further be studied through the lens of Ecocriticism with an emphasis on the relationship between Kya and the marsh as it serves to be a guardian for her throughout the novel. The marsh itself is a powerful symbol and is not just the setting of the novel. It becomes a character, that of mother nature and it represents not only the harsh realities of life but also of the beauty and mystery that are found in the least expected places. Other symbols like that of the feathers, the fireflies and the birds hold significance not only to Kya but to the storyline. Nature as a mother and a nurturer is given prominence when Kya's isolation and loneliness find a sense of calmness, home and solace as well as knowledge in the marsh with its varied creatures. The vivid descriptions of the marshland along with its flora and fauna serves as a lens through which the readers realise the beauty of nature and the importance of the interdependence and coexistence between humans and nature.

The Marsh – A Guardian

The setting of the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* is the marshes of North Carolina, USA which extends up to a hundred miles along North Carolina's barrier islands and the mainland. The water here ranges from salty to almost fresh as it depends on tides and rainfall. This salt marsh is a dwelling for a number of plants and animals as they adapt to the constantly changing salty to fresh water conditions. Marsh periwinkle or *Littoraria irrorata*, an acorn-sized snail, is one of the most well known inhabitants of this marsh. It plays an important role in the ecology of the marsh by scraping up algae that grows on rocks, grasses and marsh floors and lives mostly at the base of the plants. Smooth cordgrass or *Spartina alterniflora* is a plant predominantly found in the marsh as it makes it look like a sea of grass and it can grow up to around 8 feet. During high tides, it provides shelter to the marsh periwinkle and also from its predators like birds and crabs. The relationship between these two is already a microcosm of the symbiotic and self-sustaining nature of earth's ecological systems.

This very setting in the novel plays a key role as it emphasises not only the power and mystery of the natural world but also the human-nature relationship. The marsh, though being the setting, became a character, a teacher and a guardian for Kya Clark. Its emergence as a character – a vast, untamed expanse breathes life into the novel. The personification of mother nature in this novel emphasises the concern of the author Owens and the message she wants to convey to her readers. She meticulously weaves the setting with its labyrinthine waterways, vast estuaries, whispering reeds and elusive wildlife that brings about an immersive and vivid backdrop that envelopes the whole narrative of the novel.

The marsh transcends beyond a setting by holding a deep and profound connection between Kya and the natural world around her. The connection between the former and the latter brings to light an ecocritical perspective by portraying nature as a guardian and a provider which nature truly is as is often called 'mother nature'. For Kya, the marsh is a sanctuary that offers a home, solitude as well as lessons in life. Her solitary existence in the ecosystem turns out to be a metaphor for the resilient human spirit of survival. Kya's coming of age story intertwines with the ebb and flow of the marsh which underscores the transformative power of nature. By masterfully weaving the ecosystem into the narrative, Owens highlights the beautiful and intricate web of life and interdependence among the flora and fauna within the marshland. The marshland serves as a powerful backdrop that reflects themes of isolation, survival, resilience and the symbiotic relationship between nature and the protagonist, Kya Clark.

The marshland transcends its role as a mere setting but becomes a strong and dynamic force that shapes characters, echoing the intricate balance between humanity and the environment. Viewing from an environmental point of view, the marsh symbolizes the delicate balance of ecosystems as the novel draws attention to the obstruction of civilization on the fragile ecosystems that mirrors real-world threats faced by marshlands in the present scenario. Marshlands are significant and vital for the vast biodiversity by providing and retaining habitat for numerous species and an attention is drawn towards the impact of man's actions on nature. The novel subtly addresses contemporary issues such as destruction of the natural world, pollution and the clash between urban development and environmental conservation, including how drifting extensively away from nature can affect human characters which is very much relevant in the present-day ever-growing process of urbanisation and technological advancements.

Kya the Marsh Girl

Abandoned by her mother when she was just six and by the rest of her family later in her life, Kya has learnt to survive on her own in the wild marshland. Having no one to depend on for daily chores and livelihood, little Kya had to start from scratch. After her mother and elder siblings left her and Pa, a drunkard, she became the lady of the house and had to take care of everything though not much but mostly her Pa. Pa hardly comes home and even when he does, he is not in his senses because of the alcohol and partly because of the absence of his family. It may be assumed that a part of him felt left out, disappointed over his actions and the fact that his wife and kids actually left him behind yet he is flushed with anger and rage. Kya slowly learned how to deal with him as months passed and some days they would have sparse conversations when Pa was sober and he often did which brought a little warmth in the house and in their lives. However, that also did not last as Pa, the last person she had decided to leave her like everyone else. Young and alone, Kya started to live in the shack by herself and all she could do was wonder why everyone had to leave her behind.

