

An Analytical Study: Employing Ecofeminist in Anne Clermont's *learning to Fall* From Horse-Assisted Therapy Perspective



Bassim Mohammad Ali Al-Masri¹, Salim E.Al-ibia²

^{1,2} Al al - Bayt University

ABSTRACT: This study aims to examine the healing power of human–horse relationships in The *Learning to Fall* (2016) by Anne Clermont, by employing Ecofeminism Theory and Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT). This study attempts to answer the following question: what is the nature of the psychological connections between Brynn Seymour and her horse in Learning to Fall? Additionally, this study will investigate the relationships between man and animal, by relying on some relevant ecofeminism theoretical frameworks. Also, the aim is to explore the ways in which relationships are constructed between male characters, female characters, and horses in learning to fall. Generally speaking, ecofeminism is useful in examining the power dynamics as manifested in the interactions between men, women, and horses.

KEYWORDS: psychology, horse-assisted therapy (HAT), ecofeminism, learning to fall.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major themes in literature is the firm interconnectedness between nature and humans. Quite often, human are portrayed as intimately tied to nature and completely reliant on it. However, modern times have witnessed new development with regard to relationships between humans and nature due to the global acceleration of the pace of life. The new advanced technologies that humans rely on, especially in the digital age, have altered the relationships between humans and nature, where nature and the environment are progressively threatened by humans' irresponsible actions. The more damage we inflict on nature the harder human life becomes. These new development certainly raise serious ethical issues and elevate the sense of responsibility towards earth, nature, and the environment. In this context, it is equally critical to note that environmental protection is becoming more and more urgently recognized. Such awareness is manifested in many human knowledge-production arenas, such as the fields' natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities (Santoso et al., 2020).

Literature is among the most ancient and influential forms of cultural production systems that attempted to portray nature and its vitality to human life. More recently, literature has become a more important tool to raise consciousness of the damage done to environmental harm and the dire repercussions of continuing to ignore climate change. Such humanity's recklessness towards the flora and fauna takes different forms and shapes. For instance, man's attempts to control and exploit nature throughout human history were considered necessary to facilitate the construction of human civilization. At the same time and throughout human history, nature demonstrated its force, challenging and thwarting man's exploitative attempts. What is of concern in this chapter is the way men treat both women and animals in the two novels that this thesis investigates. More specifically, the spiritual and caring relationships that develop between female characters and horses face some challenges that stem from the watchful eyes of patriarchy and its thirst for exploitation and oppression (Gaard & Gruen, 1993).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Learning to fall

Anne Clermont's *Learning to Fall* (2016) that investigates the complex relationship between humans and horses. The novel's main events are centered around its protagonist, Brynn Seymour, who is a young woman living in a family and a community that is very passionate about caring for horses and all kinds of sports related to them. In this novel, the horse stands as a symbol of help and power in Seymour's family. The novel shows quite clearly the feelings of closeness and love that the Seymour's cultivate

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towards their horses and the ranch in general. They are fond of every aspect of noble horses and their breeding processes. In other words, horses play a significant role in their lives and are always looked at as having a positive presence and force on their daily routines.

The major event in *learning to fall* is centered on a truck accident that had two human characters and three horses. In what follows, summarize the main events in order to create the context for the analysis. This novel tells the story of Brynn Seymour and her father, Luke Seymour, and their horse stables in north California. Both are passionate about horses and the sport of show jumping. The father and his daughter decide to participate in a show jumping tournament. They travel with their three horses, Jett, Seraphim, and Cervantes. The plan for them was to use the prize money if Luke Seymour will win the first place, the prize money, 70,000\$, to pay their accumulating expenses. Of course, this all depends on whether Luke Seymour manages to win the first place or not. This ambitious plan never translates into reality due to the accident they all had to suffer while on their way to participate in the tournament.

