
Surviving Nature: An Ecocritical Analysis of the Relationship Between Humans and the Ecosystem in *Love and Monsters*

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Abstract

Love and Monsters (2020) explores a post-apocalyptic world where mutated insects dominate the ecosystem, reversing the human-nature hierarchy. The film metaphorically critiques humanity's ecological arrogance and presents nature's self-regulation through the Gaia Hypothesis. It portrays humans as fragile beings stripped of technological privilege, forced to relearn survival and coexistence. Protagonist Joel Dawson's journey from fear to ecological understanding reflects the psychological and evolutionary need for reconnection with nature. The movie parallels real-world ecological crises, suggesting that environmental collapse could be humanity's "Great Filter." By depicting role reversals and interdependence between species, it urges a shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. The narrative aligns with ecopsychology's view that nature is essential to mental and ecological healing. It challenges modern civilization's exploitative tendencies and advocates for sustainable, respectful coexistence with the environment. *Love and Monsters* becomes both a cautionary tale and a hopeful allegory for a possible ecological renaissance.

Keywords: Gaia Hypothesis, Anthropocentrism, Ecopsychology, Post-apocalyptic Ecology, Evolutionary Reversal

Love and Monsters is a 2020 post-apocalyptic film that situates the human struggle for survival in a dangerous new landscape populated by giant critters and insects. Humanity has almost been wiped out by a black swan event of astronomical proportions. Man-made nuclear bombs that are detonated in the atmosphere to counter an asteroid catalyze the mutation of coldblooded creatures into monsters of titanic proportions. Set in North America, the movie's landscape is unfamiliar, but not new, as the movie tries to capture what earth would look like without human influence and control, as it perhaps did before humans. It portrays the chaotic middle between urbanized abandoned human cities and nature taking over. Human influences are all washed out and weathered down, and nature has taken over

rather quickly what used to be bustling towns. The movie depicts how transient human civilizations are in the face of the incessant march of nature. It also shows how the ecosystem and all its dependents, including humans, are easily affected by even the smallest change that happens in ecological processes.

Human civilization is at a stage of explosive technological development which has even taken humans beyond the constraints of the planet. Those who speculate on the existence of alien life consider the civilization of humans to be at a stage where the next step is ‘colonization explosion’ where humans begin to expand outwards into the universe (Hanson). However, the Fermi Paradox brings up an interesting contradiction, despite probability supporting the existence of extra-terrestrial creatures, there is no evidence of anything similar ever existing. This is where the ‘great filter’ comes into play. “The Great Silence implies that one or more of these steps are *very* improbable; there is a "Great Filter" along the path between simple dead stuff and explosive life. The vast majority of stuff that starts along this path never makes it” (Hanson). In the world of *Love and Monsters*, insects end up being humanity's ‘great filter’. The choice seems to be a metaphoric from an environmental perspective. The transformation of the landscape, and the collapse of advanced civilization takes place after an apocalyptic rearrangement of the food web. It is facilitated by a cataclysmic mutation that allows cold blooded creatures to become the new megafauna. It is precipitated, both literally and figuratively, by human action. In an ironic twist, the insects, now titanic in size, treat humans like insects. Humans are knocked off their place of privilege in the web by the most unexpected creatures conceivable- by insects and critters. This metaphor is rooted in environmental facts, that the position humans occupy in the ecosystem is precarious and can, at any given moment, be toppled by forces out of humanity’s control.

The role reversal between humans and insects is a great example of a negative feedback loop. Human actions disrupt the ecological balance, and there arises a need to achieve equilibrium. Chemist James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis describes the possibility of biotic and abiotic elements in an ecosystem interacting and influencing each other. “The notion of the biosphere as an active adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis we are calling the ‘Gaia’ hypothesis” (Lovelock and Margulis 3). In light of this concept, the earth can be viewed as a superorganism composed of various biomes that interact and influence each other. All organisms and all ecosystems are interconnected and interdependent. An imbalance in any one biome can cause ripple effects in others. Any action that causes an imbalance is met with a counter effect that neutralizes it. In the movie, when man-made bombs release harmful chemicals into the atmosphere, it is balanced by a resurgence of megafauna. Discussing the Gaia Hypothesis in the *Encyclopedia of Ecology*,

Boston says, "this entity has closely controlled self-regulatory negative feedback loops that keep the conditions on the planet within boundaries that are favorable to life" (Fath and Jorgensen 1727). The organisms in an ecosystem influence it, and get influenced by the environment through evolutionary mechanisms, as seen in the movie. It points to the earth's capability to heal itself through various processes in the aftermath of an environment altering catastrophe.

