



## Where The Crawdads Sing

An investigation into nature's role in human lives  
and nature as a metaphor to critique societal structures

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## Innholdsfortegnelse

<b>FAKULTET FOR UTDANNINGSVITENSKAP OG HUMANIORA.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>ABSTRACT: .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.0 INTRODUCTION:.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2.0 WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING, NATURE AS A METAPHOR.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3.0 THE “POETIC NATURE” .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3.1 NATURE AS A SYMBOLIC MANIFESTATION OF KYA’S PSYCHOLOGY .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3.2 KYA AS “THE OTHER” .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3.2.1 CRITIQUING SOCIETY THROUGH NATURE AS OTHERNESS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.3 THE DECEPTION OF THE READER .....</b>	<b>16</b>

## Abstract:

The purpose of this essay is to do a close reading of *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) by author Delia Owens, focusing on the use of nature within the novel. In this regard I have pointed to the depiction and importance of nature used to shine light on cultural critique and human behaviors. A large focus has been on nature being used as a metaphor for the human condition, there has subsequently been a focus on examining the relationship between the human, culture and nature within the novel.

My thesis has undertaken these questions via an ecocritical approach, with a particular focus on the psychoanalytical and feminist perspective in relations to nature, and how this reveals elements of cultural critique present in the novel. I have used various scientific articles and critics for reference, such as Professor Jonathan Bate and his book *Song of the Earth* (2000) and Cheryl Glotfelty with her contribution to the theory with: *The Ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). I have used these in accordance to the ecocritical approach, to show the reader the ways in which nature-writing has been used to problematize the human condition and human psyche. More specifically what close-readings from the novel, undertaken from this perspective, can reveal to us.

# Where the Crawdads Sing:

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and nature as a metaphor to critique societal structures

## 1.0 Introduction:

In the article “Ecocriticism – What is it good for?” literary critic Lawrence Bull states that environmental representation “is at least faintly present in most texts, but salient in a few”.<sup>1</sup> In this essay it will be made clear how *Where the Crawdad Sing*, (2018) is one of the “few” pieces of fiction where environmental representation is “salient”, meaning it holds a central role in the novel. The term “intention” may ring true as well. Nature has been used intentionally as a way of describing certain aspects to the story. I mean to investigate exactly what happens when a piece of literature *uses* nature actively as a mediator, instead of as a background setting.

Delia Owens, writer of the book *Where the Crawdads Sing* is an author, but also a practicing and educated Wildlife Scientist, her knowledge of the nature sciences of the world shines through in this literary work. The beauty of the natural world is seemingly at the forefront, with *The New York Times* referring to the novel as being a “[...] celebration of nature”.<sup>2</sup> Her poetic writing style and knowledge of nature makes this statement true for many readers. This novel could definitely be interpreted and understood this way, however for the purpose of this reading I argue against their claim of this novel as a work that directly “celebrates nature”. In this thesis I will uncover some underlying aspects to nature's role in the story, then what first meets the eye.

Robert Kern mentions in his article “Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For” how “[...] nature is important, not for what it physically is, but for what it conceptually means or

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kern, “Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 7, no. 1 (2000): 11.

<sup>2</sup> Delia Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Paperback edition (London: Corsair, 2019) on the back of the cover.

could be made to mean”.<sup>3</sup> This particular reference institutes the basis of my thesis which will revolve around examining the ways nature is used in works of literature to mean something “other” or “deeper” than what first meets the eye. Cheryll Glotfelty, known for defining the term of ecocriticism, states that this approach is simply “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”.<sup>4</sup>

With painful nostalgia we yearn to return as soon as we have begun to experience the pressure of civilization and hear in the remote lands of art our mother Nature’s tender voice.<sup>5</sup>

These are the words of German poet and literary theorist Friedrich Schiller from “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry”. His words depicting our relationship to Mother Nature, state how we all wish to return to the original state of nature-living. As nature has played an important part in human life since the beginning of time, it has also played a part in many works of fiction, from ancient works to those of the well-known Romantic tradition.<sup>6</sup> To investigate the depictions of nature and the various messages stemming from nature-writing, there has been a need to find a theory to use for this specific area of literature studies. It is here the ecocritical approach comes into light. Ecocriticism is an approach to literary studies, and not a method. What this entails is that there seems to not be a common methodology of doing a so-called “ecocritical reading”. Perhaps that is why it is mentioned how eco-critics generally base their studies on any number of previously existing theories within literature, such as psychoanalytical, new critical and feminist.<sup>7</sup> It will be made clear how the psychoanalytical theory and the feminist theory will be of significance throughout my analysis.

