

A Study of Human Alienation and Environmental Despair in Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*: An Eco-Critical Study

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Abstract - The study analyzes Lucy Kirkwood's play *The Children* by using the deep ecology principles that criticize anthropocentric viewpoints and show how they resulted in environmental despair and feelings of alienation while simultaneously promoting a close bond between humans and nonhuman animals. The play, which takes place in a post-nuclear disaster, highlights how man-made actions affect the environment and the characters incapacity to recognize and interact with it. Additionally, it looks into the characters responsibility to the next generation. This study highlights how the children successfully uncover an absence of profound ecological concepts fostering the of the integration of human life with nature through an examining the behavior of characters and the underlying themes. The aim of this research is to theatrically enhance awareness of the current environmental issues by questioning human supremacy worldview and its effects on both individuals and the natural environment while also encouraging people to get back in touch with and interact with nature.

Keywords: Lucy Kirkwood, *The Children*, Anthropocentric, Post-Nuclear, Environmental Issues

I. INTRODUCTION

Lucy Kirkwood is a British playwright and screenwriter who has won numerous awards. She was born in London in 1984 (Norcross 2019). At the University of Edinburgh, where she wrote for the Edinburgh University Theatre Company and performed with the improv comedy group *The Improverts*, she graduated with a degree in English literature (Interview with Lucy Kirkwood, 2019). As a dramatist, she consistently advocated for the pressing issues of the day and received multiple accolades for her efforts (Nick Hern Books, 2018; Geng, 2024; Norcross, 2019). *The Children* won praise from critics for its provocative themes and performances following its 2016 Royal Court London premiere and December 2017 Broadway debut (Interview with Lucy Kirkwood, 2019).

The Children revolves around a long-married couple's life in their remote cottage on the British coast, which is the subject of the play. Numerous nuclear physicists live humble lives after retirement, working in the energy industry, doing yoga, talking, and caring for their gardens. It completely upends their lives when Rose, a former coworker, makes a

reappearance after 38 years. The couple's confidence and equilibrium are shaken as a result of long-ago decisions that suddenly become apparent. Over their union with Rose, a threatening proposal is revealed. The latest work by Lucy Kirkwood is tense. Kirkwood is a popular suspense about responsibility that's across the two cities, New York and London. reparations that one generation owes another (Theatrical Outfit, 2020; Allabergenov et al., 2024). The Kirkwood took a tsunami, which served as the catalyst for the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi plant accident that caused the meltdown of three of the plant's six core reactors, flooded the facility, and broke through the seawall, as well as the story of the retired nuclear power worker who entered the plant to clean it up. "We built a nuclear reactor next to the sea and then put the emergency generators in the basement!" says one character (Kirkwood, 2016), and then she did in a sense, it molded a highly predictable catastrophe to examine the all-natural tendency to minimize the significant ramifications duo to their choices (Interview with Lucy Kirkwood, 2019).

Kirkwood, in her conversation with Navida Stein, says that She had difficulty writing regarding the climate crisis before Fukushima events sparked her inspiration. Yet, Kirkwood indicates that her play is not a type of social activism (Stein, 2018).

In this sense, *The Children* is not a play that offers ways to make things different within society in a more positive manner but rather a dramatic allegory that highlights the repercussions of environmental consequences of human behavior and instead uses creative investigation to increase awareness compared to social action (Filfilan & Alattas, 2025).

Each of the three protagonists acknowledges the need for nuclear energy, "one in 10 million years fault sequence" (Kirkwood, 2016), based on the scientists' findings. Ultimately, this play is about more than intergenerational relationships as well as the individuals with varying viewpoints and dispositions. A sizeable amount focuses on analyzing the distinctions between Rose and Hazel in the first half. Rose does not have children, while Hazel has four

children, though. Rose takes a more careless approach to life than Hazel, and Robin has produced an efficient and orderly household (Nelson, 2020). After being away for over a decade, when Rose reappears, she brings unresolved drama that calls into question Robin and Hazel's manufactured relationship. Hazel, however, is not solely defined by her hope despite of the catastrophe (Yates, 2023). "If you're going to grow, don't live," Hazel states (Kirkwood 2016). As the play begins, Hazel and Rose's past is disclosed. Hazel's repressed rage and jealousy start to surface but never to the extent of an outright altercation. But everyone can see it. Rose is always familiar with the kitchen and knows it all too well. When you need a glass, you know exactly where to get it. Hazel has every right to be suspicious of her former colleague and spouse, as shown when Robin shows up and is able to engage in a personal discussion (Nelson, 2020; Daivagna et al., 2025). There's a strong sense of losing control in the one room where the action takes place and acceptance of bittersweet relief. The play's central theme is the mess that people create and whose responsibility it is to clean it. Rose, who is not present, is trying to mitigate the disastrous consequences. To get things going, it is suggested that the younger scientists be replaced by the engineers who constructed the plant and are currently engaged in radioactive zone work (Yates, 2023).

