

**The Dark Ecology of Hazelwood: Ecocritical and Ecofeminist Perspectives on
Kelly Barnhill's *The Mostly True Story of Jack***

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Abstract:

This paper examines Kelly Barnhill's children's fantasy novel *The Mostly True Story of Jack* (2011) through the lenses of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, arguing that the setting of Hazelwood, Iowa, operates not as a passive background but as a highly charged, agentic, and deeply entangled ecological landscape. Drawing upon Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" and the ecofeminist theories of Greta Gaard, Mary Mellor, and Val Plumwood, this study analyzes how the novel dismantles the traditional, idealized pastoral representation of the American Midwest. Instead, Barnhill presents a messy, damaged, and interconnected environment where human greed, personified by the patriarchal capitalist figure of Mr. Avery, directly wounds the land and splits its guardian deity, the Lady, into binary opposing forces of "Wickedness" and "Goodness." Furthermore, the paper explores how the protagonist, Jack, who discovers his true identity as a "Magic Child" of leaf, bark, and wood, undergoes an ontological transformation that breaks down the dichotomous division between Nature and Self. Through the ecofeminist resistance of Wendy Schumacher and Jack's final act of maternal unification, the narrative proposes a healing ecological paradigm of wholeness and reciprocity, illustrating that the resolution of human trauma is indissolubly linked to the reclamation and healing of the non-human world.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Dark Ecology, Ecofeminism, Nature/Self, Kelly Barnhill

Introduction

In contemporary literary scholarship, there has been a growing global concern for the sustainability of human life on Earth, brought on by the exhaustion of natural resources and the intensification of global warming. Literary studies in the present age are constantly in flux, and writers and critics have become increasingly sensitive to

environmental issues (Alghamdi 1). This academic responsiveness gave rise to ecocriticism, a critical and research approach that investigates the relationship between literature, humanity, and nature (Sharma 1–2, Alghamdi 1). Broadly speaking, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii), taking an earth-centered approach that analyzes the representation of the environment in creative works (Sharma 8). Historically, the term was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his seminal essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (Alghamdi 1), while Lawrence Buell later defined it as “a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis” (Buell 430). As Simon Estok argues, ecocriticism is distinguished by its ethical stand and commitment to making connections, functioning as a theory committed to effecting change by analyzing the artistic, social, and ideological representation of the natural environment (Estok 16–17).

Kelly Barnhill’s fantasy novel *The Mostly True Story of Jack* (2011) provides a remarkably rich site for ecocritical inquiry. Set in the flat, expansive farmlands of Hazelwood, Iowa, the novel immediately plunges its protagonist, Jack, into a landscape that initially appears to represent a standard pastoral ideal. Sent to spend the summer with his eccentric relatives, Clive and Mabel Fitzpatrick, following his parents’ impending divorce, Jack observes a town that is clean, orderly, and silent (Barnhill 208). Yet, beneath this veneer of pastoral comfort lies what Timothy Morton terms “dark ecology”—a way of reading literature that refuses to treat nature as pure, peaceful, or separate from human life, instead focusing on damage, decay, and uncomfortable entanglement.

By examining Barnhill’s novel through the intersecting frameworks of dark ecology and contemporary ecofeminism, this paper argues that *The Mostly True Story of Jack* functions as a sophisticated ecological narrative that critiques the exploitative nature-culture divide. Through the physical and psychological journeys of Jack and Wendy, the novel demonstrates that human identity and environmental integrity are recursively entangled, presenting a narrative path toward ecological and ontological wholeness. In doing so, the novel aligns with the ecocritical objective of redefining the relationship between nature and self (Sharma 18), moving from a paradigm of domination and dualism to one of mutual communion and healing (Sharma 19, Alghamdi 10).