## 2.0 Where the Crawdads Sing, nature as a metaphor

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<sup>3</sup> Kern, “Ecocriticism,” 9.

<sup>4</sup> Edited Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, “LANDMARKS IN LITERARY ECOLOGY,” n.d., xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Song of the Earth* (Picador, 2001), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Bate, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Glotfelty and Fromm, “LANDMARKS IN LITERARY ECOLOGY,” 23.

Delia Owens' book *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 2018, tells the story of American Kya Clark, a young girl who grows up by herself in North Carolina's marshes. The book is divided into two timelines, one featuring Kya's coming-of-age tale and the other featuring a 1960s murder mystery where she is the prime suspect. The first timeline we get to follow is about her family consisting of her mother, father and four other siblings living in a secluded cottage in the middle of the marshes, disconnected from the outside world. As a result of her abusive father, her family leaves one by one, and Kya has to learn to live by herself, largely secluded from modern society and its inhabitants. Nature plays a large role in the novel, as it has a consistent role in her life, as a teacher, mother and savior. With her seclusion from modern society, themes of loneliness, her mental state, cultural dilemmas and her perceived otherness, will be the basis of my analysis through looking at nature as a metaphor in the story.

### 3.0 The “poetic nature”

The poetic depictions of nature seems to be a major theme within this book, according to *The New York Times* as previously mentioned. Already on the very first page, a certain view on nature as something “beautiful” is established. This specific view is kept throughout the novel as a red thread. The ecosystem in question are the marshes of North Carolina. The wildlife depicted subsequently follows the traits of this specific ecosystem consisting of riverbends, trees and wetlands often represented as “swamplands”. The author feels the need to explain the marshes in a specific way to start of her novel, which is a useful starting point:

Marsh is not swamp. Marsh is a space of light, where grass grows in the water, and water flows into the sky. Slow moving creeks wander, carrying the orb of sun with them to the sea, and long legged birds lift with unexpected grace – as though not built to fly – against the roar of a thousand snow geese.<sup>8</sup>

In this very first passage we get to see this vivid imagery of the beautiful ecosystem. The rather poetic way of describing the marshes as “a space of light” sets a tone for the representation of nature. Through the metaphor of “water flows into the sky”, the personification of the moving creeks described as “carrying the orb of sun with them to

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<sup>8</sup> Delia Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Paperback edition (London: Corsair, 2019), 4.

the sea”, we see how nature is being romanticized from the very beginning. Positive descriptive words are also seen utilized here, such as “grace” and “flows”. These types of descriptive words, accompanied by this lyrical writing aids with imagining nature. This may seem as a romantic way of describing nature. The very genre of Romanticism is explained as to hold qualities like “ bright aimless fancy, awe of the unknown, eager uncritical delight in the abundance of nature”<sup>9</sup>, so one can regard this very passage to some extent derive from this tradition of writing. The painting of a vivid and beautiful natural world is set in motion.

By adhering to this snippet from the novel above one might get the same idea as *The New York Times* in regards to this novel being a “celebration of nature”. I however choose to also ask the question of; is this novel actually written simply for the purpose of portraying the beauty of nature? Professor Jonathan Bate mentions how the romanticist tradition “defines civilization as alienation from nature, and accordingly idealizes both childhood and imagined lost ways of dwelling oneness with the earth”.<sup>10</sup> At first glance it might seem as if Delia Owens is adhering to this version of the romanticist tradition by starting her novel of by depicting a beautiful natural world, setting this standard that the oneness with the earth is at the center, however is this the whole truth?

