

# A Biocentric Reading of Farley Mowat's A Whale for the Killing

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*“To kill another creature is in some sense an act of violence against oneself”*

*- Farley Mowat*

## Abstract

*Biocentrism is a highly multidimensional phenomenon whose scope extends beyond aesthetics, anthropology, ecology, ethnography, linguistics, politics, philosophy, psychology, semiology, and sociology. It began with philosophy and deep ecology but quickly expanded to become eco-centric as well as anthropocentric and linguistic. “Biocentrism is a life-centered outlook that rejects the view that humanity alone matters in ethics and accepts the moral standing of (at least) all living creatures” (Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy 97). While Arne Nases intended his version of biocentrism to be a sort of ‘radical egalitarianism’, John Rodman’s viewpoint of biocentricity is ‘ecological sensibility, and Paul Taylor argues ‘respect for Nature’ is one of the prevailing forms of biocentrism. This study proposes a biocentric interpretation of Mowat’s A Whale for the Killing, which depicts life and death in an inconceivable catastrophe involving a voiceless giant species.*

**Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, Deep Ecology, Ecocentric**

“So long as I live, I shall hear the echoes of that hunting cry. And they will remind me that life itself- not human life – is the ultimate miracle upon this earth. I will hear those echoes even if the day should come when none of her nation is left alive in the desecrated seas, and the voices of the great whales have been silenced forever.”

-Farley Mowat, A Whale for the Killing, 195

Farley Mowat (1921–2014) is Canada’s most famous writer and a dedicated environmentalist. He has a lengthy history of being a serious and passionate environmental writer. Most of his compositions are concerned with the extinction of animals. His sensitivity for such creatures is evident in his works. His main concern is the environment, which is why he has acquired a love for nature. His idea of nature as a valued, God-given resource surpassing utilitarian worth aided in the definition of contemporary environmental space and ecological movements. He has an interest in wildlife that he began in Ontario under the influence of his uncle, Frank Farley, a well-known ornithologist in western Canada. He spent his childhood days reading books and watching wildlife. His father introduced him to sailing and hunting expeditions, instilling in young Mowat a taste for wildlife. His writing career started off with *People of the Deer* (1952), which established him as a controversial figure. Which was followed by *Lost in the Barrens* (1956), a best children’s book that received the Governor’s General Award. *Owls in the Family* (1962), *Never Cry Wolf* (1963), *A Whale for the Killing* (1972), *And No Bird Sing* (1979), *Sea of Slaughter* (1984), *Born Naked* (1993), *No Man’s River* (2004), and *Eastern Passage* (2010) are some of Mowat’s well-known works.

Mowat's works show his experiences in and with nature, and they are still very popular. He has served on various boards of environmental organizations, most notably the Green Party of Canada, for which he was an ardent member and supporter, as well as an honorary Director of the North American Native Plant Society. He was an excellent storyteller with a sense of humor. Beyond wit, farce, excitement, and pain, he also has a serious purpose. His writings had a strong background, and he never wrote anything out of imagination. He referred to his writings as 'subjective non-fiction'. He does not only show his passion for nature and animals, but he also considers himself to be a part of the larger system. He trusts in the interconnection of all living organisms. Mowat's biocentric viewpoint on nature, in which man, nature, and the animal worlds are considered interrelated, Mowat is regarded as the originator or, at the very least, one of the very early proponents of what they now term deep ecology.

### What is Biocentrism?

Biocentrism is a highly multidimensional phenomenon whose scope extends beyond aesthetics, anthropology, ecology, economics, ethnography, linguistics, politics, philosophy, psychology, semiology, and sociology. It began with philosophy and deep ecology but quickly expanded to become eco-centric as well as anthropocentric and linguistic. "Biocentrism is a life-centered outlook that rejects the view that humanity alone matters in ethics and accepts the moral standing of (at least) all living creatures" (Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy 97). Biocentrism is a phrase with several meanings. However, in environmental philosophy, it corresponds to the life-centric environment approach. It indicates that all living things on the planet, including animals, have moral worth. It advocates for the well-being of every living thing in the ecosystem. Since the study of this subject became a self-conscious discipline in the 1970s, it has performed a pivotal role in the development of environmental ethics; it was also influential among some key earlier thinkers, including Arne Naess, who wanted his version of biocentrism to be a kind of 'radical egalitarianism,' endorsing "the equal right of all creatures to live and blossom", Albert

Schweitzer's "reverence for life", Paul Taylor's "Respect for Nature," etc.