The Snare of the Pastoral and Timothy Morton’s “Dark Ecology” in Hazelwood

Ecocriticism has traditionally distinguished itself by interrogating how literature represents “place” and how human perceptions of wilderness and rural landscapes have changed throughout history (Glotfelty and Fromm xix). Greg Garrard has dubbed “pastoral ecology” the notion that nature undisturbed is inherently balanced, harmonious, and innocent (Garrard 56). This pastoral fantasy often slips into the belief that the natural world is a clean backdrop for human drama (Fiveable, “Dark Ecology”). In *The Mostly True Story of Jack*, Barnhill initially evokes this pastoral imagery. As Jack travels into Iowa, he watches “the

passing farmland as it rippled and swelled like a green ocean stretching from the pavement to the sky” (Barnhill 204). The town of Hazelwood presents “a quiet block of perfectly mowed yards, where each green square of lawn fitted snugly against the one next to it... Neat whitehouse followed neat white house” (Barnhill 209).

However, this suburban-agricultural neatness is quickly revealed to be an artificial mask that suppresses a deeper, more unsettling reality. This tension is where Morton’s concept of “dark ecology” becomes useful. Dark ecology treats nature as messy, damaged, and interconnected with human harm, rejecting the idealized, pretty depictions of nature writing to look instead at suffering, violence, and environmental crisis. In Hazelwood, the natural and the non-human are not separate from society; rather, the environment itself is a web that humans are already inside of, along with its ugly and broken parts. The air itself carries a sensory warning of this ecological degradation: the breeze, while smelling of “turned earth and dry seed,” is shot through with “something else too. Something sweet and sick all at once, like rat poison dipped in candy” (Barnhill 197).

This dark ecological reality is physically anchored in the town’s geography, specifically at the “eruption points” of magical and ecological power (Barnhill 258). The old, abandoned schoolhouse, located a mile outside of town, represents a space where the nature-culture divide has collapsed. Surrounded by wildly tangled raspberry brambles that seem to “cover it up, like a quilt,” the schoolhouse behaves like an organic, breathing organism: “an outline of the old building began to emerge in the air—just the steps at first, then the sagging roof, then the boarded windows, then the outline of the door” (The Mostly True Story of Jack 176). Historically, the schoolhouse has been a site of trauma; Anders explains that “kids would disappear sometimes. Just vanish, like they’d never been there in the first place” (Barnhill 423), and when they vanish, their very memories are erased from the community (Barnhill 484).

Anders later compares the schoolhouse to a trap designed by the landscape, or by the forces operating through it:

In order to catch strong, healthy, clever rabbits, you have to really know how those rabbits operate. You have to want to catch them. This thing here [the schoolhouse]... it attracted Wendy. And us. And other kids like us. Curious kids. Do you think that’s on purpose? (Barnhill 134).

The “grass” that replaces the schoolhouse after it collapses is not a passive lawn but an aggressive, predatory snare. When Anders steps onto it, the poison-green grass begins to “sink” him like quicksand: “The green curled around his feet, wound gently around his legs, and hugged him about the waist... It was warm and dry and pleasant... but it had rippled as Anders had sunk lower and lower” (Barnhill 537).

This dangerous ecological behavior is directly tied to human manipulation and patriarchal exploitation. The antagonist of the novel, Mr. Avery, is the quintessential representative of

what Val Plumwood describes as the “mastery of nature”—a cultural and economic mindset that views the natural world primarily as a resource to be owned, controlled, and capitalized upon. Mr. Avery’s ancestors built the town, the college, and the massive Grain Exchange and Trust building, a structure whose limestone facade is carved with agricultural symbols—corn, wheat, and livestock—but which conceals “the hidden likeness of a sleeping woman” in the stone, representing the captured and exploited spirit of the Earth itself (Barnhill 342). For generations, the Avery family has maintained their immense wealth and power by performing a magical and biological “swap” on the eruption points of Hazelwood. In each generation, they trade a human son for the “Magic Child” borne by the Lady (the guardian of the land), using the words mine and yours to establish property rights over ecological forces. However, as Reverend Marcus Weihr notes in his historical letters, “To call something Mine carries a great significance anywhere, but infinitely more so on the site of a Magic Eruption” (Barnhill 255). Four years prior to the novel’s opening, Mr Avery attempted to perform this swap again. Instead of offering his own son, Clayton, he kidnapped the marginalized, silent boy Frankie Schumacher, using him as a substitute to deceive the Lady (Barnhill 601).