By dissecting the citation further some deeper themes may be vocalized, contrasting the apprehension of the extract as “romanticizing nature”. A stance against the prejudices surrounding the marshlands may be seen here. With Owens’ first stanza explaining how the marshes are *not* swamp, we get insight into how the marshlands have been looked upon. It may be useful to mention how the word “swamp” has traditionally been categorized with a *negative* connotation. Martha Jane Gibson has, for the University of Maine, written an article which investigates the origins of the word. She mentions how “many of the occurrences of *swamp* thus gathered yielded, it is true, no positive information”.<sup>11</sup> She implies how the word “swamp” (here referred to as “wetlands”) is deemed fundamentally different from the forest, which in this article goes by the term of “woodlands”. She claims this difference by stating how: “The first group includes evidence of a negative nature, showing that swamp, being, as it is, contrasted with both

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Harold Herford, *The Essential Characteristics of the Romantic and Classical Styles: With Illustrations from English Literature* (Deighton, Bell and Company, 1880), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Martha Jane Gibson, “‘Swamp’ in Early American Usage,” *American Speech* 10, no. 1 (1935): 30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/452931>.



*upland* and *woodland*, must therefore be something different...”.<sup>12</sup> By mentioning the previous evidence of negative associations with the word, we can figure out why the author chooses to separate the marshes from the word “swamp”.

Cheryll Glotfelty revealingly asks “[...] how do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?”.<sup>13</sup> How do we really view nature? As something to use? Profit off of? Maybe even something to conquer? Glotfelty problematizes the bigger questions when it comes to human’s relations to nature: What is nature to *us*? This is important seeming as I will argue that the individual’s relationship and view on nature is being used to explain human behaviors, and functions as cultural critique within this novel.

### 3.1 Nature as a symbolic manifestation of Kya’s psychology

Kya has a complex relationship with the marshes and the ecosystem surrounding her. It is described as a home to her in more ways than one. Mary Douglas investigates this idea of the “home”, and mentions how some people have more complex relationship regarding it. In part because it is strongly connected to the human mind and what ideas the human mind carries with them about their lives within time and space.<sup>14</sup> The marshes functions not only as a place where her cabin resides as in a tangible “home”. It functions as a place for education, love, refuge and comfort, rooted in her isolation from the world and the abandonment she has experienced. This sense of “home” is essentially a problematic one, even if she as a child does not see it as such. Douglas mentions how:

As for those who claim that the home does something stabilizing or deepening or enriching for the personality, there are as many who will claim that it cripples and stifles.<sup>15</sup>

In connection to this comment, this idea of the marshes as Kya’s home adheres to a certain duality between the *beauty* of nature as her home and savior, and the *tragedy* of nature as her home and savior. Grounded in this isolation and rejection from modern society from a young age, Kya’s emotions are continuously being linked to natural phenomena as a result

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<sup>12</sup> Gibson, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Glotfelty and Fromm, “LANDMARKS IN LITERARY ECOLOGY,” 19.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,” *Social Research* 58, no. 1 (1991): 290.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas, 288.

of this being the only companion she has. I argue that nature has been used to explain her inner turmoil, sequences of events and even the consciousness within her, which is in line with the romantic tradition. Bate mentions how a trait of the romantic artist is to use the landscape to express the interior life of characters within literature.<sup>16</sup> What is happening in nature is subsequently made to *mirror* the emotions of characters in correspondence to the plot and actual events happening, as seen in this passage:

The palmetto patches stood unusually quiet except for the low, slow flap of the heron's wings lifting from the lagoon. And then, Kya, only six at the time, heard the screen door slap.<sup>17</sup>

Kya's surroundings are here being used to build an ominous feeling. Nature is seen as a metaphor to represent a human event: abandonment. How the palmetto patches stand generally has no connection to what actually happens within the story, however, by using the word "unusually" one might see nature as descriptive of human emotions. Where the natural image is filled with movement, meaning and presence the human world is only associated with absence, and so called "non-meaning". An ominous feeling that something important and disturbing is about to happen is being mediated through the imagery of a heron slowly flying and the presence of an unnerving silence within the natural world. However the human world is only associated with absence. Kya only hears the screen door slap. The human images and the natural images are here being juxtaposed. It could also be read as a way of relaying traumatic experiences. After this passage it is told how Kya's mother abandoned her and never came back, which for a young girl is a life-altering and traumatic event. Trauma is a blank, something we cannot say, so she's using nature as a metaphor to try to mediate the trauma of being abandoned by your mother. Nature is being used both for the purpose of mediating psychological aspects within the protagonist Kya, but also to calm these feelings of dread by having the main character start relating to nature and what it "tells her", perhaps as a coping mechanism.