Biocentrism is in opposition to anthropocentrism. While anthropocentrism advocates for a worldview centered exclusively on people and identifies worth exclusively in people, biocentrism considers all living things in nature to have inherent worth and so goes beyond the most extreme form of anthropocentrism. This point of view contends that our commitment extends beyond people to embrace all living species. This is a direct commitment to living organisms, not an indirect responsibility through people. We are ethically obligated, for example, to protect endangered species not only because current and future humans may find life less valuable if we do not, but also because they are living creatures with intrinsic or inherent value, which deserves our moral respect.

Clarifying the focus of biocentricity, which differs from biocentrism in that it has a bigger framework and encompasses ecological and philosophical components as well, According to John Rodman, who divided environmental philosophy into categories such as resource conservation, wilderness preservation, moral extensionism, and ecological sensibility in his article 'The Liberation of Nature?'

The finest proponent of the present biocentric perspective on nature is Paul Taylor. Taylor's book is the most thorough attempt to describe and defend a biocentric perspective in environmental debate. His biocentric approach dates back to 1981, when he published 'The Ethics of Respect for Nature' in environmental ethics. Following that, a full-fledged book, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Studies*, was published. Taylor's primary argument is that all living objects and beings have inherent value and hence deserve moral respect. There are two principles, according to Taylor: the principle of moral consideration and the principle of intrinsic worth. According to the principle of moral consideration, every living creature has a right to its own merits and moral consideration. And, according to the idea of intrinsic value, the fulfillment of an individual's good is essentially valued.

The term 'biocentrism' refers to a philosophical and ethical investigation that asks us to give equal importance to all other living organisms or concerns

about the environment, particularly non-human species. This combination of these two principles constitutes the fundamental moral attitude known as “respect for Nature,” as defined by Taylor.

### **Is there a Biocentrism in Literature and the Humanities?**

In the article titled “Literature and Environment,” Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber said,

First-wave scholarship of the 1990s tended to equate environment with nature; to focus on the literary renditions of the natural world in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction as means of evoking and promoting contact with it; to value nature preservation and human attachment to place at a local, communitarian, or bioregional level; and to affirm an ecocentric or biocentric ethic, often intensified by some conception of an innate bond—whether biological, psychological, or spiritual—conjoining the individual human being and the natural world (419).

The concept of biocentrism is based on deep ecology, and it is a movement that opposes the human-centred value system. In an article titled *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary*, Arne Naess coined the term ‘deep ecology’ (1973). Naess refers to the “ecology movement” as a cosmology or worldview. He accuses European and North American civilizations of being arrogant in their human-centred instrumentalization of non-human nature (*Encyclopaedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy* 206).

Deep ecology, in its restricted academic meaning, is founded on two principles: an axiology (the study of the criteria of value systems in ethics) of “biocentric egalitarianism” and an ontology (the study of existence) of “metaphysical holism”. The perspectives of Naess and Sessions are crucial in this case. “Biocentric egalitarianism is known by other phrases that combine biocentric, biospherical, and ecological with equality and egalitarianism” (95), and Sessions pointed out that “all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal”. In “Literature and Environment,” Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber said:

From the seafaring and fishing narratives of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* to the fiction and poetry of Ernest Thompson Seton, Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, William Faulkner, Robinson Jeffers, GraySynder, Julia Leigh, Jiang Rong (Lu Jiamin), and GuoXuebo, writers have foregrounded encounters with whales, wolves, and bears in particular. the search for some combination of human dominance over and coexistence with other species (431).

### **A Biocentric Reading of A Whale for the Killing**

A true story clearly recalled by Farley Mowat in 1972. The spread page passes on the message that “A Heart-Wrenching True Tale of Cruelty and Courage” and the story made a change in Mowat’s vocation as a writer. Peter Davison aptly identified, “The ‘whale episode’ would prove to be a pivotal incident, a turning point in Mowat’s career as a writer” (16).