Kya had no choice but to start earning for her livelihood, find her way in the marsh and in life. Everything was silent, no more chatter and laughter, no more clattering of dishes in the kitchen and the sound of cornbread fritters popping and crackling in grease. Kya would often slip from her bed on the porch and stroll around the lagoon and her only friends were the seagulls, the sand and the waves. It was around this time when she finally started to get used to her lonesome life and adapt to the natural world around her. She started to welcome nature into her life and little did she know that it was about to become her home, peace, solitude, teacher and the keeper of her deepest and darkest secrets. There are many instances in the novel where the relationship between Kya and nature i.e., the marshland is communicated. Her relationship with nature is a heartfelt and symbiotic bond that imbues every aspect of her life.

“Months passed, winter easing gently into place, as southern winters do. The sun, warm as a blanket, wrapped Kya’s shoulders, coaxing her deeper into the marsh. Sometimes she heard night-sounds she didn’t know or jumped from lightning too close, but whenever she stumbled, it was the land that caught her. Until at last, at some unclaimed moment, the heart-pain seeped away like water into sand. Still there, but deep. Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother.” (Owens 34)

Owens sews into the novel many instances of Kya’s observation and interaction with the natural world, right from digging up mussels to earn her livelihood to studying the patterns of fireflies and to deciphering the calls of birds and crickets. These moments turn out to be a metaphorical education, provided and written by the marsh itself. The change and pass in seasons and the coming and going of life in the marsh portrays a connection and parallel to Kya’s journey in life. Like each season, there comes hope and joyful days along with gloomy days but that is the way of nature and as the marsh transforms itself in each season, so does Kya. She slowly understood the way of life in the marsh and she also learned how to adapt to the challenges that life had brought to her. For instance, when Tate teaches her to read and write, the natural world around her becomes a classroom. It was as if she was learning from the pages of nature in the expanse of the winding and mystical marshes. Kya may not have received her education in the school like the other teenagers in town but she did experience literacy that extends beyond words and the four walls of a classroom. Her knowledge is more practical as she is able to use it in her daily life. With enough exposure to nature and the

creatures of the land, she develops an interest in the beautiful and delicate patterns of bird feathers. In addition to this, her skills and talent in illustration became her life-saving achievement that spearheaded her career later in her life.

Another instance that highlights Kya's close relationship with the natural world is the day that she went to school for the very first and last time in her life. Though she was eager to learn the lessons in school, she decided to never go back because all the other kids did was bully and mock her as they called her 'marsh hen' and 'swamp rat'. When she went home, instead of going to the shack, she ran to the ocean and called to the birds as they were her only friends. Somehow, her connection with these creatures has become so deep that they could make her laugh even on her worst day. She could turn to nature and be herself in the midst of it and was comfortable enough to show her deepest emotions.

"A few birds pecked gently between her toes, and she laughed from the tickling until tears streamed down her cheeks, and finally great, ragged sobs erupted from that tight place below her throat. When the carton was empty she didn't think she could stand the pain, so afraid they would leave her like everybody else. But the gulls squatted on the beach around her and went about their business of preening their grey extended wings. So she sat down too and wished she could gather them up and take them with her to the porch to sleep. She imagined them all packed in her bed, a fluffy bunch of warm, feathered bodies under the covers together." (Owens 31)

Throughout the narrative, nature is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in Kya's story. From her lonesome childhood to her later years of being the "Marsh Girl," nature has been there for her, like a friend, a guardian and also a mother and serves as a mirror to her emotions, echoing her loneliness, resilience and eventual triumph. Her intimate connection with the marshland is a testament to the nurturing power of nature, shaping her into a woman who finds strength, wisdom, knowledge and belonging in the embrace of the wild.

"In every other direction, slipstreams, lagoons, creeks, and estuaries wove through brilliant green grass to the sea. Kya had never been this high above the marsh. Now all the pieces lay beneath her, and she saw her friend's full face for the first time" (Owens 165).

Bioregionalism

Bioregionalism, a philosophy connecting people and ideas into place that works region by region in a way that will bring about sustenance, democratic and justice. The philosophy of Bioregionalism is highly relevant in the study of *Where the Crawdads Sing* as it emphasizes the interconnectedness between human communities and the unique ecosystems that they inhabit. This theme resonates strongly with the novel's portrayal of the marshes of North Carolina.