Kya and her relationship with nature may also be seen as a form of escape. This is shown clearly when she was younger and her impressionable sense of self is still developing. In the upcoming passage, she is testing the waters by buying something in town for the very first time, clearly anxious and out of place: "Kya felt sick to her stomach. Was she supposed to count something back?" [...] "Kya dashed from the store, and walked

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<sup>16</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 124.

<sup>17</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 5.

as fast as she could towards the march tracks”.<sup>18</sup> The mention of Kya rushing back towards “the march tracks” after an encounter with the foreign modern world is important. In childlike fashion, when one encounters something new and scary, the response would often be to go look for your mother’s safe embrace. In this passage it is made clear how the lack of a stable parent-figure, renders Kya unable to deal with her emotions through human contact. Nature has been used as a replacement for home, which is further emphasized when she states: “We can run. Hide in the mossy place”<sup>19</sup>, when experiencing fear at just six years old. Her place of comfort, and therefore home seems to be nature: “the mossy place”.

By examining Kya’s emotions through nature and therefore her closeness to the marshes, we get snippets into her mind, where she seems to view herself as a part of nature and the animals living there:

Kya ducked behind a thorn bush, then squeezed into a rabbit run that twisted through brambles thick as a fort wall. Still bent, she scrambled, scratching her arms on prickly scrub. Paused again, listening. Hid there in burning heat, her throat racking from thirst. After ten minutes, no one came, so she crept to a spring that pooled in moss, and drank like a deer.<sup>20</sup>

Within the ecocritical approach, there is also a focus on the animal as used within literature.<sup>21</sup> This passage clearly shows the “animalistic tendencies” Kya inhabits from living in proximity to nature her whole life. Kya’s movements are explained as typical animal movements, “ducked, squeezed, bent, scrambled, crept”, descriptive words one might use when looking at wild animals from the outside. Similarly, she is described as an animal through the use of simile: “drank like a deer”. In *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Bennett and Royle state how “We are forever *comparing ourselves* to other animals”.<sup>22</sup> Implying here that we are also animals by saying *other* animals, as well as mentioning how we are doomed to make these comparisons. These, however, may function as oxymorons here. The animal is being spoken of as if one understands the animal: “They lived with Ma and Pa, squeezed together like penned rabbits”.<sup>23</sup> In this

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<sup>18</sup> Owens, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Owens, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Owens, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Glotfelty and Fromm, “LANDMARKS IN LITERARY ECOLOGY,” 23.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Sixth edition (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 220.

<sup>23</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 6.

passage, referring to the penned rabbits as squeezed may be telling. Penned rabbits do not necessarily define themselves as “squeezed”, it is simply just the way they live. The human language trying to explain animals is at large. It is also noted how “in the very gesture of such appropriation these idioms also register the otherness of these creatures”.<sup>24</sup> This may show the reader how Kya acts as a part of the wild but is still fundamentally “other” to it. In this sense Kya is actually “homeless”, because she neither truly belongs to nature nor to culture. That in a sense may be her tragedy.

With Kya being described *as* nature and *a part of* nature, the opinions on her by the townspeople subsequently seem to reflect their opinions on and treatment of nature. The way nature is mediated, reflects their views. As the romanticists explain human behavior, and emotions through nature, the prejudice they hold stems from their views *of* nature. The way she is perceived by the “outside world” later on in the novel and how this relates to cultural critique will therefore be more clear.