The Children explores significant topics as the play goes on, bringing humanity and humor to the discussion, issues like nuclear safety, ecological collapse, aging, and even the decision to raise children or not (Gao, 2024). Whether or not one generation bears is the primary question at the heart of this play. accountability for how its actions will affect future generations. If they agree, take responsibility and take action. These are particularly important questions given the ongoing worldwide warming crisis. highlighting the play's main topics wider ramifications (Lowe, 2024). In the end, the play seems to be an examining that explores life after retirement for three nuclear scientists who are still dealing with the fallout from their past while leading different lives and activities in the environment (Allabergenov et al., 2024). Kirkwood deftly examines and pertains to the psychology of her characters. the more general theme of environmental dejection. She did not assign blame to the characters. demonstrates how intricate the topic is. What does altering the behaviors actually mean? (Parker, 2011; State Theatre Company South Australia, 2024) Accept accountability? (Ahani, 2016).

Through its investigation of the inner psyche and emotions impacts of interactions between humans and nature and the interconnectedness of the various generations, which Kirkwood effectively illustrates, its own voice about the contemporary environmental crisis encourages people to take action on nature's interdependence. Additionally, the play illustrates the interdependence of generations, urges increased understanding of how human activity affects the environment, and offers a possible solution and strong basis for additional study within the ecocriticism framework

(Lowe, 2024; Maya, 2024; Mowafi, 2023; Sharma & Nayak, 2018).

II. THEATRICAL FRAMEWORK

The term deep ecology, which was first used by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, serves as the foundation for this study. It highlights how all living and non-living things, including humans, are interconnected with nature. Despite reflecting romantic visions, it deviates by taking a critical socio-political stance and education systems that are anthropocentric and frequently at odds with efforts to preserve nature (Alvarado, 2021, Ambrosius, 2005, Banerjee, 2020).

This point of view is clearly applicable to examining Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, which reveals human self-centeredness and the effects of human behavior on the natural world.

Deep ecology is less of a biological argument and more of a philosophical one. Sometimes it also takes on a religious dimension. According to deep ecologists, people should respect nature for what it is, its inherent value on par with human value. They believe that conventional ecologists are excessively associated with preserving nature for human benefit; they value it based on moral judgment, simply for its pure purpose. They believe that people should drastically change in order to make human life easier in order to blend in with the environment, highlighting the ways in which the increase is seriously harming the natural world within the human race. Ecologists therefore support human rights, just like many other environmentalist's restrictions. Deep ecology is based on the moral principle of respect for nature. Simply put, the phrase deep ecology has remained popular due in part to its rhetorical power in terms of ecology. Deep ecology and thought are clearly visible. But occasionally when faced with a choice, one must make one. Most advocates of deep ecology make the decision to select between the livings beings and non-livings creatures. But they value human life in the same way that other ecologists and non-ecologists do (Parker, 2019). By reflecting these issues, *The Children* critiques the anthropocentric priorities of its characters, people over non-human animals. The fundamental tenet of deep ecology is that people should consider their actions and re-establish a connection with the natural world, and the play stands as a powerful reminder of this.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative methods to show feelings of isolation, loneliness and environmental hopelessness in ecological theatre in *The Children*. This research uses the play's text as the primary source for analysis. This research based on an analytical method. Also, the study adopts a methodical framework that addresses the various levels of meaning found in the literary work under study. Furthermore, the research studies the interpretations of the themes to indicate the topics that reflect feelings of isolation, loneliness and environmental hopelessness in ecological

distress. By using the lens of deep ecology, this research intends to introduce understanding into the psychological as well as emotional aspects of ecological anxiety. The study aims to examine how *The Children* expose anthropocentric views and human interference with nature. It also analyses *The Children* by using deep ecology as a critical lens. Moreover, this research highlights how theatre serves as a medium for ecological awareness. By addressing these objectives, this study provides a deeper understanding of how contemporary drama engages with ecological concerns, emphasizing the urgent need for environmental responsibility.

IV. DISCUSSION

The play starts with a description of the vibes of the settings, which establishes a direct connection between the play and the natural world and shapes the topic of environmental concerns. The minor items, like the wildflowers candlelight, milk, and the room's gentle bend, all serve to strengthen the bond between them, the characters and the environment, and evoke a feeling of vulnerability. The description is reflecting the balance between humanity and nature, emphasizing the effects of human interaction with the natural world. The play aims to illustrate how ecological degradation is exacerbated by human activity.