Humans, on the other hand, heavily depend on social structure for survival. Human social structure is organic, but it suffers from imbalances like inequality. It is not dissimilar to the social hierarchies of many other species' where the ones higher up in the structure control more of the resources than those further down. It is difficult to escape such systemic inequality, and it becomes impossible to do so during ecological disasters. The self-regulatory nature of the ecosystem enables it to regenerate itself from disastrous events in deep time, but as a species inferior in scale to the ecosystem as a whole, humans will face extinction at some point as a combined result of their actions and the evolutionary processes by which nature regulates itself. Considering the scale of these processes and the deep time in which they happen, the dichotomy between nature and civilization begins to lose meaning. Civilization seems to be nothing more than an evolutionary process that enables humans to be more successful than their relative species.

Love and Monsters begin with the premise of a civilization in tatters. Humans have lost the war with nature. They have also lost the evolutionary advantages of civilization. Survivors stick together in 'colonies', which are sheltered, rickety refuges away from the monsters. The movie maintains the irony of role reversal in the choice of dwelling as well. Humans, like insects, stay deep underground to protect themselves. The protagonist Joel Dawson lives in one such colony. In many ways, they try to maintain a semblance of similarity to the pre apocalyptic society. Pair bonding happens, reproduction follows, they defend themselves against threats and allocate resources like food in a civilized manner. However, it becomes obvious that the dynamics of identity have completely changed in these colonies. It is characterized by fear, loss, acceptance and adaptation. For the most part, society seems to have regressed to the premodern times, and nature seems to have been successful in overcoming civilization. If the giant insects are metaphors of ecological disasters, then it is conceivable that the survivors are suffering ecological trauma. The ecological process that culminates in the creation of giant insects is too big in scale for humans to control. The movie challenges the perception of the human position in the ecosystem by presenting a dramatic possibility wherein humans are dwarfed by other creatures that exist alongside.

The protagonist, Joel Dawson, suffers from a traumatic fear of these giant creatures. He is paralyzed by this trauma whenever confronted by them. The very first conflict in the movie is a great example, the monster here is an ant. The movie portrays the usually tiny insect as a terrifying monster that simply tears humans apart to get what it wants. The ant claims the life of one of the survivors and damages their hideout, greatly diminishing their chance of survival. However, the survivors regroup and discuss strategy. These fragmented moments in between conflicts with the monsters is when a semblance of civilization can be seen. The survivors are people who were raised in cities dependent on the protection of society and structure. Reasonably, their course of action is to hide until they no longer can. This is an example of how conditioned humans are to the conveniences of cities. They decide to simply exist in fear by clinging on to the last of what made up their cities. Leaving that would mean leaving the human way of life behind. It would require them to understand the new equation of survival in nature. While nature recovers from the onslaught of civilization under new dominant species', man is left far behind to recuperate with his losses. Humans are forced to re-analyze their position in the ecosystem. They live in a new ecosystem where they have no significant power over anything. It puts them on par with other creatures that are prey. In order to complete his journey towards a new life, Joel Dawson must rely on a dog that chooses to rely on him. All of a sudden, the dog becomes an equal partner rather than a useful companion in the story of human survival.

In the world of *Love and Monsters* humans have no choice but to relearn what it means to be a part of nature. Nature is in a position of power over all organisms including humans. To rebuild society, they have no choice but to accept their new place in the web of life. Dawson understands this by listening to his fear. He is perceptive of the new position his species occupy on the food chain, and his fear is a natural reaction to it. However, it is also this fear that prompts him to go on a journey to meet the girl of his dreams, so that he could perhaps make a life for himself in the new world. Ultimately, it is this venture into the wild that makes him truly understand what it is to be human, and what it is to be one of the many species that occupy earth. He learns to cooperate with a dog, he learns to read the ways of nature and how to survive using the many resources that can be found in the environment. The relationship between Joel and his found pet dog is framed as typical master-pet relationship, but the co-dependence of both man and dog cannot be missed. Both need the other to survive. Joel also realizes that he needs to depend on and learn from other survivors and other species' to find his way through the landscape. Such co-dependence, without exploitation in any form, is not readily seen in the modern world.