Kya's identity is intricately tied to the marshes, emphasizing the concept of bioregional identity. Her understanding of self is deeply rooted in the natural environment that surrounds her. This sense of place shapes not only her character but also her choices, relationships and worldview. The novel vividly illustrates the symbiotic relationship between Kya and the marsh ecosystem. Kya relies on the marsh for sustenance, shelter and emotional solace, while in turn, she becomes an integral part of the marsh's narrative. This mutual dependence echoes the bioregionalist perspective that emphasizes the reciprocity between human and natural systems. As the story unfolds, the encroachment of urbanization threatens the delicate balance of the marshes. This conflict between human development and the preservation of a unique bioregion reflects broader issues explored in bioregionalism. The

tension between progress and the conservation of natural spaces is palpable, adding layers to the novel's environmental themes.

Kya's intimate knowledge of the marsh ecosystem embodies the concept of local ecological knowledge, a key aspect of bioregionalism. She possesses a deep understanding of the flora and fauna that are attuned to the rhythms and cycles of the marsh. This knowledge sustains her, highlighting the importance of recognizing and preserving such wisdom in the face of changing landscapes. Bioregionalism often involves a spiritual or emotional connection to the land and this is evident in Kya's relationship with the marsh. Her experiences in nature are not just practical but hold profound spiritual significance that shapes her beliefs and provides a source of transcendence amid isolation. In essence, the novel engages with the principles of Bioregionalism by portraying a narrative where the characters and their environment are intricately intertwined. The marshes become a living, breathing entity, shaping and being shaped by the lives within it. This holistic perspective aligns with the bioregionalist ethos, emphasizing the importance of understanding and preserving the unique qualities of a specific natural environment.

Southern Ecocriticism

The relevance of Southern Ecocriticism in the novel unveils a rich tapestry where the cultural and environmental dimensions of the American South converge, offering a nuanced understanding of the novel's thematic landscape. In the tradition of Southern Ecocriticism, the novel treats the southern landscape particularly the marshes of North Carolina as a dynamic character with its own history and agency. The intricate portrayal of the marshland captures the essence of the southern environment that serves more than a setting but a living entity that shapes the characters' lives. Southern Ecocriticism often explores the intersection of nature and culture specific to the southern United States. In the novel, the marshes mirror the complexity of southern culture, encapsulating themes of resilience, isolation and the relationships between individuals and their surroundings.

The narrative subtly engages with ecological challenges prevalent in the southern context. The encroachment of civilization into the marshes reflects broader environmental issues faced by the region, highlighting the tension between progress and the preservation of the unique southern ecosystems. Southern Ecocriticism often incorporates elements of Southern Gothic literature, where the landscape becomes a site of both beauty and darkness. The marshes, with their mysterious and haunting qualities, align with the Southern Gothic tradition, adding layers of complexity to the ecocritical exploration of the novel.

The characters' relationships with the land are deeply influenced by southern cultural norms. The novel explores how individuals in the south, represented through characters like Kya, forge intimate connections with nature that are steeped in cultural heritage. This cultural lens enriches the ecocritical analysis, emphasizing the ways in which southerners relate to their environment. Southern Ecocriticism also offers a lens through which to explore the novel's environmental themes, enriching the narrative with the cultural nuances of the American South. The marshes become a canvas where the complexities of southern identity, history and ecology converge, creating a deeply layered and regionally specific exploration of nature and literature.

The Allegorical Significance

Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens is a captivating novel that weaves together themes of nature, isolation, love, and survival through the use of allegory. Throughout the

novel, the character of Kya Clark serves as a powerful allegorical representation of the resilience and beauty found in the natural world. Delia Owens's masterful use of allegory in this work extends beyond Kya's character but to the marsh itself. The marsh becomes a symbol of both isolation and interconnectedness, mirroring Kya's own experiences of being isolated by society but finding solace and connection within the natural world. The marsh's changing seasons and wildlife mimic the flow of Kya's own life, providing a rich canvas for the allegory of resilience and survival to unfold.

As the story progresses, the allegorical elements deepen, with the introduction of Tate Walker, a character who represents the potential for human connection and love in Kya's life. Through Tate, Owens delves into the delicate balance between the human experience and the natural world, further intertwining themes of love and survival with the allegory of Kya's bond with the marsh. Owens's rich and evocative prose draws readers into the heart of the allegory, inviting them to contemplate the broader themes of isolation, resilience, and the enduring power of nature. The allegorical framework becomes a lens through which readers can explore the complexities of the human experience and the intrinsic connections between humanity and the natural environment.

