

Exploring the Wilderness: An Ecocritical Analysis of Kristin Hannah's  
*The Great Alone*

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ABSTRACT

William Rueckert coined the term 'ecocriticism' in 1978. The idea of ecocriticism originated as 'literary ecology' in Joseph Meeker's 1972 book, *The Comedy of Survival*. Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural theory that studies the relationship between literature and the environment. It examines how literature represents the connection between humans and non-humans. It is also known as environmental criticism or green cultural studies. Kristin Hannah is a famous American writer whose novels include *Night Road*, *Firefy Lane*, *True Colors* and *Winter Garden*. Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone* presents a vivid illustration of nature's dual role as both nurturing and destructive. The novel, published in 2018, shows the complicated relationship between humans and the Alaskan backwoods. The novel portrays the struggle for

survival and the wilderness that lives in both human and nature. This paper explores the theme of survival and vulnerability in the novel. This paper also highlights how nature influences human lives, emotions and identities from an eco-perspective. It depicts the feminine connection to nature by examining the character of Leni. It also represents the influence of human activities on the environment and questions modern society's detachment from the natural world.

Keywords: Wilderness, Emotion, Identity, Survival, Vulnerability, Ecocriticism.

Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone* is a novel deeply embedded in the raw and untamed landscapes of Alaska. The story follows Ernt Allbright, Leni and Cora, as they move to a remote part of the state in search of a fresh start. However, the harsh environment proves to be both physically and emotionally challenging. The novel's portrayal of the Alaskan wilderness as both a nurturing and destructive force provides a rich ground for ecocritical analysis. Ecocriticism, as a literary theory, offers a suitable framework to examine how Hannah presents nature as a powerful force that influences the characters' experiences, emotions, and survival. According to Serpil Oppermann,

Ecocriticism is a new critical movement that attempts to link literary criticism and theory with today's ecological issues. It studies the relationship between literature and the science of ecology by applying ecological concepts to literature. Its aim is to synthesize literary criticism and the environmental matters by focusing on the literary analyses of the representations of nature in literary texts, and the literary constructions of the environmental crisis in eco-literary discourses (1).

This paper explores how *The Great Alone* represents nature as an indifferent entity, how it mirrors human emotions, the survivalist aspect of life in the wilderness, and the ecofeminist relationship between women and nature. Through this analysis, the paper aims to highlight the novel's contribution to

contemporary ecological discourse and call for a deeper understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

The Alaskan wilderness in *The Great Alone* is portrayed as both beautiful and formidable. Hannah's depiction of nature aligns with the ecocritical perspective that challenges anthropocentric views, presenting nature as an independent entity rather than a mere backdrop for human endeavours. The novel highlights the sublimity of nature, its ability to evoke both awe and fear. The long, brutal winters and the region's isolation serve as constant reminders of human vulnerability. Unlike romanticized portrayals of nature, Hannah emphasizes its indifference to human struggles as,

Two kinds of folks come up to Alaska, Cora. People running to something and people running away from something. The second kind—you want to keep your eye out for them. And it isn't just the people you need to watch out for, either. Alaska herself can be Sleeping Beauty one minute and a bitch with a sawed-off shotgun the next. There's a saying: Up here you can make one mistake. The second one will kill you (29).

This quote encapsulates the transformative power of the Alaskan wilderness, which forces the characters to confront their own limitations and adapt to the demands of the environment.

Nature is depicted as a force beyond human control. The Allbrights face extreme weather conditions, food shortages, and the ever-present danger of isolation. The novel underscores that nature does not cater to human needs, rather, humans must adapt to its demands. The Alaskan terrain, with its unpredictable climate and untamed wilderness, demands respect and resilience. For instance, the family's struggle to prepare for the harsh winter months highlights their vulnerability and the necessity of self-sufficiency. As Leni reflects,

Weather's unpredictable up here. Some years June is spring, July is summer, August is autumn, and everything else is winter. Up here the growing season is short, so we have to really work it.

Believe me, Cora, you have no idea how long the winter will be and how soon it will be here. It's one thing up here for men – a lot of them are going to leave for work on that new pipeline. You and me- mothers- we stay on the homestead and keep our children alive and well (52).

The novel's portrayal of nature as an autonomous force that shapes human existence reflects the fundamental principles of ecocriticism, which seek to decentre human agency and emphasize the agency of the natural world.

Survival is a central theme in *The Great Alone*, emphasizing the necessity of respecting and adapting to nature. The Allbrights must learn self-sufficiency through hunting, farming, and preparing for severe winters. Leni's survival depends on her ability to learn from experienced homesteaders, particularly Large Marge, who embodies a deep respect for the land. On the other hand, Ernt's struggle to adjust illustrates the risks of fighting against the realities of nature. His aggression and irrational fear show his failure to survive in Alaska's harsh environment. This juxtaposition between adapting to and resisting nature reinforces consequences of human actions on the environment. As Cora informs Leni, "It's going to get worse. Every day is darker and colder...every day more and more woods had to be chopped and carried and stacked. There was no room in these shortened days to think about anything beyond the mechanics of survival" (100-101). This statement underscores the indifference of nature and the necessity of adapting to its demands.