### 3.2 Kya as “The Other”

In an essay, Leona F. Cordery explains otherness as a term that not only defines “something or someone who is different, but it is an essential mechanism in creating ‘my own’ identity”.<sup>25</sup> Here, we see how othering is a central part of creating human identity. This also creates an “us” and a “them”. It is clear how society in this instance, with its majority, considers themselves to be an us, and Kya to be “them”. Jonathan Bate provides us with a particularly important quotation from *The Song of the Earth* on the topic of nature’s relation to otherness: “Once you invent the category of the ‘human’ you have to make nature its Other”.<sup>26</sup> By referring to nature as “the original Other” one might see how Kya with her strong relations to nature, would also be considered as such. Kya herself recognizes her otherness already from early childhood. This is made clear through her time at school, which lasted for a single day: “‘I can already coo like a dove’. She told herself. ‘And lots better than them. Even with all them fine shoes’”.<sup>27</sup> She does not necessarily view herself as less than, even though the girls her age bullied her for spelling DOG as

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<sup>24</sup> Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 220.

<sup>25</sup> Leona F. Cordery, “The Saracens in Middle English Literature: A Definition of Otherness,” *Al-Masāq* 14, no. 2 (September 2002): 87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950311022000010493>.

<sup>26</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 32.

GOD in class. The comment of “with all them fine shoes” exemplifies this divide between culture and nature and modern and rural. Kya having no shoes, and recognizing how this makes her different from them. In order to not seem inferior because of educational differences, she states something she knows how to do, which is “coo like a dove”.

In the novel it is mentioned how the marshes were labeled as “‘Graveyard of the Atlantic’, because riptides, furious winds, and shallow shoals wrecked ships like paper hats”.<sup>28</sup> This negative relationship between those trying to claim the land, deeming it dangerous and unusable, might be the instigator of the negative view of the marshes. This brings us back to a comment previously made by Glotfelty regarding how the metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it. The way the townspeople view the marshes as “unusable and dangerous” directly influences their relationships to nature. This in turn may influence their view on Kya as a “nature-person”.

Kya is subsequently being othered from society through their opinions regarding the marshes. Nature here functions as a metaphor for something “different”. Otherness, is also a concept that has traditionally been linked to the feeling of fear. Cordery mentions how “[...] fears, as we know, easily make people xenophobic and intolerant, scapegoats and enemies” which are furthermore employed “to focus the reasons for my fear”.<sup>29</sup> By having Kya strongly related to nature and the marshes, which has been established they deem as “other than us”, it is not difficult to see how they would have prejudice against her. This is also shown through Kya’s very first encounter with discrimination. We hear about an older woman living in the village mentioning Kya to some boys that nearly ran her over with their bikes: “Never mind her. You cain’t go blamin’ yo’ sins on somebody else, not even swamp trash”.<sup>30</sup> We get to see how the word “Swamp” is used as a slur, or rather as a symbol for something inherently negative and disgusting. We henceforth get another perspective on the idea of swamps, a cultural one. Kya describes this land as beautiful and home, but here it is associated with poverty as seen from the comment of “trash”. This may be a result of the historical aspects of the marshes which in the novel used to be an area: “scooping up mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors...”.<sup>31</sup> We actually get a cultural evaluation of swamps as something viewed as “less than”. Classism as a societal and cultural issue could subsequently be criticized. Especially

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<sup>28</sup> Owens, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Cordery, “The Saracens in Middle English Literature,” 88.

<sup>30</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Owens, 7.

through nature functioning as an implied metaphor for this divide between privileged and poor.

### 3.2.1 Cultural critique through nature

I argue that Delia Owens uses nature as an implied metaphor and a means of critiquing society within this novel. However critiquing “society” seems too vague in this regard. I will point to two pieces of societal structures I believe is being problematized through the use of nature in this novel which is: The patriarchy and a prejudice culture.