As the novel goes on, the allegorical layers continue to unfold, inviting readers to consider the profound interplay between the human spirit and the natural world. Through Kya's journey, Owens crafts an allegory that resonates with readers on a deeply emotional level that ultimately reveals the enduring strength and beauty that can be found in both the human and natural realms. The novel stands as a masterful example of allegorical storytelling, weaving together themes of nature, isolation, love, and survival to create a rich tapestry of meaning and resonance. This skilful use of allegory extends beyond the individual characters and settings to encompass broader existential themes. Through the allegorical representation of Kya's resilience and connection with nature, the novel helps readers to contemplate the complexities of the human experience and the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment.

The layered allegorical framework of *Where the Crawdads Sing* not only serves as a vehicle for storytelling but also as a profound meditation on the enduring strength and interconnectedness of all living beings. As the novel unfolds, the allegorical depth grows, revealing the intricate interplay between the human spirit and the natural world, inviting readers to recognize their own place within this larger universe of existence. Through the allegorical lens of Kya's journey, Delia Owens reminds us of the profound resilience and beauty inherent in the human experience, while also celebrating the intricate and delicate balance between humanity and the natural world. The novel stands as a testament to the transcendent power of allegorical storytelling, leaving readers with a deep appreciation for the enduring connections that bind us to the natural world and to each other. This depth of allegory permeates every aspect of the narrative, offering an exploration of the human condition and our fundamental connection to the environment. The allegorical representation of Kya's resilience and deep connection with nature makes readers contemplate the complexities of the human experience and the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment.

Kya's bond with the natural world becomes a powerful allegorical reflection of the human spirit's ability to endure and find solace in the face of adversity. Furthermore, the introduction of Tate Walker brings a new layer of allegorical depth to the narrative. Tate represents the delicate balance between human connection and the natural world, intertwining themes of love and survival with Kya's bond with the marsh. Through Tate, Owens explores

the capacity for love and connection to transcend societal barriers, further enriching the allegorical exploration of humanity's relationship with nature.

Owens' rich and evocative prose draws readers into the heart of the allegory, inviting them to contemplate the broader themes of isolation, resilience, and the enduring power of nature. The allegorical framework becomes a lens through which readers can explore the complexities of the human experience and the intrinsic connections between humanity and the natural environment. It serves as a vehicle for storytelling, offering a profound meditation on the enduring strength and interconnectedness of all living beings. Delia Owens's masterful use of allegory in *Where the Crawdads Sing* goes beyond mere storytelling; it becomes a profound meditation on the enduring strength and interconnectedness of all living beings. The character of Kya Clark, often referred to as the "Marsh Girl," serves as a poignant allegorical representation of the resilience and beauty found in the natural world. Her journey from isolation and abandonment to independence and understanding mirrors the ebb and flow of life within the marsh itself. Owens intricately weaves Kya's experiences with the changing seasons and wildlife of the marsh, providing a rich tapestry for the allegory of resilience and survival to unfold. Kya's bond with the natural world becomes a powerful allegorical reflection of the human spirit's ability to endure and find solace in the face of adversity.

The novel is an example of allegorical storytelling, weaving together themes of nature, isolation, love, and survival that elevates the novel beyond a mere narrative, offering readers a profound meditation on the enduring power of the human spirit and the natural world. Through the allegorical representation of Kya's resilience and connection with nature, the novel prompts readers to contemplate the complexities of the human experience and the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the environment. Viewing in the allegorical lens of Kya's journey, Delia Owens reminds us of the profound resilience and beauty inherent in the human experience, while also celebrating the delicate balance between humans and the environment. The novel is a testament to the transcendent power of allegorical storytelling, leaving readers with a deep appreciation for the enduring connections that bind us to the natural world and to each other. The allegorical depth of the novel permeates every aspect of the narrative, offering a profound exploration of the human condition and our fundamental connection to the natural world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Delia Owens's novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* offers a rich canvas of ecocritical exploration, weaving together themes of nature, resilience, and the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment. Through the allegorical representation of Kya's bond with the marshland, Owens invites readers to contemplate the enduring strength and beauty found in both the natural world and the human spirit. The marsh transcends its role as a mere backdrop, emerging as a dynamic character that shapes the lives of the novel's protagonists and reflects broader ecological themes. Furthermore, the novel resonates with the principles of bioregionalism and Southern Ecocriticism, highlighting the intricate relationship between culture, landscape, and environmental stewardship in the American South. As readers journey through Kya's experiences of isolation, survival, and eventual triumph, they are reminded of the profound connections that bind us to the natural world and to each other. Ultimately, *Where the Crawdads Sing* stands as a testament to the enduring power of allegorical storytelling, offering readers a deeper understanding of the human experience and our fundamental connection to the environment. Through its exploration of nature's resilience and the transformative potential of human-nature

relationships, the novel leaves a lasting impression, inspiring readers to cherish and protect the fragile ecosystems that sustain us all.

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