Unfortunately, the horses loaded on the truck began to move around and kick each other, losing their initial calm during the first stages of the ride. Overtaken by anxiety and fear, the three horses continued to kick each other and move around uncontrollably, which resulted in the opening of trailer's door. The outcome was inevitable and the accident occurred. Luck Seymour was lying on the ground in the entry of the trailer trying hard to breath: "He gasped another breath" (Clearmont, 2016, p.29). In the middle of this tough situation, he tries to communicate something of great importance to his daughter, Brynn: "His eyes met mine" "please...." Clearmont. 2016, p.29). Apparently, he managed to utter his last sentences to his daughter, which they were about the horses and the ranch: "Promise me, if anything happens, you must take care of the horses, the ranch..." (Clearmont, 2016, P.29).

This quote presents how Luck links their lives with horses and the ranch, which appear quite clearly to be of great significance during his life and after his passing. Horses seem to symbolize dignity and power, and appear to play the role of facilitators of "a positive self-construct and were an important emotional support during treatment" (Kern-Godal Ann, et al., 2016, p. 10). The novel depicts Luke Seymour as someone who lived surrounded by horses and died surrounded by horses as well.

After her father's death, Brynn has experienced anxiety, fear, and depression. Additionally, the accident serves as a traumatic experience that Brynn has to live with and subsequently attempt to overcome. The scene of the death of her father kept coming back to her, leaving her mentally exhausted and always dominated by feelings of loss, sadness and anxiety. One of the symptoms of post-traumatic experiences is the lack of focus. This is evidenced in Brynn's saying: "I could not focus on anything" (Clearmont, 2016, P.39).

2.2 Ecofeminism in *learning to fall*

If we were to contemplate the history of equestrian sports, we would find that women were excluded from participation and not until late 19th century that women began to play important roles in this prominent sport. This does not come as a surprise, especially since women were not treated as equals to men and were always marginalised. However, the relationships between women and horses were often described as natural (Savvides, 2011). Clermont's *learning to fall* addresses the natural ties between women and horses in the realm of equestrian sports by shedding light on the horse's personality and identity development during its interactions with riders and other humans. Additionally, the author deals with the types of struggles and challenges that women in particular face in horse society in general and equestrian sports in particular.

The novel focuses on Brynn Seymour, a female protagonist, whose life is centered on studies to become a vet specializing in horses. At an early age, she developed a firm relationship with horses based on mutual love and understanding. As Kings, 2017; Fine, 2010, argues above, women are strongly tied to nature and if they face any forms of oppression and exploitation, then "the liberation of women cannot be achieved without the simultaneous liberation of nature from the clutches of exploitation" (Clearmont, 2016, p.70). In other words, the connection between Brynn and horses in general is always depicted as natural, whereas her father's relationships with horses are often hierarchical. Ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen often warned against any hierarchical frames of thinking in the sense that such ways of seeing the world would lead to oppression and exploitation. They stress that:

the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind (Gaard & Lori, 1993,p.5).

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What those two prominent ecofeminists focus on seems to fit perfectly with how Brynn and her father view their relationship with nature and animals. For instance, Luke Seymour views his status as superior to horses. On the contrary, Brynn always thought of horses not as mere instruments that riders need to be skilled at manipulating in order to maximize their benefits to ultimately win contests, but as equal partners that demand balanced dialogues and healthy negotiations. Brynn's true struggle is not with horses, but with men. Her father, Luke Seymour, for instance, is very demanding and no matter what she accomplishes, it is never enough. It is interesting that he has high expectations from the horse, Jett, and his daughter who is aware that he is not easy to please. (Clearmont,2016).

It is clear that Brynn's relationship with her dad is one of conflict and not of understanding. Brynn's comfort is found in the horse's closeness to her and his ability to connect with her spiritually. In other words, what the father cannot fathom easily, the horse does with ease. This characterization of the way the father views his daughter and Jett as well as the way Brynn views her relationships with her father and Jett remind us of the notions of dominance and exploitation that ecofeminist theorized as mentioned above. It is quite striking that the father groups his daughter with the horse and his expectation is anchored entirely in winning contents. His ties to both are purely practical, which explains why Jett, to him, is a just tool that needs to be trained well in order to win. Brynn as a woman possesses the qualities and communication skills that allow her to connect with nature, Jett the black stallion and other horses, more naturally (Clearmont, 2016). The tragic trailer accident, which resulted in the loss of her father and wounding Jett, left her and her mother depressed. In light of such unexpected turn of events, the plot line of the novel shifts its focus to Brynn's struggles and attempts to overcome the new challenges and save her father's ranch and legacy.