Hannah also highlights the psychological aspects of survival. In the novel, Alaska is portrayed as a challenging environment that tests individuals' resilience. The untamed wilderness symbolizes the personal struggles of the characters, mirroring their inner conflicts. Ernt's post-traumatic stress disorder and abusive behaviour escalate in isolation, representing the harmful possibilities of human fragility when faced with the apathy of nature. Conversely, Leni and Cora's growing resilience demonstrates the human capacity to adapt and thrive in nature. Their journey emphasizes the ecocritical idea that survival in the natural world

demands not just physical strength but also emotional and mental resilience. Hannah writes, “The ham radio filled with warnings of bad weather and listed the deaths that were as common in Alaska in the winter as frozen eyelashes. People died for the smallest mistake- car keys dropped in a river, a gas tank gone dry, a snow machine breaking down, a turn taken too fast” (100). This quote highlights the precariousness of life in the wilderness and the constant need for vigilance and adaptability.

The novel’s environmental setting often mirrors the emotional states of its characters. The harsh, unrelenting winters symbolize the increasing violence and instability of Ernt Allbright, whose PTSD and abusive behaviour escalate in isolation. On the other hand, the fleeting but lively summer seasons offer periods of optimism, affection, and emotional respite for Leni and her mother, Cora. This literary device called pathetic fallacy, emphasizes the connection between human sentiments and the environment. It supports ecocritical viewpoints on how nature shape personal identity and experiences. As Leni observes, “Trees fell over, crashed into power lines; electricity was lost. Rivers flooded their banks, washed across yards, ruined homes. People who loved each other snapped and fights erupted as the water rose and the rain continued” (3). This quote captures the transient nature of happiness in the Alaskan wilderness, where the harsh realities of winter always loom on the horizon.

Throughout the novel, the landscape serves as both a refuge and a threat. For Leni, Alaska represents both danger and freedom. The changing seasons parallel her emotional journey, from the oppressive darkness of winter to the fleeting joy of summer. Hannah’s use of nature to reflect human emotions highlights the deep relationship between people and their environment, a central tenet of ecocriticism. The novel recommends that human emotions are intertwined with the natural world. It emphasizes the need for a holistic understanding of human-nature relationships. As Large Marge says, “Alaska brings out the best and the worst in a man” (163). This quote underscores the idea that nature is not a passive environment but an active participant in the characters’ lives.

Hannah hints at the weakness of the ecosystem and the necessity of sustainable living. The novel puts together the self-sufficient lifestyle of Alaskan homesteaders with that of a modern industrialized society. *The Great Alone* depicts the characters living in harmony with the Alaskan wilderness. The novel suggests for an environmentally conscious living and questions about humanity's disconnection from nature. The novel claims that humans must learn to coexist with nature rather than attempting to dominate it.

Theodore Roosevelt opines that, "To waste, to destroy our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed" (Zafar). The novel also critiques the mistreatment of natural resources. Although the Allbrights and other homesteaders sustainably utilize the land, the threat of industrial activities like oil drilling and deforestation acts as a reminder of humanity's intrusion into the environment. By illustrating the fragile balance between survival and exploitation, Hannah encourages readers to contemplate their ecological duties. She writes, "This is Alaska. We live and let live" (75). As humans shift into a technologically advanced society, there are negative impacts on the environment and nature. The author examines these actions and asks the readers to realize how harmful their activities can be.

Leni's evolving relationship with nature parallels her journey toward independence and self-discovery. The land gives her a sense of identity, refuge, and power. It resonates with ecofeminist concept of connecting women's stubbornness to the persistence of nature. This perspective implies that both women and nature endure hardship under patriarchal and exploitative systems, and that they also hold the resilience to defy and regain control. To Leni, the land was her mother, her protector, her teacher. It had given her everything she needed to survive.

Cora and Leni's experiences in Alaska exemplify the challenges women encounter in male-dominated societies. Their ability to endure depends on skilfully managing both the harsh wilderness and the oppressive domestic environment. According to Peter O.O. Ottuh,

“... ecology or environment is closely associated with the female. The primary belief of ecofeminism is that the supremacy over women parallels the suppression of nature and that this mutual domination has led to environmental destruction by the controlling patriarchal society. This philosophy is based on the principle that there is a vital connection between the oppression of nature and women” (167).

The novel emphasizes that nature, like women, is often viewed as an entity to be subdued, yet it possesses inherent strength to resist and regenerate. Leni's connection to the land symbolizes her empowerment and her ability to overcome the challenges posed by both her environment and her father's abuse. Through Leni's character, Hannah highlights the ecofeminist notion that women and nature share a common struggle against patriarchal domination, yet both possess the resilience to endure and thrive. As Leni reflects,

“Wild. That's how I describe it all. My love. My life. Alaska. Truthfully, it's all the same to me. Alaska doesn't attract many; most are too tame to handle life up here. But when she gets her hooks in you, she digs deep and holds on, and you become hers. Wild. A lover of cruel beauty and splendid isolation. And God help you, you can't live anywhere else” (347).

This quote underscores the deep linking between Leni and nature, highlighting the ecofeminist idea that women and nature struggle against patriarchal domination. It also captures the essence of Leni's journey and the novel's ecofeminist message.

Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone* offers a compelling exploration of nature's dual role as both a life-giving and threatening force. Through an ecocritical lens, the novel highlights themes of survival,

emotional connection to the environment, and the moral consequences of human interactions with nature. Hannah portrays nature as an indifferent force, a mirror to human emotions, and a site of both struggle and empowerment. The novel's critique of industrialization and its advocacy for sustainable living resonate with contemporary ecological concerns.

Furthermore, the ecofeminist perspective in *The Great Alone* underscores the interconnectedness of women's struggles and environmental issues, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach to ecological discourse. Ultimately, *The Great Alone* calls for a deeper understanding of ecological balance and the necessity of living in unity with nature. Through its vivid portrayal of the Alaskan wilderness and its complex characters, the novel serves as an influential reminder of the permanent connection between humans and the natural world. It also urges the readers to review their place within the wide-ranging ecological system.

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