Because this transaction was based on a lie and an act of violence, the magic “backfired” and surged out of control, causing a massive ecological rupture (Barnhill 601). In that moment of trauma, the Lady’s heart and being were split in two: “Her heart split in two, and She split in two—Her Wickedness and Her Goodness divided into two separate beings” (Barnhill 410). Her “Wicked” half became the predatory Lady who traps children’s souls in the dark, subterranean World-Under-the-World to sustain her own fading strength, while her “Good” half became the “Other,” trapped within the walls and structure of Clive and Mabel’s purple house (Barnhill 396). This ecological division is a direct consequence of patriarchal capitalism’s attempt to turn the relational vitality of nature into static property. As Timothy Morton argues, when human systems attempt to exploit and master ecological forces, they do not escape them; instead, they become trapped inside a fractured, decaying, and vengeful ecosystem (Morton 12). The split of the Lady mirrors the split in the town’s social fabric, proving that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked (Sharma 11).

Ontological Grafting and Ecofeminist Reconnections

To resolve the ecological crisis in Hazelwood, the novel turns to what can be read as an ecofeminist strategy of resistance and ontological reconciliation. Ecofeminism, as Greta Gaard and Noel Sturgeon define it, is a movement and theory that connects feminist concerns with environmentalism, showing that the ideology which authorizes the oppression of women, marginalized groups, and nature is the same system of patriarchal domination (Alghamdi 3). According to ecofeminist theory, Western patriarchal societies are structured around a culture-nature dualism in which culture and masculinity are valued, while women and nature are devalued and associated with passivity (Alghamdi 3).

In *The Mostly True Story of Jack*, this dualism is challenged through the character of Wendy Schumacher and her alignment with Jack and Frankie. Wendy represents a fierce rejection of patriarchal expectations. In Hazelwood, which is described as “Avery’s town... Avery’s cops and teachers and buildings” (Barnhill 334), Wendy is constantly targeted by the authorities as a “delinquent” and threatened with “removal” by the local police because she physically defends her deformed, mute brother Frankie from Clayton Avery’s bullying (Barnhill 299, 330). Rather than conforming to the passive “feminine” role expected of her, Wendy is described as “all angles and edges,” with scraped knuckles and coppery hair that streams “away from her body like a flag,” looking as though she “should be holding a sword, leading an army, or killing a dragon” (430).

Wendy’s deep bond with Frankie and her subsequent friendship with Jack are grounded in their shared immersion in the non-human landscape. In an ecofeminist reclamation of the women-nature connection as empowering (Alghamdi 5), Wendy is the only character who remembers the “lost boy” (Jack) wandering in the cornfields after the magical backfire, refusing to allow his memory to fade when the rest of the adult world undergoes a psychological erasing (Barnhill 461, 484). She interacts with the landscape not to master it, but to find solace and solidarity, climbing trellises, sleeping in the forest of the gully, and seeking the truth hidden beneath the soil (Barnhill 236, 485).

This rejection of patriarchal dualism culminates in the protagonist, Jack, and his journey toward ontological self-discovery. Throughout his life in San Francisco, Jack has felt completely “invisible” to his self-absorbed, career-driven parents, a feeling of displacement and lack of belonging that mirrors the modern human alienation from the natural world (Barnhill 206–207). However, upon arriving in Hazelwood, Jack is forced to read Clive Fitzpatrick’s *The Secret History of Hazelwood*, a handwritten text that details the magical and ecological lineage of the town (Barnhill 281). Through this book, Jack learns of “grafting”—the process by which a farmer takes a shoot from one tree and binds it to a mother trunk, making them appear as one tree when they are actually two different species (Barnhill 247).

This horticultural metaphor is revealed to be Jack’s own ontological reality. He is not a biological human child; rather, he is the Lady’s “Magic Child” who was saved from Mr. Avery’s failed swap by Clive and the Lady’s Good half (the Other) (Barnhill 599). To hide him from the Wicked Lady, they “infused magic into the very fibers of the house” and “made [him] appear as a boy,” grafting him onto an artificial family structure with fake memories (Barnhill 603). Jack’s physical transformation in the subterranean tunnels of Hazelwood represents a literal shedding of his human mask to reclaim his ecological self:

“Vines erupted from the walls... Jack looked down. There were so many vines binding his legs that he looked like the trunk of a tree, woody and leafy, brown and green... leaf, bark, and wood... To Jack’s surprise, it did not hurt. Instead,

he only felt relief—as though he were finally shrugging out of an extremely uncomfortable suit or a shirt that itched” (Barnhill 184).