Now, Hazel and Robin reside in a cottage situated away from the radioactive danger zone in Suffolk owned by "some distant cousin of Robin's" (Kirkwood, 2016). This is a reminder that the characters are in a temporary situation. The circumstances of the characters are precarious. Important elements of the staging, like the stage, contribute to this feeling of instability. There are "candles in wine bottles" (Kirkwood, 2016), according to the directions, implying power shortages following the nuclear catastrophe. The room is also mentioned in the stage directions: it tilts slightly as a result of erosion on the land underneath it. This shouldn't be apparent, however, and can only be observed when a round object is placed—to the unaided eye for example, the kitchen table. These subtle have an emotional impact on the audience—disturbing details inside the environment reinforce the notion that Hazel and Robin are indeed displaced from their place on a nonverbal level, without conscious awareness (Banerjee, 2020; Blowers, 2016; Burton, 2021).

Hazel's feelings were expressed when Rose paid her a visit in their cottage early in the play. Her sense of being detached from the outside world and physically alienated in a cottage due to the outcome of the nuclear crisis. This assertion illustrates how the characters endure more than just one physical alienation in addition to emotional isolation. Living beside the ocean fails to help the characters to feel less alone. While deep ecology promotes the notion of a fundamental understanding of the interdependence of humanity and the inanimate, "The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human

purposes" (Naess, 2019). Hazel's statement shows an anthropocentric viewpoint because she does not appreciate the intrinsic worth of nature, like the ocean, which contributes to their sense of isolation. The sea was seen as a barrier by them; they conquered the obstacles they encountered. All species are interdependent according to deep ecology, a connection to which the characters in the play are unable to adjust.

While at the beginning Hazel's expression of being alienated and lonely mirrors her anthropocentric perspective that fails to recognize the inherent worth of the environment. Her next words convey a strong bond with the land. Hazel's connection to the land is evident in this speech. Her commitment to the land is consistent with the fundamental ideas of deep ecology. This attachment made her feel like she belonged to the extent that she feels betrayed if she goes away. Unlike the anthropocentric perspective that prioritizes humans over all other animals, Hazel's attitude toward abandoning the land demonstrates a biocentric view of the planet as intended solely for human use. This viewpoint promotes the connections between the living and all other creatures and values nonliving creatures, the key concepts of deep ecology. As Hazel exhibits Her remarks hint at isolation that a lot of individuals live when their surroundings become hazardous or deteriorated. Hazel's comparison of a nuclear station to retirees gives her speech more depth. Like those who being near to the sea and are retired, nuclear power stations, even though they are no longer in use, continue to serve as a reminder of human wrongdoing. This is a critique of the destructive technologies that humans rely on that ultimately cause environmental despair and a sense of alienation between people and their surroundings.

People are working harder as a result of technological and industrial advancements. Make a few payments to them without even knowing what they produce. Thus, they disregard the materials and moral principles. In the concept of it, it contends human-centeredness perspective is the only source of the issues that deep ecology advocates, ecological issues, and that cultural, economic, and ideological factors are needed to solve them. technological reorganization. Within the field, deep ecologists do not advocate for human connections within the ecosystem's nutrient cycle. Human's separation from the source of life brings both people and the non-livings creatures to the fore. Integration with nature is viewed in this way. The importance of equality disregards human's diplomatic, spiritual, ethnic, and different associations in priority over reliance on ecosystems. Deep ecological thinking is therefore crucial for participation in the promotion of discouraging ecological viewpoints, humanity-centered behavior, and thinking (Clayton et al., 2021; Dindaroglu, 2024). Hazel and Rose laughing at the end of their conversation appears to serve as a solace for Hazel and a coping mechanism, a way to temporarily alleviate the ecological instability disaster, which is reinforced by those in her immediate vicinity's fragile feeling of safety (Maya, 2024).