Throughout such disasters, Brynn kept learning to stand up no matter how many times she fell literally and figuratively. Her faith was always placed in horses in general and Jett in particular. She decides to participate in the Spruce Meadows Million Dollar Gold Cup, believing she could win this prestigious competition and save her father's legacy. In order to achieve this goal, she needed to shift her energy and focus to training for the competition instead of chasing hopeless romantic relationships. Hiring a well-established trainer and champion, Jason Lander, was the right step towards accomplishing her goal. Not only are Jason's methods strict towards Jett, but also his entire behavior towards Brynn who had to relinquish her grip on all matters related to training (Clearmont, 2016).

Jason's general behavior and disciplined methods of training are similar to what ecofeminists discussed about how men tend to group women and animals in a category that can be controlled. During training, Jett gets injured and it took him six months to heal. The novel's repeated focus on the notion of falling and rising was not only limited to Brynn, but to Jett, in order to highlight the themes of resilience, determination, and hope. The storyline always grouped them together, uniting them and falling and rising, in the ups and downs of the dog-eat-dog world of equestrian sports. Finally, and despite the many times they both fell, Brynn and Jett win the Spruce Meadows Million Dollar Gold Cup. Commenting on the prize of one million dollars and a brand-new Mercedes, Brynn says: "I had used the check from the Gold Cup win to pay down all of our revolving debts, and had put the rest of the money toward the mortgage of the house" (Clearmont, 2016. pp, 278-279). This is a story of determination, success, and fall and rise of humans and animals when they are bond together.

Finally, there are not previous studies that have investigated novel as they relate to fields of Horse-Assisted Therapy and ecofeminism. Thus, this novel is more suitable compared to other prominent horse and equestrian novels such as Anna Swell's *Black Beauty* and Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*, because they specifically stress the theme of healing through the connections with animals and the natural world. In other words, these novels also promote sustainable interactions with nature, emphasize compassion and empathy and enhance our understanding of the interdependence between humans and animals. Moreover, the novel challenges power dynamics and encourages a more harmonious relationship with nature. While novels like *Black Beauty* and *Horse War* may involve horses as central characters, they do not specifically explore the themes of Horse-Assisted Therapy or ecofeminism. The focus of Swell's and Morpurgo's novels is on themes related cruelty towards animals and the value of animal welfare and safety as well as the relationships between horses and warfare during major historical events.

This study may fill a gap in the literature by adopting Animal-Assisted Therapy and Horse-Assisted Therapy to examine humans and animals through narrative. The goal is to also examine the ways in which ecofeminism theory deals with the relationships between women and nature in the aforementioned novels. It will also investigate the significance of horses in the novel chosen for of this study. Furthermore, *Learning to Fall* (2016) by Anne Clermont has not previously been examined, which can be highlighted as an added significance to the present study. As a matter of fact, the significance of this study stems from its focus

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on the connection between fiction and animals. In other words, it sheds ample light on the complex relationships between individual human beings and horses in this chosen the novel.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an analytical approach to answer and analyse *Learning to Fall* (2016), a novel by Anne Clermont by employing ecofeminism theory, and Animal-Assisted Therapy and Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT). Horse-Assisted Therapy is applied to demonstrate improvements in the main characters' psychological attitudes. This framework is very useful in showing us how the human characters' bonds with horses in novel helped some characters overcome their psychological traumas they had experienced in the past. "The horse becomes a symbol of the power of human consciousness and a symbol of time" (Bronkhorst, 2009, P.25). The author of the selected novel underscores the therapeutic effects of horses, which opens up the possibility of viewing the texts through the perspective of Horse-Assisted Therapy. This study attempts to address the following issues: first, the nature of the human-horse relationship in the selected texts. Secondly, understand the nature of the psychological connections between Brynn and her horse in *Learning to Fall*.