It is interesting to note that Joel not only learns how to depend on a dog, he also grows to accept the roles other creatures play in the new world. Joel's acceptance of the

monsters as megafauna with a right to survive is quite significant from a nature point of view. The scale in which nature is commodified in the modern world often makes humans unable to realize the intrinsic value of other species. Capitalistic actions are so prevalent in human society that humans often turn even others of their own species into commodities. By the end of the movie, Joel Dawson reaches a state of mind where he predicts the actions and mentality of a creature by simply looking into its eyes. His character growth is completed when he fights and frees one of the monsters that had been enslaved, showing that he has accepted his role as one of the many creatures given an opportunity to live in nature.

Love and Monsters is an excellent reflection of what the environment would look like without human interference. A human less world, as imagined by scientists and writers, is vastly different from the world as seen today. A Live Science article discusses what scientists believe the earth would look like in the absence of humans. The earth would be a lush, wilder place. There may be a resurgence of giant mammals, and these may spread out through most of the world. Megafauna like mammoths used to be responsible for over ninety percent transportation of nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus. Due to a greater distribution of large mammals, nutrient and seed dispersal would increase and hence, the abundance of wildlife. Cityscapes would be transformed to forests and ultimately, the earth would turn into "one big wilderness" (Bryce). One can notice from these observations that megafauna serves an important role in the ecosystem. In a world dominated by humans, megafauna are extinct. However, the role is significant enough that if nature is allowed to regulate itself without human interference, there would be a possible resurgence of such species. However, the resurgence of humans as a species post extinction does not seem likely, and the discussion of that possibility cannot happen without a discussion of the role of humans play in the ecosystem. Like megafauna, humans too have a role, but to fulfil that there needs to be a complete change in the way modern humans relate to the environment. It is possible that humans have failed their purpose in the ecosystem by choosing the convenience of a nature-less civilization. Instead of keeping the wild out with technology, humans should perhaps focus on allowing nature into our societies while using technology to maximize survival. Our knowledge systems should nurture the idea of coexistence with nature, not just figuratively, but also literally.

The field of ecopsychology studies the relationship between the psyche of man and nature. Coexistence is a major discussion in this field. As a species, humans are connected to the ecosystem in many ways. Over the centuries, in their frenzy to ensure the generational success of their progeny, our ancestors have ended creating a society that tries to banish the wild. However, the wild is deeply connected to our existence. It is a part of the ecological unconscious that civilization has been trying to deny out of fear. The need to survive is the

evolutionary directive that has kept the species going from one generation to the next. The movie portrays both this survival fear, and the ecological unconscious. In *Love and Monsters*, Joel Dawson's real enemy is fear. It holds him in the comforts of a tattered society that no longer offers any protection. It can be likened to how humans live in modern society. In more ways than one, human social structure is flawed. However, instead of finding efficient alternatives, we continue to be cogs in a system that perpetuates inequality and environmental destruction. Finding alternatives is not easy, but a discussion towards such alternatives is how society changing actions happen. In the movie, Joel changes the history of humans by finding an alternative for them to survive. This is what defines the fictional history of humans in this particular movie, and the person who pioneered it becomes an epic hero of sorts.

At the end of the movie, Joel, who began his character arc as an ordinary man suffering from deep distress and alienation, becomes a true hero. It is his confrontation with nature that turns him into a hero. A hero's journey is rarely complete without a journey to the wild. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh transforms from being a tyrant to a hero after he encounters a challenge from nature in the form of Enkidu. His maturity as a hero is defined by his actions in the wild. He leaves the conveniences of his city where he is feared as a god-king to the wild where he, along with Enkidu who he befriended, are forced to contend with creatures that are just as strong as they were, if not stronger. The knowledge he gains by the end of the epic, and his acceptance of death as a natural end to life are both lessons from nature, and he uses these lessons to transform his society. To give another example, in James Cameron's science fiction movie *Avatar*, the protagonist Jake Sully becomes a hero by learning to coexist with nature. He uses his newfound knowledge to dismantle the notion of superiority drilled into the psyche of humans through generations of successful environmental oppression. His journey as a hero forces a reconsideration of human actions against the environment and its consequences. The movie also includes a very dramatic representation of natural self-regulation. If nature in *Love and Monsters* regulated itself by facilitating the resurgence of megafauna, in *Avatar*, nature is personified without anthropomorphism, and its reaction is literal, direct and dramatic. It is an exaggerated visual representation of the Gaia Hypothesis in action, applied in an unfamiliar, but not new, landscape. In both movies, and the epic discussed above, people alienated from nature suffer mentally. They are distressed, depressed or outright evil. The field of ecopsychology provides a solution- reconnection with nature. The narratives of the works discussed above depict the benefits of the return to nature. These benefits are not just personal in scope but also have the potential to redress the environmental issues that define human existence today.

