

## SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Barbara Kingsolver synthesizes her evolving feminist concerns with sociological tenets in *Animal Dreams*. While all her novels explore feminist and social issues, *Animal Dreams* merges social concerns with environment. As in her other two novels, *Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*, she challenges the assumptions of patriarchal culture through an exploration of society and natural domination. While *Bean Trees* introduces her concerns as a human rights activist, focusing primarily on social issues, themes she elaborates on in *Pigs in Heaven*, in *Animal Dreams*, and in her later novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, her enhanced vision embraces both social and natural concerns. More specifically, Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams* focuses on the local, and thus is representative of a bioregional narrative, a narrative that brings voice to the community of Grace, Arizona. For this reason, this paper focuses on *Animal Dreams*. Because Kingsolver has often referred to her desire to change the world, it is only natural that she would use such a novel as a vehicle for her goals. Although the novel contains many of the same themes as *Mean Spirit* and *Ceremony*, *Animal Dreams* is uniquely social, an artistic call for action.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Concerns, Sociological Tenets, Exploration of Society

### INTRODUCTION

"Fiction is a better tool for education than nonfiction" (Miles 28), Kingsolver uses stories to reach a more expansive audience than a political treatise might. As Karen Karbo reflects, "Her medicine is meant for the head, the heart and the soul— and it goes down dangerously, blissfully, easily" (9). Her novels, easily accessible to a wide audience, have the potential to influence the reader and change the world. Noting this potential, she comments on the power of storytelling: Art has the power not only to soothe a savage breast, but to change a savage mind. Although Kingsolver recognizes the importance of reaching a wide-ranging audience, she also realizes that her story must inspire the reader to respond to her message with action. She wishes the reader to choose to participate in the transformation of the world. By the time the novel closes, Kingsolver has led the reader through an educational process whereby he or she must explore our society's mainstream assumptions. Kingsolver once commented on the importance of such an analysis: So few of us examine our motives and our mythology, the things that we believe in without question. Like humans are more important than any other species. Most people with your background and mine go through their whole lives without questioning that. I am more important than a Kirtland's warbler. Don't even think about it. And, so when you run up against somebody who says, 'Of course the Kirtland's warbler is just as important as I am,' that can throw you for a loop. (Epstein 5)

*Animal Dreams* explores mainstream assumptions about self, society, oppression and environmental protection. Because Kingsolver wishes to give voice to the oppressed, her novels contain a diverse mix of characters, both human and natural, which have often been the target of such oppression. In *Animal Dreams*, Kingsolver juxtaposes Codi's search for herself, for her place, with the exploitation of the natural community of the fictitious town of Grace, Arizona much as Silko

uses Tayo's quest as a vehicle to comment on themes of isolation and connection. *Animals Dreams* focuses on the history of Grace and the Nolinans, descendants of its founding family. Focalizing through Cosima (Codi) her father, Doc Homer, and the letters from Codi's sister, Halimeda (Hallie), Kingsolver delineates the story. Since their mother died just days after giving birth to Hallie, the two girls, raised by a father unable to show affection and connect with his family roots, felt quite isolated from their community, an isolation that created between them a special bond. Ultimately, Codi feels completely estranged from her world. Kingsolver traces the theme of connections throughout the novel in what we might label "the education of Codi." Through fragments of Codi's memories and dreams, the reader learns how Codi yearns for connections. The recurring images from her childhood contradict the family "facts" provided by her father. Thus, Kingsolver uses Codi's memories and her dreams as a vehicle to delineate her sense of isolation. Because her father felt that he descended from the disreputable branch of the family, a lesson he says he learned in school with his academic lessons (287), Homer decides to erase his history, thus burying his family rather than redeeming them (287). Ironically, as he begins to lose his mind to Alzheimer's, he reflects that perhaps what he has done has made him "a brute beast" (287), yet he still believes that he created this myth out of necessity, that the people would not have accepted him as their doctor if he were one of them. Telling Codi that they wanted someone they could trust and that he was that man, Homer insists that "if you change the present enough, history will bend to accommodate it" (288). Codi retorts that "what's true is true." Homer, in retrospect, realizes some of the damage he has caused his family. Comparing his family to a spider web, he thinks of "himself at the center like a spider" and feels as if "he has damaged them all just by linking them together" (98). While he does not fully comprehend what has done to himself and his family, we see how they have all suffered because of this perceived rootlessness.