Jonathan Bate mentions how in the debate of human and nature in the sense of making nature an “other”, this dichotomy has previously been termed as “man and nature” with ‘man’ usually meaning ‘civilized’. The idea of civilized referring to white and stereotypically European men.<sup>32</sup> This brings us to the religious aspect. There has existed a critique regarding Christianity as a religion in terms of their actions towards nature. Particularly how men claiming the religion has inhabited dominating tendencies through hiding behind religious ideologies. Historian Lynn White Jr “censures the Judeo-Christian religion for its anthropocentric arrogance and dominating attitude toward nature”<sup>33</sup>, making a negative connection between the Christian religion and the preservation and treatment of nature. In the novel, the Christian faith as an integral part of the modernized society is also established:

Barkley Cove served its religion hard-boiled and deep-fried. Tiny as it was, the village supported four churches [...] Of course, the pastors and preachers, and certainly their wives, enjoyed highly respected positions in the village, always dressing and behaving accordingly.<sup>34</sup>

Classism shines through in this passage, which depicts the stark differences between these “symbols of faith” and Kya herself. This divide between them is further emphasized in the next passage, where the pastors wife fears for her daughter being near Kya and exclaims “I wish those people wouldn’t come to town. Look at her. Filthy. Plum Nasty ”.<sup>35</sup> There may also be a juxtaposition here, of first explaining the Christian influence on the town, and

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<sup>32</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Glotfelty and Fromm, “LANDMARKS IN LITERARY ECOLOGY,” 27.

<sup>34</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> Owens, 66.

then in the very next passage write how they view Kya as an Other with the pastors wife referring to the marsh-dwellers as “those people”.

I argue that a symbol for this Christian patriarchy in this particular novel, with its “dominating tendencies” towards the natural world, could be the character of Chase Andrews. As a symbol, he represents the cultural expectations and social norms that can perpetuate systemic issues, such as gender inequality, classism, and racism. The issues regarding patriarchal dominance in society is subsequently being problematized through his character and through what eventually happens to him, his death. He seems to be drawn towards Kya and the marshes as a place of refuge from his “restricting reality” which is deeply imbedded in the social norms of their culture. I will however argue that this is only how it *seems*, not necessarily the point Owens wishes to make here. I will examine how Chase’s relationship with Kya is not his attempt at refuge from the town he inhabits, and a “return to nature” as romanticists may claim, but rather his attempt at exerting control and power. I will argue how Owens might be critiquing the patriarchy through the way the character of Chase views nature and Kya alike.

Chase stood a little distance away, watching as Kya disappeared into the spiraling birds. He hadn’t planned on feeling anything for this strange and feral barefoot girl, but watching her swirl across the sand, birds at her fingertips, he was intrigued by her self-reliance as well as her beauty. He’d never known anyone like Kya; a curiosity as well as desire stirred in him.<sup>36</sup>

The way Chase describes Kya in this passage, seems innocent enough. It may even seem rather positive and “romantic”, that is, if you don’t look at it for too long. One might already see the connections he makes between Kya and nature through the word of “feral”. Figuring something beautiful yet still want to exert your own power is not mutually exclusive, it is all about intensions .

Like most people, Chase knew the marsh as a thing to be used, to boat and fish, or drain for farming, so Kya’s knowledge of its critters, currents, and cattails intrigued him. But he scoffed at her soft touch, cruising at slow speeds, drifting silently past deer, whispering near birds’ nests. He had no interest in learning the shells or feathers himself and questioned her when she scribbled notes in her journal or collected specimens<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Owens, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Owens, 176.

Chase is explained to think about nature as “a thing to be used” in this instance, and his annoyance towards Kya and her careful treatment of nature is a clear foreshadowing of how he is to treat her later. In other words Chase’s “metaphors of the land”, as Glotfelty states, directly influences the way he treats Kya. In Bennett and Royle’s, this dichotomy between man and woman, is mentioned through a series of examples, where man is the hunter, and woman is the hunted, man is the subject, while woman is the object, and lastly it is mentioned how “she is not even figured as human but instead as a female deer” in relation to a poem written by Thomas Wyatt.<sup>38</sup> This general comment on feminist theory, where the woman is not even regarded as a human being, may illuminate how women being related to nature, may actually reveal a form of oppression. “Yeah, she’s wild as a she-fox in a snare. Just what you’d expect from a marsh minx. Worth every bit a’ the gas money”<sup>39</sup>, Chase states to his friends. By looking at this passage it is clear to see how Chase referring to Kya as animal through derogatory language explaining his sexual relationship to her shows us how he views the marshes as something he has a claim on. Subsequently viewing her the same way. “In a snare” may also be a metaphor for his state of mind where he sees her as this wild “she-fox” he has “caught”, and subsequently dominated. This is further emphasized in the chapter where we finally get to see his true colors, and he attempts to rape Kya as a result of her rejecting him. In this heated passage he refers to her as “My Marsh Girl”<sup>40</sup>, and also states “There’s my lynx, wilder than ever”.<sup>41</sup> These direct references to nature through referring to her as animal, broadcasts how the way he views nature has influenced the way he views Kya. The comments of “my” revealing how he figures Kya as something he has conquered and dominated, juxtaposed with “Marsh Girl” and “Lynx” as a way of exemplifying his general perspective of Kya as nature.

