

The Eco-ethical Interpretation of the “Werewolf” in “The Company of Wolves”

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From the ecocritical perspective, with the reference to ecological ethics, this paper explores the ethical meanings and views of nature embodied in “werewolf” in Angela Carter’s short story “The Company of Wolves”. This paper analyzes the construction of the werewolf’s ethical identity, the reconstruction of human–animal ethics and finally the ecological integration of nature and culture. Through the analysis of the werewolf and its relationship with humans and nature, this study reveals the complex intertwining of animal and human emotions and ethical identities. This paper aims to reveal how Carter, through fairy tale rewriting and literary experimentation, rethinks the ethical positions of humans, animals, and nature, which presents an ecological ethical imagination that transcends anthropocentrism.

Keywords: Angela Carter, “The Company of Wolves”, Eco-ethical criticism, ethical literary criticism, werewolf

Introduction

“The Company of Wolves” is a story of parody by Angela Carter, one of the most celebrated feminist English writers in the 20th Century, on the fairy tale classic “The Little Red Riding Hood”. “Carter’s works are crammed with an extraordinary range of ideas, themes and images” (Peach, 1998, p. 2). This story deeply explores the intricate relations among men, women, and nature. Previous studies have mainly focused on gender, power, and narrative reconstruction, emphasizing the subversion of traditional gender roles and the redefinition of desire. However, studies from the perspective of ecological ethics, particularly those centered on the werewolf figure and its relationship with nature remain scarce.

Ecological ethics refers to the moral relationship established between humans and the natural environment through actions, revealing how humans treat nature (Li et al., 2022). Carter views “the Other” in nature through a new lens of ethical empathy rather than anthropocentric judgment. Guided by Nie Zhenzhao’s ethical literary criticism and contemporary ecological ethics, this article analyzes how the werewolf functions as an ethical subject and how the story reimagines human–animal interdependence. The paper seeks to construct a non-anthropocentric literary interpretive model and provide an interdisciplinary case study for ecological ethics.

The Construction of Werewolf’s Ethical Identity

According to Nie Zhenzhao’s theory of literary ethical criticism (Nie, 2020), ethical identity refers to the role a person assumes in a specific ethical relationship, involving responsibilities, duties, and moral positioning. It is a conventional identity that guides one’s behavior in accordance with social and moral expectations. While traditional literature often portrays ethical identity in terms of familial, social, or political roles, Carter’s werewolf characters complicate this framework. Nie refers to the “Sphinx Factor (Nie, 2020)” with a combination of “human factor” and “animal factor” to describe characters in literature who embody dual or contradictory identities, often creating ethical ambiguity. The werewolf in Carter’s tale is the very example of the two factors. Like the mythological Sphinx—half human and half beast, the werewolf combines human consciousness with animal instinct. This duality destabilizes the fixed ethical identity rooted in original moral frameworks.

Carter begins her story not with the familiar “Little Red Riding Hood” plot but with a darker legend. This prelude sets the tone for the narrative’s exploration of ethical identity. The werewolf in this opening story is not merely a monster, but a tragic hybrid. He is a victim, an aggressor, as well as the husband and beast. The ethical identity is challenged by his transformation, yet he retains properties of human feelings such as jealousy and loyalty. He is driven by instinct, making him neither fully innocent nor fully guilty. In Carter’s retelling of “Little Red Riding Hood”, the werewolf again transcends the role of villain. He becomes a figure of desire and transformation, who forces the heroine and the reader to rethink the instability of traditional ethical categories such as “innocent” and “evil”. Through this liminal figure, Carter critiques the binary thinking that structures conventional morality. “Ethical identity is not exclusive to humans; animals and plants also possess moral value” (Wu, 2025, p. 21). The “Sphinx Factor” thus becomes a lens through which Carter critiques the binaries that underlie conventional morality. This challenges the human-centered belief that only rational beings can act morally and invites a rethinking of ethical boundaries in literature and ecological thought.

Another important dimension of the werewolf’s ethical identity is its emotional agency and self-awareness. In traditional gothic and folklore narratives, wolves are often portrayed as instinct-driven creatures without inner life or moral reasoning. However, Carter reverses this pattern. Her werewolves possess emotion, reflection, and even the ability to make ethical choices, suggesting that moral agency is not confined to humans.

In the story, the werewolf’s transformation is both physical and emotional. Initially presented as a seducer and potential predator, the male werewolf becomes the girl’s companion. He sheds his predatory role when confronted by the girl’s fearless self-possession, and instead of devouring her, he submits to intimacy. This shift demonstrates his capacity for emotional resonance and highlights emotion as a foundation for ethical relations. Moreover, Carter’s werewolves often exhibit a degree of self-awareness regarding their dual nature. They are not merely trapped by their animalistic instincts, but conscious of the roles they play and the identities they perform. This reflexivity challenges the assumption that non-human figures lack interiority or morality.

By endowing the werewolf with emotional and cognitive complexity, Carter challenges the tradition that has defined who can be considered an ethical subject. The werewolf’s ethical identity becomes a crucial symbol, forged through interaction and emotion. This destabilization of identity aligns with posthumanist ethics, which seek to decenter the human as the sole locus of moral value.