In Kingsolver's portrayal of Homer, we see a man who denied his family and his connection to the community his entire life. The onset of Alzheimer's disease is fittingly appropriate for one who has ignored his own identity. Perhaps in some ways, Kingsolver wishes to represent Homer as a microcosm of mainstream society, a society that has forgotten its own roots and its own connection to the natural world. Just as Homer has developed a type of amnesia, so has society in general. Kingsolver explores this amnesia, this lack of connection, repeatedly throughout the novel. For instance, Kingsolver portrays the men in the novel as powerless to save the land because they do not feel as connected to the land as they might. As one woman at the "Stitch and Bitch Club" meeting complains, "These men don't see we got to do something right now. They think the trees can die and we can just go somewhere else, and as long as we fry up to bacon for them in the same old pan, they think it would be. Home" (179)

It is not just the men in the community who often forget their connection with place, nationally and internationally; the people, government and industry often fail to recognize our interconnections and the importance of the land. In one section of the novel, Codi, while reflecting on the destruction of the mining industry, 108 comments that "American enterprise must seem arrogant beyond belief. Or stupid. A nation of amnesiacs, proceeding as if there were no other day but today. Assuming the land could also forget what had been done to it" (240-241). On a global level, Kingsolver shows our society's ability to "forget" atrocities when Hallie writes Codi about the death of some school girls in Nicaragua, girls gunned down from above by a U.S. helicopter. She tells Codi that she cannot "stand to think it could be the same amnesiac thing, big news for one day and then forgotten" (180). Later, after Hallie's own murder, Codi encounters this same type of amnesia during her encounter with Mrs. Alice Kimball on the greyhound bus, a woman who had been touched by Hallie's life even if only through the Gardening Hotline in Tucson (314). When she tells her that Hallie was killed in Nicaragua, Mrs Kimball grows uneasy, especially when Codi asks her if she heard about it. What

follows is a social commentary on America's amnesia: "It made the news in Tucson, at least for a day. You just forgot. That's the great American disease, we forget. We watch the disasters parade by on TV, and every time we say: 'Forget it. This is somebody else's problem'" (316). Just as Mrs. Kimball grows uncomfortable and silent, Kingsolver wishes the reader to grow uncomfortable about this amnesia and recognize his or her connection to the problem.

Ecofeminism and bioregionalism both require us to recognize our connections to all within the community. Without such recognition, we cannot adapt to our community; and without adaptation, we and our world cannot survive. Ecofeminists note that our world is "on the very edge of collapse" because patriarchal society fails to respect the "other" unless it can economically benefit from the "other" (Plant, *Healing the Wounds* 2). Because this view is so self-centered, "it [society] is blind to the fact that its own life depends on the integrity and well-being of the whole (2). Because this is the viewpoint that Kingsolver must ultimately wish to change, she uses her fiction to effect such a transformation: "By reminding the reader of his or her own connections to the land, she challenges the reader to remember and to act as well. Into Codi's quest for self, Kingsolver interweaves ecofeminist and ideas related to social concerns.

As previously mentioned, bioregionalists believe that we must connect with our community and ecofeminists believe that we must connect with our historical and cultural past. What Codi faces is what many women and marginalized people face. When we lose our connections to the past, we cannot effect any social transformation. Metaphorically, we are blind both to the possibilities of change and to the connection of our environment to ourselves. Kingsolver uses Codi's dreams to illustrate her lack of "sight." Codi's recurring dream of losing her eyesight becomes so real that she fears she will literally lose her eyesight (75-76). What Codi must learn is that blindness to her connections with her world is more damaging than physical blindness. In order to change our worlds, we must connect with our history and re-discover ourselves. Codi must discover and examine her stories carefully if she wishes to overcome her sense of isolation and become a contributing member of her community. Throughout the novel, Kingsolver weaves images of isolation. Codi's journey is wrought with difficulties and her ingrained assumptions about herself. She truly believes that she does not belong anywhere. At one point, she even expresses the fear that it will always be so because she has believed it for so long: "I was an outsider not only by belief but by flesh and bone" (291). These feelings of alienation, rooted in her childhood, cannot be eliminated easily. For instance, Codi often reflects on her "lost possibilities" (9), her fragmented communication with her father as a series of "badly connected phone calls" (10).