His skin peels away to reveal that he is “supple and strong as a sapling,” with green, alive arms that release “the strong scent of sap” (Barnhill 670). This ontological merging undoes the dichotomous pair of nature and self (Sharma 4, 18). Jack does not experience this loss of a distinct human identity as a source of gothic horror or death; instead, it is a moment of profound “relief” and self-actualization, demonstrating that his true self is co-extensive with the earth itself (Sharma 19). In the climax of the novel, Jack uses this ecological agency to perform an act of ultimate reconciliation. Recognizing that the Lady’s split into “Wickedness” and “Goodness” is the source of Hazelwood’s decay, Jack refuses to allow Wendy or Frankie to sacrifice themselves. He steps into the magical membrane of the World-Under-the-World, declaring his ownership and relationship over both halves of his maternal deity (Barnhill 677). Holding onto both the Lady and the Other, Jack screams: “No, Mom. You can’t give me away again... I choose You, Mom. Both halves of You. You’re supposed to be whole, and You’re supposed to love me. And I’m supposed to be Your son. And You’re mine, do You hear me? Mine!” (Barnhill 708–709).

This declaration of mine is not an act of capitalist ownership or mastery, but a claim of relational, familial reciprocity. By pulling the two halves of his mother into the magical mirror, Jack forces them to merge back into a single, unified being: “The mirror rippled and flowed like water around their bodies, and both Lady and Other merged into one... She stopped screaming, stopped singing, and stood perfectly still” (Barnhill 709).

This unification represents what Alghamdi describes as a “healing paradigm, based on environmental ethics, which cures the ill-treatment of nature and women” (Alghamdi 11). By making the Lady whole again, Jack restores balance to the land: the corn fields heal, the blank birth certificates and historical documents in the town library miraculously rewrite themselves, and the stolen souls are finally set free to “go on” (Barnhill 700, 715). Jack’s mother is restored not as a passive, purely benevolent “Mother Nature” (a stereotype often critiqued by ecofeminists), but as a deity who is “whole, complicated, and real,” possessing “the same struggles of right and wrong, just like you and me” (Barnhill 725). Through this ecofeminist lens, Barnhill shows that ecological restoration cannot occur through the suppression of nature’s wildness or the sentimentalization of its purity; it requires an active, complicated, and relational embrace of the non-human other.

Conclusion

Kelly Barnhill’s *The Mostly True Story of Jack* stands as a powerful and sophisticated contribution to ecological children’s literature. By weaving together gothic, magical realist, and fantasy elements, the novel provides a profound critique of the historical and material practices of ecological exploitation. Through the theoretical frameworks of

Timothy Morton's dark ecology and contemporary ecofeminism, we can see that the town of Hazelwood is a microcosm of the Anthropocene, where the capitalist and patriarchal impulse to dominate and commodify the land leads directly to social fragmentation, personal trauma, and environmental decay.

The novel's resolution offers a hopeful yet complex environmental ethic. Jack's decision to sacrifice his human, suburban existence to merge with the World-Under-the-World is not a tragic death but an act of ecological communion. As Clive Fitzpatrick reflects, Jack's choice allowed him to "finally experience the love of his mother," achieving a state where human and non-human forces are "whole, complicated, and real" (Barnhill 726). The novel ends not with a return to an untouched, pristine wilderness, but with a community that has integrated its historical trauma and recognized its deep, material connection to the soil (Barnhill 718). Ultimately, *The Mostly True Story of Jack* teaches young readers that we cannot separate our own emotional and physical well-being from the health of the ecosystems we inhabit. To survive, we must, like Wendy, hold fast to our memories of the earth, letting our hearts "send out tendrils, grasping onto... memory, gently winding around it, holding it fast" (Barnhill 728).

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