The methodology that is employed in this thesis will be based on ecofeminism in general as well as Animal-Assisted Therapy and Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT). The last part of this study is the conclusion, which will entail a brief discussion of the major themes and a summary of the findings.

4. DISCUSSION

The, horses can provide significant help to people who suffer from grief and sadness. Hilde Hauge et al declare that "the interaction between horses and young people may have positive physiological, physical and psychological effects, opening up for the possibility of using horse-assisted activities for promoting health and preventing illness" (Clearmont, 2016, P. 2). Brynn in *Learning to Fall* faces many challenges related to her own trauma caused by the death of her father and fulfilling the responsibilities towards the horses and the ranch. Overwhelmed by feelings of intense sadness, she was unable to take care of the ranch and its horses following the death of her father.

This sense of incapacity can be understood as one of the symptoms of trauma. Clearly, her focus on her own grief leaves her completely unable to think about her surroundings and diminishes her motivation to look forward to the future. She is trying hard to finish her studies at the Vet School as soon as she can, while trying to deal with massive debts that her father left for her. Additionally, she is deeply concerned about preserving her father's legacy and the last words he uttered while dying. If she does not face the challenges, it is quite possible that she will lose the ranch and the horses: "Your funds are overdrawn, and at this point, you might lose the land unless you earn as much as you have been" (Clearmont,2016, p.47).

What Brynn knows very well is that horses might be a source of the help she needs. More specifically, she is aware of Jett's potential and his ability to help her stand on her feet again. She rekindles the positive interactions once had with Jett and through caring and training, positive change might become a reality. She begins training Jett to participate in the competition, but there is much more than only professional training; there is always some sort of spiritual interaction, something therapeutic about the relationship with Jett. Brynn says: "my soul seemed to connect with Jett's" (Clearmont, 2016, p.105). It is in this spiritual connection with Jett that Brynn finds a way out of her psychological wound. Julie L. et la in Equine-Assisted Therapy for Anxiety and Post traumatic Stress Symptoms state that Equine-Assisted Therapy "may be an effective treatment for people suffering from anxiety symptoms because interactions with horses may increase mindfulness" (Clearmont, 2016, p.151) The horse in this context serves as a source of comfort and relief for Brynn. In other words, Jett is a source of empowerment for his human companion.

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy is another name for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. It is basically a form of psychotherapy that utilizes a horse that provides treatment for people who suffer from mental illness. Additionally, the environment in which horses exist can provide help for people to overcome their traumatic experiences. It is important to understand here that Equine-facilitated Psychotherapy is different in substance from therapeutic riding. One of the major aspects of horse therapy is that it concerns with physiological characteristics (Bachi, 2013). As stated earlier, spending time with horses bring about feelings of freedom and a sense of safety as well as promote mindfulness, self-esteem, and self-confidence. In this context, Brynn's main challenges are linked to the stresses that themselves lead to negative suppression. She says: "I would never live a day and not feel this pain" (Clearmont,2016,p.33). Clearly, the reader finds such negative feelings scattered throughout the novels and, as a result, sympathizes with Brynn's pain and agony. Such negative feelings often entrap Brynn and make her feeling unable to do anything. But as indicated above, horses can bring about positive changes. Therapists often assert that being near horses can

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help humans reduce their negativity and feelings of stress. And that is exactly why we see Brynn always escaping from her surrounding or anything that causes stress to Jett's environment: "I leaned against Jett's stall door, inhaling the scent of shavings, fly spray, horses. My shoulders relaxed. This was my place. This was my sanctuary. And for a moment I felt better" (Clearmont,2016,p.51). Brynn's frequent visits to Jett allowed her to regain herself gradually. Deep down, she feels that the steady calmness of the horse helps her reestablish her own calmness and rebuild her self-confidence bit by bit.