The narrative of *Love and Monsters*, as well as *Avatar* and many other science fiction movies based on similar premises provides an interesting idea to speculate on. Humanity's concern for the ecosystem is, at its core, concern for the survival of the human species. As such, it is anthropocentric in nature. The earth's recovery process is slow, and it could possibly take several millions of years undo the damage humans have wrought. However, nature is a resilient entity, and time affects it on a scale that is incomprehensible to humans. Humans are on top of the list of species that are being affected by the consequences of their environment changing actions. The insect apocalypse is simply one among the several literary takes on what could finally dwarf human ego and consequently reduce human exploitation. It could easily be replaced by a massive tsunami, as in the movie *2012* and *Day After Tomorrow*, or a huge natural disaster like in *San Andreas* and *The Core*, or degradation brought about by human exploitation like *Avatar*, *Interstellar* and *Wall-E*. The common theme that runs through all such works is the fact that humanity at large is insignificant in the face of massive natural processes, sometimes occurring naturally and otherwise getting triggered by human action. In the absence of tools, and machinery to make tools, humans are simply like all other animals. *Love and Monsters* may be treated as a cautionary tale on what might happen if humanity proceeds without considering the ecological impact of their actions. While nature may bounce back in a period of time inconceivable to humans, it is impossible for humans to survive the catastrophic effects of pollution and climate change.

In *Love and Monsters*, the monsters are the consequences of man's thoughtless actions. As Gaia Hypothesis postulates, these monsters then influence the ecosystem in their own unique ways, creating a different landscape that has all but deleted human beings. The transformation of insects to monsters results in a shift in evolutionary processes, leading to the creation of a new regulatory system and feedback loop favorable to the new dominant species, the insects. Another example is the Netflix series, *The Last of Us*, where the fungi are the new dominant species, and their dominance is facilitated by climate change- a consequence of human action. Humans are forgotten by the environment and forced to put together their lives within burrows while being constantly terrorized by the new predators all around them. This fictional role reversal serves to shock humans out of their complacency in environment disrupting actions.

It also brings forth the question, in real life, how mindful are humans of the needs of all organisms in the environment? Unlike insects, humans certainly have the cognitive ability to identify needs above their own and act on it. The field of evolutionary psychology postulates that human behavior is controlled by neural pathways that evolved as a result of evolutionary pressure. Human behavior has evolved to maximize the possibility of reproductive success over generations. Several of these characteristics, like the drive towards

 pair

bonding, are universal in nature. The journey that Joel Dawson undertakes is also the result of such an evolutionary pull.

Evolutionary psychologists postulate that several aspects of modern human behavior can be traced back to the hunter gatherer societies in the pre-modern times. However, human actions have come to be exceedingly defined by selfish interest rather than evolutionary survival. Our tendencies have crossed the realm of evolutionary success to capitalistic gain, which leads to the alienation of large sections of the society in the face of ecological disasters. Ecological collapse could be humanity's great filter, and it is because humans have lost sight of why society evolved with its constituent structures that such a time has come where ecological disaster and extinction are imminent. The machinations of society designed to protect humans and ensure survival from one generation to next become sites of inequality that play an active role in the destruction of the species. The solution to this problem is a return to nature. In *Love and Monsters*, the survivors ultimately overcome their fear of the landscape and decide to venture forth to find ways to exist within it. In the absence of civilization, society has regressed to be similar to that which existed in the age of hunter-gatherers. The journey provides an excellent opportunity to rewire the anthropocentric worldview humans have inherited from their ancestors and develop a more holistic, and biocentric model of living,

By depicting the precarity of the human position in the ecosystem, movies like *Love and Monsters* seek to instill in viewers the kind of humility that would enable them to regard all creatures with some amount of respect for the roles they play in their shared habitat. They uphold a biocentric model of conservation over an anthropocentric one. A biocentric model that extensively incorporates nature into culture would benefit both the environment and the human psyche. Joel Dawson's fear is changed into courage and hope by his journey through the wild environment. Gilgamesh was a tyrant whose mental faculties were reformed by nature. These narratives depict the possibility that ecopsychologists discuss- that nature holds the key to healing the mind. It would also be effective in changing the human attitude towards the environment. In *Avatar*, Jake Sully refuses to support the exploitative company that sponsored his journey after he was exposed to nature in its wild, but beautiful form. By going back to nature, we may find the cure for the self serving march of modern civilization. Instead of using the evolutionary advantage of intelligence to dominate and push back nature to generate profits that do not matter in the scale of time that the ecosystem operates in, humans must learn to use it to learn to coexist fruitfully with nature.

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