Her love affairs that failed to "rescue me from the cold, drafty castle I lived in" (117), and her feelings that everyone is related to each other, everyone except them, "the fish out of water" (71). Moreover, from childhood, the girls were often called *huerfanas*, the "orphan girls." One recurring fragmented memory from her childhood haunts Codi through much of the novel. During her attempt to save coyote pups from drowning, a flash flood separated her from her father, an image that metaphorically represents her feelings of isolation. Having lost her mother as a child, she feels alone because she never established a meaningful bond with her father. Codi, often reflecting on the loss of her mother and her confused memory of the night her mother died, wishes to know her, wishes for "some mothering" (76). Yet Homer's insistence on hiding the past keeps her from connecting with her mother. This lack of connection with her mother stunts her mental growth just as Tayo's lack of connection with his mother led to feelings of isolation in *Ceremony*.

In some ways, Codi's inability to sort through her memories parallels her father's own memory loss. Neither knows where they fit in, and to be totally complete, Codi must discover a place for both of them. By searching her memory and her past, she must come to recognize that the town of Grace did nurture them. Unlike her first response— when she

wants to scream that she needs “everything you have” (47)— at the store in Grace with its carefully stocked, nurtured shelves, she must learn that her family are not outsiders to Grace's nurturing. Once she recognizes her connection, she can help her father see that he also belonged to the community, illustrated by the way the women of Grace keep his refrigerator stocked and tend to his needs. As Codi undergoes the process of rebuilding her identity, it leads her gradually to recognize her connection with the community of Grace and her responsibility to this community. In other words, the way she interacts with her world begins to change as she learns to adapt. Once she discovers photos of herself and Hallie, photos showing their newborn “marble white eyes,” characteristic of all the babies of Grace, Codi uncovers the secret her father kept buried in his attic and finds her connection to Grace. After this discovery, her memories, like a flood in her mind, return, and Codi can begin slowly to piece together her life (282). As she rebuilds her history, Codi cultivates a new perspective. She begins to move from her self-centered ethos towards an ethos of caring, a true caring for her world. Earlier in the novel, Hallie had written Codi “that as long as you're nursing your own pain, whatever, it is, you'll turn your back on others in the same boat. You'll want to believe the fix they're in is their own damn fault” (88-89). Indeed, Codi responded in this manner when she first arrived in Grace. Upon seeing a group of children supposedly beating a peacock to death, she felt no response, no obligation to the bird: “no one had jumped in to help when I was a child getting whacked by life, and on the meanest level of instinct I felt I had no favors to return. Especially to a bird” (15). But to her credit, she does react when she thinks of Hallie and what Hallie would do in the same situation.

While she credits Hallie's memory with her action, perhaps she underestimates her innate sense of responsibility to her world. As a child, she saved coyote pups during a flash-flood despite her overriding instinct for self-preservation. Thus the memory can metaphorically also represent her true, albeit hidden, self. Perhaps it is also her hidden self that motivates her to action when she believes the children are killing the peacock. For her to grow up and acknowledge her responsibility to her community, she must learn to re-value her home and her community.. Moreover, in the process of Codi's re—connection with place, Kingsolver also guides the reader through the same re-evaluation and re-connection. We learn the same lesson that Codi learns: during the cyclical pattern of give and take that follows, the more Codi gives to the community, the more self-knowledge she receives, a classical example of the lesson that to find yourself, you must give of yourself. In addition to Codi's journey to reconnect with her world, Kingsolver explores the theme of connections through her juxtaposition of industry's managerial ethos with the Native American care-taking ethos. Just as we've seen in the novels of Hogan and Silko, Kingsolver focuses on the Native American holistic view of the land as an interconnected web of life. Codi's boyfriend, Loyd Peregrina, of Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache descent, introduces her to this world view, one that has been marginalized by modern society. Lisa See notes that Kingsolver believes

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Loyd helps Codi and she also helps him to recognize his role as an oppressor when he participates in cockfighting and to accept his responsibility to his cocks. Ecofeminists see oppression of any type as a suitable subject, and Kingsolver uses Codi's repulsion to comment on this inhumane practice. Upset with Loyd because he can “disengage” from his birds so easily he is sickened by the scene and wonders how anyone “could look at this picture and fail to see cruelty” (188). Although she notes that she might feel better if they at least ate the birds, used them somehow, Codi resolutely condemns the practice: “What I believe is that humans should have more heart than that. I can't feel good about people making a spectator sport out of puncture wounds and internal hemorrhage.” (191) He agrees to give up cockfighting, not to impress her, but because she was right (206). In essence, she reminds him of what he already knows and what he has helped her to understand: that we are all connected not only to each other but also to the natural world— the animals and the land. The