Nature is seen used as a metaphor to critique the very structures of a patriarchal society, Owens may be “[...] exposing a Hierarchy, in other words, involving dominance of the man and the subordination of woman”.<sup>42</sup> The ecofeminist approach to literature is here important to note. Jonathan Bate mentions how the traditional portrayal of nature as female “[...] (‘Mother Nature’) yokes the exploitation of Her to the oppression of

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<sup>38</sup> Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 270.

<sup>39</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 199.

<sup>40</sup> Owens, 263.

<sup>41</sup> Owens, 264.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 269.



Women”.<sup>43</sup> This approach linking the abuse of nature to the abuse of women, would seem relevant in this instance as well. In the novel, this connection between nature as “mother” has been made quite early on: “Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother”.<sup>44</sup> It is subsequently not difficult to draw the lines of men’s view on nature as being representative of men’s view on women, here Kya.

As a result of the prejudices the townspeople have towards nature, Kya quickly becomes the main suspect of the death of Chase Andrews, which takes place in the marshes. This prejudice is further proved, when the officers that find Chase is explained as having the rhetoric of “[...] why interrupt rats killing rats. But this was Chase”.<sup>45</sup> This further emphasizes their prejudice towards the marshes and Kya, through referring to the marsh-dwellers as animals, in this case “rats” which may also function as a symbol for inferiority. The townspeople would not care much, was Kya the one found dead within the marshes, but seeing as “one of their own” was dead, they need to secure blame. If they can’t blame the elements or nature, why not blame the *other* dwelling there, her. A prejudice culture is being problematized through looking at the way nature functions as a metaphor for depicting otherness. This leading to issues such as the blame of a murder, with Kya facing the death-penalty should she be convicted. She is however not found guilty, on the basis of too little evidence and a lawyer with a strong moral compass advocating for her, despite her being considered Other. What we have been cheering on and hoping for is realized: she is not unfairly judged by the justice system on the basis of prejudice.

### 3.3 The deception of the reader

#### “The Firefly

Luring him was as easy  
As flashing valentines.  
But like a lady firefly  
They hid a secret call to die.

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<sup>43</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Owens, 23.

A final touch,  
Unfinished;  
The last step, a trap.  
Down, down he falls,  
His eyes still holding mine  
Until they see another world.

I saw them change.  
First a question,  
Then an answer,  
Finally an end.

And love itself passing  
To whatever it was before it began. A.H.”<sup>46</sup>

This poem functions as an eye-opening reveal and plot-twist to the reader. It is at this moment we realize how we have been tricked into rendering Kya innocent, on the basis of the discrimination and torment she faces. It is a shock when we in fact stumble upon this poem of hers under the alias of A.H, admitting to murdering Chase Andrews.

Kya’s naturalistic way of thinking on the basis of her upbringing from nature directly influences her actions and views on life and death. She considered herself as a part of the natural world, so when she learns of female fireflies ways of dealing with their male counterparts, this directly applies to her as well: “Female fireflies draws in strange males with dishonest signals, and eat them [...] Female insects, Kya thought, know how to deal with their lovers”.<sup>47</sup> As the poem reiterates how she pushed Chase to his death, she sees herself as a part of nature by referring to herself “like a firefly”. Bate revealingly states how “The ecocritic has no choice but to speak on behalf of the Other”<sup>48</sup>, I too spoke on behalf of Kya throughout this analysis, but the colors of these investigations are not so black and white. On the very first page of the novel, we get to see a foreshadowing of this huge revelation: “A swamp knows all about death, and doesn’t necessarily define it as

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<sup>46</sup> Owens, 367.