The repair crew of companions retired from the nuclear power industry. Rose comes to ask her old coworkers to accompany her in safeguarding the many younger engineers who are currently working there. Young families are trying to secure the destruction reactor, putting themselves in danger from radiation that is hazardous and almost always fatal. Rose directs her unrestrained inter-generational regret at the others for casualty. This conflict is fascinating. All of the characters are skilled, their portrayals well-defined, and they each react differently to the moral quandary. Hazel, because she needs time, serves as a somewhat bumptious surrogate for the average viewer. She stands as the sole character who has not already been scarred by cancer, and her complicated allegiances and grudges add depth (Kalb, 2017). The disaster has left a physical mark on Rose as well. A vicious nosebleed leaves her covered in blood at the start of the play. In a frightening narrative about the aftermath of an atomic disaster, a pivotal plot point though untrue is overlooked. After the calamity, Rose relocated to the U.S. and endured breast cancer severe enough to require a double mastectomy. With no spouse or children, she is utterly alone in the most literal sense of the word. Thus, it is genuinely accurate to say that each member of the three figures feels both physical and emotional pain, as if the Earth has turned into a dangerous place for them (Mowafi, 2023). The central characters in *The Children* are held accountable for mistakes they did in the past. Rose, Hazel, and the building's design all raised inherent safety concerns for Robin—especially in the time Hazel worked there and Robin had just given birth to her first child. However, there are numerous challenges. It appears that people—particularly those living in the Global North, where wealth is relatively abundant—tend to possess an automatic short-term mindset (Burton, 2021).

Although ecology claims that it does avoid meddling with the environment. However, the noninterference theory of deep ecology does not suggest that. People should not change some ecosystems, just like other species. Humans have changed the Earth, and this is probably going to keep up. However, it is necessary to re-dimension the changes. That is the matter. Ecology provides education. Humans are capable of taking part in a food web, a food chain, and other ecosystems with the inherent right to encroach on and even take certain natural resources similar to those of a lion, tiger, or shark (English Theatre Frankfurt, 2019; Montaña, 2006).

In the play, the consequences of their involvement within the environment are felt by the characters. The broader issue is reflected in Rose and Hazel's involvement with the nuclear plant and the ensuing catastrophic ecological crisis where environmental damage caused by human activity has lasting effects. *The Children* exposes the transitory perspective of contemporary society, referring to how people and systems frequently disregard how their actions will affect future generations.

Rose understands that her generation made mistakes and that they were participants in the structure that constructed the nuclear power plant, but now the youth individuals has to put

up with the catastrophe. This depicts the anthropocentric and intergenerational views of injustice, which have been exploited by using natural resources excessively without considering long-term sustainability. Hazel's response, "To clear it up" (Kirkwood, 2016), appears to be a realization of the devastation that has already been completed. This supports deep ecology's central principle, which is that once nature is injured, recovery might not be possible. This is determined by the fifth deep ecology principle, which is the primary cause of environmental issues is human interference. This relates to the ability of humans to recognize that ecosystems are self-regulating, which is the second principle: no requirement for human assistance. Humans are essentially expected to be a part of nature and interfere to some degree with their surroundings. *The Children* is, according to Billington, a well-known theatre critic for *The Guardian*, a play that, whether or not one is a parent, reflects the larger existential and ethical conundrums that the play explores (Billington, 2016).

The scene where Hazel sprays air freshener after her argument with Rose appears to be a means of purifying the air of cigarette smoke, claiming the green shortcut, and signifying the separation of nature and humanity. While Rose represents the ethical commitment and duty to the environment, Hazel's action shows her anthropocentric views, which cause a disconnection from nature and are criticized by deep ecology.

Eventually, the closing scene has a profound effect on the viewers, causing a feeling of captivation and wonder. The breath of the woman, the sounds of the broom, and the crash of waves create a sense of anticipation. Unexpected sound of the church bell rises as the audiences begin to settle into the silence. The final act does not give clear responses but rather call the audience to consider on the flow of time, the vulnerability of the breath, and the hidden forces that form their lives.

V. CONCLUSION

Lucy Kirkwood has successfully managed to refute anthropocentrism and the human role, highlighting the negative effects of such a mindset through an intervention in nature. By outlining the responsibility toward next generations, environmental interconnectedness, and self-sacrifice and analyzing them by using the lens of deep ecology, the play effectively establishes a strong bond between the ecological concerns as well as the inner psyche and emotions aspects of people, inspiring them to have a deep ecological view and to consider how they behave in relation to the natural world. This research has demonstrated how *The Children* explores the ecological aspects of feelings of isolation, loneliness and environmental hopelessness, showing how ecological anxiety has an impact on the emotional, psychological, and ethical realms in addition to the physical aspect. Furthermore, this research affirms the function of theatre as a reflective medium for depicting the ecological crisis, demonstrating the potency of theatre as a vehicle for effecting change regarding the environmental

problems. In the end, *The Children* is a rejection of human-centered worldview as well as an urgent plea for people to respect the environment and interact with nature. *The Children* questions the human-centered beliefs from a deep ecology perspective and promotes a change to a more ethical and sustainable approach to the natural world.

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