



## SUBVERSION AND SATIRE OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the subversion and satire of anthropocentrism in English literature from the Middle Ages to the contemporary period. By analyzing works from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift, Wordsworth, Shelley, Hardy, Eliot, Woolf, McEwan, Atwood, and Winterson, the study reveals a persistent literary tradition that challenges the notion of human centrality. Through satire, irony, and narrative reorientation toward nature and non-human perspectives, these texts expose the limitations of human pride and reimagine humanity's relationship with the broader world. The paper argues that literary critiques of anthropocentrism offer essential insights for contemporary ecological and philosophical thought.*

Anthropocentrism—the philosophical stance that places humans at the center of existence—has been deeply woven into Western literature and thought. Yet English literature, from its earliest records to the contemporary period, frequently challenges this assumption. Through satire, allegory, and irony, writers have exposed the limitations of a human-centered worldview, revealing humanity's vulnerability, fallibility, and often absurd self-importance. This essay explores the tradition of subverting and satirizing anthropocentrism in English literature, tracing key moments from the Middle Ages to postmodernism.

Even in early English literature, anthropocentrism was questioned. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls* (1382) presents animals engaging in sophisticated political debates about love and hierarchy. The use of animals as political allegory subtly implies that human debates are no more elevated than those of beasts (Chaucer, 1382/2006). The birds, with their comical disagreements, mirror the pettiness of human courts, suggesting a continuity rather than a chasm between humanity and the natural world.

William Shakespeare, too, often explored the precariousness of human superiority. In *King Lear* (1606), Lear's descent into madness is marked by a recognition of human fragility. His famous lines—"unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (Shakespeare, 1606/2008, 3.4.106–107)—directly strip away the illusions of human grandeur. Shakespeare's portrayal of man as a mere animal underlines the thin veneer of civilization and questions human exceptionalism.

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) represents one of the most powerful satirical attacks on anthropocentrism. In the land of the Houyhnhnms, rational horses govern society with virtue and logic, while humans, embodied by the Yahoos, are depicted as violent, greedy, and base. Swift critiques not only human morality but also Enlightenment optimism about reason and progress (Swift, 1726/2010). By making animals the rational beings and humans the savage ones, Swift satirizes humanity's self-image as the apex of creation.

The Romantic period witnessed a profound literary reorientation toward nature as a force greater than humankind. In William Wordsworth's poetry, nature is not merely a backdrop for human action but a living entity with moral and spiritual authority. In "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth asserts that nature can guide human thought and feeling better than society or organized religion (Wordsworth, 1798/2004).

Similarly, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* (1818) offers a devastating image of anthropocentric arrogance. The shattered remains of a once-mighty king's statue, lost in the desert sands, epitomize the inevitable downfall of human pride before the enduring forces of nature and time (Shelley, 1818/2013).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) also critiques human arrogance towards the natural world. The Mariner's killing of the albatross—a symbolic act of human domination—brings about catastrophic consequences, emphasizing that human actions are inextricably bound to the larger ecological order (Coleridge, 1798/2017).

In the Victorian period, writers like Thomas Hardy advanced a vision of nature as indifferent or even hostile to human concerns. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), nature does not respond to human suffering or moral virtue; it simply exists, often compounding tragedy through chance and circumstance (Hardy, 1891/2003). Hardy's universe is one where human beings are no more protected or privileged than any other creature, further undermining anthropocentric assumptions.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) also grapples with a non-anthropocentric vision. Although the poem mourns the death of a beloved friend, it recognizes that evolution and natural selection imply a universe where "Nature, red in tooth and claw" cares nothing for human sentiment (Tennyson, 1850/2004). Tennyson's meditation on evolution hints at a cosmos where human life is not central but incidental.

The early twentieth century brought a profound crisis in anthropocentric narratives. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) portrays a fragmented, spiritually barren landscape in which human mastery and coherence have collapsed (Eliot, 1922/2015). Eliot's allusions to ancient myths and cultural decay depict humanity as drifting amidst ruins, unable to restore its lost centrality.

Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933), a fictional biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, further subverts anthropocentrism by centering the narrative on a non-human consciousness. Through the dog's perspective, Woolf critiques the presumption that human experiences are the only ones that matter (Woolf, 1933/2003). This playful yet pointed narrative exemplifies modernism's fascination with decentering the human subject.

Contemporary literature continues this tradition, often intensifying it in response to ecological crises and technological developments. Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010) satirizes the human inability to confront climate change, depicting a protagonist so absorbed in his petty

desires that he fails to recognize the existential threat facing the planet (McEwan, 2010). McEwan portrays humanity as simultaneously brilliant and self-destructive, deeply implicated in its own marginalization.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) imagines a post-apocalyptic world where genetically engineered beings, the "Crakers," have replaced humanity. The novel critiques not only human environmental destruction but also the arrogance of assuming humanity's permanence at the top of the evolutionary ladder (Atwood, 2003).

Likewise, in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), humanity repeats cycles of environmental devastation across different planets and epochs, suggesting that human exceptionalism is a delusion that endangers all life forms.

From Chaucer's talking birds to Atwood's posthuman species, English literature has persistently questioned and satirized anthropocentric beliefs. By portraying humanity as foolish, fragile, or secondary to nature and time, writers reveal the dangers of unchecked human pride. Literary subversions of anthropocentrism encourage readers to adopt a broader, more interconnected understanding of existence, one that recognizes humanity's place within, not above, the complex web of life.

As the ecological crises of the twenty-first century intensify, these literary critiques gain renewed urgency, reminding us that literature not only reflects but can also reshape our understanding of humanity's role in the broader world.

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