The Reconstruction of Human-animal Ethics

Traditional Western fairy tales often portray nature as dangerous. Forests are often dark and mysterious, wolves are described as evil, and human survival depends on escaping the wilderness. This reinforces a divide between civilization and nature with the former viewed as superior. As Wang Li (2017) notes, moving beyond anthropocentric and speciesist thinking is essential for a harmonious relationship between humans and animals. In Carter’s rewriting, this boundary is disrupted, giving rise to new forms of transformation and connection.

The werewolf is no longer a mere threat but a being of complexity and emotion. Humans cease to be passive victims of nature and become participants. The heroine of “The Company of Wolves” does not seek to conquer the wolf but to understand and coexist with him. Her laughter before the beast and her choice to lie beside him mark an ethical shift, from fearing nature to engaging it as an equal partner in dialogue. From the perspective of Nie’s ethical literary criticism, this marks a transformation in ethical identity that transcends species boundaries. The girl, recognizing the wolf’s vulnerability and hybridity, changes her own ethical stance. She embraces the wilderness not as “Other”, but as a part of herself. Literary ethical criticism emphasizes the reader’s role in uncovering the historical and ethical contexts within a text, discovering historical values represented in the contemporary era (Ross, 2015). From the story, we rediscover ecological ethics that are worth exploring in the contemporary world. This fairy tale is no longer just a story of fear and survival, instead, it gains renewed moral significance, prompting readers to reflect on human-nature relationships in a more ethical and responsible way.

This transformation leads to a vision of ethical symbiosis in which humans and nature shape one another. Carter depicts nature as active and morally resonant rather than merely dangerous. The forest is beyond mere peril, becoming a morally ambiguous domain where human and animal identities converge. The story opens with an intense portrayal of the wolf-infested forest, “if you stray from the path for one instant, the wolves will eat you. They are grey as famine, they are as unkind as plague...” (Carter, 1995, p. 160). The language here frames them not merely as threats but as symbols of ecological necessity, mirroring human fears and desires.

Carter further disrupts the predator-prey binary by humanizing the wolf and animalizing the girl. The moment when the girl picks lice from the werewolf’s body and “eats it as if it were a delicacy” marks a radical dissolution of human superiority. This act signals communion and interspecies connection, proposing an ethical symbiosis founded on mutual vulnerability and connection. Through such scenes, Carter destabilizes fixed ethical identities. The wolf ceases to be a mere predator, and the girl moves beyond the roles of victim or moral agent. Her actions redefine her moral identity from innocent child to conscious participant in an interspecies experience. The final image of the girl sleeping “sweet and sound” in the wolf’s arms embodies that the wolf is neither slain nor tamed, yet now accepted. Similarly, the girl’s ethical selfhood expands to encompass instinct, desire, and ambiguity. Carter’s narrative aligns with posthumanist ecological ethics. In this vision, the “company” of wolves becomes not a menace but a community.

The Ecological Integration of Nature and Culture

In Carter’s story, nature functions not as a passive setting but as an active participant endowed with ethical agency. Cultural myths are reinterpreted to foster ecological awareness. This chapter explores how Carter reframes nature’s moral voice and reconfigures cultural narratives to dissolve the anthropocentric boundaries between the natural and the symbolic.

Carter constructs a natural world that is alert, responsive, and ethically charged. The forest acts as a force that actively shapes human fate. The wolves, described as “assassins” of the woods, embody not only primal danger but also nature’s capacity for judgment and ecological justice. The recurring image of gleaming eyes evokes a sentient wilderness that watches, waits, and reacts to human intrusion.

Carter presents nature as operating according to its own ethical logic, independent of human rationality. Just as Rolston (2000) proposed that “unlike art, which depends on human intention, nature unfolds with a self-realizing autonomy—an agency that originates beyond design” (p. 68). The wolf’s refusal to “listen to reason” reflects not an absence of morality, but the presence of a distinct, instinctual form of agency. In this reframing, predation is reconceived as ecological necessity rather than moral cruelty. The winter hunger of wolves, their skeletal frames, and the frost on their jaws are not gothic embellishments, instead, they are reminders of the material realities that shape all life. This ecological perspective questions human-centered ethics by showing that the werewolf is more than a terrifying hybrid. Standing between human and animal, it reflects the deep connection between culture and nature. The story’s warnings, such as “the forest closed upon her like a pair of jaws” and “the howl of the wolf is the sound of a killing yet to come,” reflect ecological realities of hunger, scarcity, and survival. The werewolf embodies an ecological construct shaped by both cultural imagination and natural law. Thus, the werewolf becomes a symbol of cultural myth together with ecological insight. It is through this hybrid figure that Carter critiques the traditional cultural dominance over nature and suggests a new relational paradigm where storytelling does not suppress the wild but recognizes and incorporates its moral voice.

Conclusion

The ethical bond between humanity and the natural world has transitioned from relative obscurity to growing prominence (Liu, 2013). The werewolf emerges as an important ethical and ecological symbol embedded in the cultural imagination. Its existence shatters the illusion of human separation from the animal and the natural world, challenging anthropocentrism and warning of the perils inherent in denying our own animality and disregarding the non-human. Through its complex ethical identity, its potential to reframe interspecies relations towards symbiosis, and its role in ecologically integrating nature and culture, the werewolf is no longer a mere monster but a meaningful symbol that invites us to imagine a more respectful and interdependent relationship with the natural world.

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