<sup>47</sup> Owens, 274.

<sup>48</sup> Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 72.

tragedy, certainly not a sin”.<sup>49</sup> This passage could be interpreted as Kya’s feeling towards the crime she has committed. Nature, or the word “swamp” is actually used as a metaphor of depicting Kya’s morality. She does not see it as a sin to murder Chase Andrews, because nature does not see it as a sin, as the naturalistic world view suggests. One might henceforth critique this Darwinist mindset as Ken Wilbur does: “Back to fox eats chicken – which is supposed to be good simply because it is natural?”<sup>50</sup> The morality of this story is under debate, but in line with my thesis I choose to look at it from a feminist perspective, which may be revealing.

Having Kya serve as the perpetrator of the crime, after misleading the reader through so many pages of “society is to blame, Kya is being discriminated against” might seem an odd choice. I will however make the argument that the cultural critique of the patriarchy may play a part here. Wilber states how “Historically, women have had no real power in the outside world, no place in decision making and intellectual life [...] And ecofeminism, by speaking for both the original others, seeks to understand the interconnected roots of all domination as well as ways to resist and change”.<sup>51</sup> Owens might be problematizing the domination of women and nature by giving the disadvantaged and discriminated female of the story autonomy, which traditionally was not given to women in 1950-60’s America. This may also illuminate why she had Chase Andrews killed to begin with, even though this is strictly speculative. Chase represents all there is to critique within society when it comes to his view on nature, women and all that are discriminated against. His death may symbolize the consequences of not “seeking to understand the harm of this domination” when it comes to both the ecological aspects to the story, but also the cultural ones. To call the right to murder autonomy may be frowned upon because one cannot necessarily argue for the righteousness of murder under any circumstance. However with Kya sincerely believing this situation to be “kill or be killed” as a result of her upbringing by nature, with rather harsh conditions and secluded life with mainly herself to lean on and society against her, it may still function as an autonomous choice. This could also ring true when we see Kya’s perspective of her doings:

She knew the years of isolation had altered her behavior until she was different from others, but it wasn’t her fault she’d been alone. Most of what she knew, she’d learned from the wild. Nature had nurtured, tutored, and protected her when no one

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<sup>49</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ken Wilber, “Sex, Ecology, & Spirituality,” n.d., 613.

<sup>51</sup> Wilber, 17.

else would. If consequences resulted from her behaving differently, then they too were functions of life's fundamental core.<sup>52</sup>

## 4.0 Conclusion

In this thesis I have done a close-reading of the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* By Delia Owens through an ecocritical lens. The investigations I have done, has been to contradict and question the statement from *The New York Times* referring to this novel as simplistically as “a celebration of nature”. I have looked into the way nature has been *saliently* used in this novel, as a metaphor for problematizing cultural issues. It becomes clear how the marshes and nature-living may not simply be romanticized as one might believe at first glance, but that it has rather been used for a greater means. Through my investigations I have revealed how societal issues such as prejudice, Christianity and patriarchy has been under critique if you dig deep enough into the realm of the ecocritical approach. My thesis question revolves around how Owens has used nature as a metaphor to problematize these, and I conclude that she has done so, by having the characters' associations to nature directly influence the ways they perceive themselves and others. By using a psychological approach, I have shone light on the way nature has been used as a metaphor to explain the mind of characters, and subsequently their actions, such as Kya and the murder she commits, and Chase with his attempted rape, leading to his death. By doing close-reading of nature used within the novel. I have made the argument that by looking at nature as the ecocritical approach suggests, and analyzing various human relationships to nature, it is possible to reveal deeper themes of the story. I will end of with a comment from the author of this novel, Delia Owens herself, which I feel concludes my thesis in a good manner:

I longed to write a novel immersed in nature writing, which would examine how our behavior today is influenced by ancient genes. I wanted to write a mystery that didn't just ask the question who-done-it—but why the culprit behaved as they did. To explore human nature with nature writing.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 363.

<sup>53</sup> “Reese's Book Club,” Reese's Book Club, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://reesesbookclub.com/article/on-going-way-out-yonder-where-the-crawdads-sing/>.

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