Additionally, caring for Jett through grooming, feeding, and riding requires tremendous concentration and selflessness on Brynn's part. This particular awareness allows Brynn to strengthen her connection with her own inner peace and her overall faith in her own ability to overcome her trauma. Brynn is also aware that the horse needs her to reveal and maintain a good level of calmness. In this manner, one cannot help but think of the horse as a mirror of Brynn and her own feelings. Brynn and Jett succeed in establishing the safe space they both need. This mutual recognition of each other's needs enabled Brynn to increasingly restore her mindfulness, which is a vital component of healing. Therefore, Jett's calmness helped Brynn to not only grow emotionally, but to also grow out of her trauma gradually.

It is important to note here that the relationship that Brynn has with Jett is not new. In fact, she knew Jett since he was a foal; he always belonged to Redwood Grove Stables, her father's stables. Brynn cultivated strong ties with Jett and always considered him close to her, "Jett, my baby, always calm and wise" (Clearmont,2016,p.18). Of course, her father wanted more from Jett and always had high expectations for him. To him, he was a horse with great skills in jumping and a perfect horse: "but Jett, the horse you out there, has more heart than any I have ridden." They are expected to win some competitions that may be held, "And I know I can help and Jett can get to the Gold Cup" (Clearmont, 2016, p.137). Jett becomes a major part of Brynn's journey from beginning to end. He supports her in boosting self-confidence and motivates her to take actions. Jett is one of the main reasons that can help to improve her mood and reduce her feelings of stress and sadness. Brynn reflects on the possibility for a horse to be a symbol of a woman's ability and empowerment. She appears to be keen on embodying such traits through her relationship with Jett.

Horse Assisted Therapy (HAT) is all about the therapy that is given to individuals when they participate in some activities that involve horses. The type of therapy that horses provide is very important and it is experienced through general caring for horses and, more specifically through providing water and food for them. That is why it was clear that Brynn rushed to the stable to feed Jett at her father's funeral: "After the burial, I went to the barn to see Jett, it was a short hello, I fed him a couple of carrots" (Clearmont, 2016, p.39). She follows her father's steps in the ways in which he managed the stable, feeding and checking on the horses in the mornings and the afternoons. This was clearly how he showed love and care for the horses.

Finally, as was shown above, the horses serve as powerful interventions in their lives and play a major role in helping them cope with their own stress and trauma. The presence of horses created the chance to communicate emotionally to the two characters and it was clear that this type of communication was needed to help both of them begin the process of healing. It is clear that emotions of warmth, love, belonging and connectedness that the horses provided increased characters' mindfulness and helped them heal.

CONCLUSION

The significance of this study stems from the ways in which Anne Clermont uses horses' therapeutic properties in their works to highlight how past traumatic experiences can be overcome by focusing on the centrality of the interconnectedness between animals and humans. The rationale for selecting *learning to Fall* is that a novel is more appropriate to discuss in the context of Horse-Assisted Therapy and ecofeminism.

Brynn, the protagonist in *learning to fall* is an experienced equestrian who has practiced showjumping since an early age. Her father always encourages her to follow his steps into the equestrian world. After losing her father in a truck accident, she relies on her horse to heal. And later on, she becomes motivated to win the Grand Prize in order to pay off her father's debts. This novel explores the competitive aspect of equestrian sports and the pressures that riders face, while striving for success, overall, the main aspect of this study is to show how horses can offer healing to female characters that face serious personal challenges. Additionally, as discussed in this study, ecofeminists often highlight that men succeed when they maintain their superiority and dominance over both women and animals. In other words, novel presents similar power dynamics, which often lead to the creation of similar interactions or patterns of behavior between two groups, the first of which consists of female characters and their horses, and the second the male trainers and saviors, who appear to be steady, self-assured, and, more importantly, conscious of the vulnerability of women and horses.

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