title of the novel, "Animal Dreams," infers this connection. When Loyd asks Codi if she knows what animals dream, we learn that he believes that the way we live generates our dreams: "I think they dream about whatever they do when they're awake. . . . It's the same with people" (133). Perhaps Kingsolver wants us to reject the supposed "shame" that of "our animal nature" (High Tide 8), and learn to live in harmony with the environment. By recognizing her role in preserving the community, Codi can begin to participate in the community from an ecologically-minded perspective. Likewise, her belief that her visit to Grace will last only one year enhances her role as a stimulus for social and environmental change. Codi's embarrassment over the exploitation of the land in relation to Loyd's beliefs helps strengthen her own convictions. As her convictions grow, she begins to act on her knowledge by teaching her students the same concepts. In what one of her students labeled "poetry," Codi lectures her student on the web of life and on adapting to their natural world. When met with apparent apathy, in anger, she tells them of the destruction of mountains so that companies can mine pumice, a necessary element in the stone-washing of jeans. Lecturing to them about sustainability and the true environmental cost of those jeans, she hopes to show them that this is their problem. She wants them to recognize that they cannot think somebody else will solve their problems. If they do not recognize that the world is not there just for them to exploit, they will suffer the ultimate fate: "Your life is the test. If you flunk this one, you die" (254). In this example, Kingsolver has Codi pose a problem that several ecofeminists and environmentalists have addressed. As one of her students notes, Codi is guilty of wearing stone-washed jeans too. While Codi acknowledges that she bought them before she knew the truth, she also emphasizes to her student that the ignorance of the truth does not make it acceptable. She is so angry because she is guilty too, and she wants to fix it.

Codi's growing concern over the continuing exploitation of the earth motivates her to teach her students that to be "custodians of the earth" (332) they must recognize their connections to the earth and their responsibility for the earth. In other words, she wants them to adopt an ethic of care. Because of her own life experiences, she recognizes the devastation that occurs when one loses this memory. By teaching her students about the diversity of the ecosystem, she can begin to implant the seeds of responsibility in them. By learning how their actions and the actions of others affect their community, the students will slowly perceive that they must also play an active role in preserving their environment. Likewise, in this merging of the bioregional directive to learn about and adapt to one's home with an ecofeminist directive to heal this same world through community activism.

Kingsolver also influences the reader in the same way. Believing we must save the place we live, Kingsolver provides ample examples of community activism, examples similar to her discussion of the copper mine strikes in *Holding the Line: Women in the Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*. Clearly, her own background in activism informs the novel. Quite by coincidence, Codi's class uncovers the poisoning of the river while on a field trip. After collecting water samples, they discover that the water contains no life and the pH was higher than battery acid: I couldn't believe the poisoning from the mine had gone this far. Protozoans are the early-warning system in the life of a river, like a canary in a mine. And this canary was dead. (110) Later, at a special meeting of the "Stitch and Bitch Club," Codi attempts to explain the problem about the damage to the ecosystem caused by the copper sulfate that the Black Mountain Mining Company uses to run through their tailing piles in an attempt to extricate all the copper possible. While the fish still live, other microorganisms do not: "That's how you can tell if a river is healthy or not. You can't see them, but they're supposed to be there" (177). While Codi thinks they wish to know the "why" of the problem, what they really want to know is "how" to solve the problem. Rather than seeing their situation as hopeless, they do not want "sympathy or advice" from her; they want "information." They want to know if the river is permanently poisoned. Once she assures them that the effects can be

reversed if they can stop the mine from poisoning the river with the sulfuric acid, in a confusion of discussion that follows, the women begin to decide on a course of action.

The reader can fully understand the same lesson Codi has learned. In Codi's struggle to reconnect with her historical and cultural past and to adapt to her world, she has finally grasped what Hallie understood all along: that you have to figure out what you hope for and then reach out for that hope. Although Hallie's death casts a shadow over the conclusion, the novel still ends with a sense of affirmation because Codi chooses to return to Grace to live. 4 Finally, she recognizes that she must act to make her hopes a possibility. In other words, like Hallie, she must be "a protagonist of history," not a spectator (338). With her memories intact and with a sense of wholeness, she is ready to accept the advice that Loyd once gave her: "If you want sweet dreams, you've got to live a sweet life" (133), a sentiment she rephrases at the end of the novel when she tells Homer, "It's what you do that makes your soul, not the other way around" (334).

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