Animal species are more evolutionarily related to people than other aspects of nature, yet they are also frequently depicted as animals separated from humans by a fundamental boundary. This was sadly recalled by Mowat. A pregnant whale came into Burgeo’s local pond and was trapped for half a year. Unfortunately, the residents of the village decided to make a game out of tormenting the whale. Mowat would never be able to absorb the awful events he witnessed. He then created *A Whale for the Killing* because he was unable to change his suffering.

It’s a moving account of the whale’s fight to save its life, in which the artist acts as a courageous volunteer to assist the mute whale in the struggle. To be honest, Mowat puts up a valiant fight to save the Whale’s life. Despite the fact that he saw the captured whale’s agony as an outlet for the dissatisfaction of the town’s residents, who had been caught up in the progress of industrialization, the event further fuelled his love for animals and his resentment of his family. In Chapter 1, Mowat pointed out, “I have always been fascinated by the mysterious lives of the non-human animals who share this world with us.” (8)

In the beginning, there was a natural harmony seen between the fishing society as well as the whales themselves, according to Functional status.

Three or four whales were shot every year by an initial hunting society. They, much like the People of the Deer, hunted primarily to survive. Eating a whale takes a very long time. Those who never shot them for entertainment or profit, and they posed no danger to the Whales' existence, on the other hand, began brutally murdering whales in order to make a profit from them. People continued to use various bone pieces from whales as ornaments and equipment. People who gained wealth through murdering...

During the journey to St. Pierre, Mowat was horrified to witness the murder of some 23 whales. This was a terrible scene for him, but it was a remarkable display for the people of St. Pierre. The master of such a puller inside that area warned him that there had been accounts of killer whales following them and often eating pothead babies. He was shocked to observe huge whales floating casually. He saw that there was really no basis for labelling themselves as 'killers.' He discovered that the fishing boats were turning whaling into a sport. Despite their injuries, a slew of whales remained on the beach until the fishing boats arrived and slaughtered them the next day. People started having a great time with these games. Mowat pointed out, "Many American and Canadian tourists had witnessed the show and now were busy taking pictures of one another posing beside the dead behemoths" (41). The violent event had been a source of entertainment for the people. For him, though, it was an obvious show of human brutality toward the wonderful animals.

Mowat talked to the Canadian Navy about extending the south-west canal and giving medicines to get the whale to the sea. However, the overall procedure appeared to be harmful. He went for the Harmon, a government truck specializing in herring gathering. However, it took some time to reach him. Somebody had suggested keeping the whale in Burgeo rather than releasing it into the ocean. All of these stupid ideas were disregarded by him. Instead, he focused on three necessities: feeding the whale, protecting the whale, and finally planning to release it. The existence of some swellings detected beneath the whale's skin bothered him. And he was surprised to observe that it was wiggling and making grunts now and then. The whale struggled to submerge because the deep swellings on her skin had huge

repositories of fluid and bleeding infections. She arrived at the other beach and laid her huge forehead on the rocks. Mowat felt bad about not treating her gunshot wounds. He was even more afraid to leave her alone, especially in her final moments. From a distance, Mowat heard the Whale's moaning with such a mournful weep:

It was the same muffled, disembodied, and unearthly sound, seeming to come from an immense distance—out of the sea, out of the rocks around us, out of the air itself. It was a deep vibration, low-pitched and throbbing, moaning beneath the wail of the wind on the cliffs of Richard's Head. It was the most desolate cry that I have ever heard (192).

The whale was severely infected as a result of gunshots made by the Burgeo people. Mowat requested that the whale be given antibiotics. Two physicians offered that if he could acquire antibiotics from somewhere, they would give them to him. Mowat sent a public statement pleading for assistance and requesting contributions of antibiotics and unstillable apparatus. C.B.C. broadcast a particular announcement requesting huge contributions of antibiotics. There was an instant response from a wide range of sources. All of this boosted his hope in his ability to save the whale. That's how the whale truly placed Burgeo on the map.

Mowat endured restless nights in anticipation of the charter aircraft carrying medicines and specialists. Meanwhile, Mowat's wife, Claire, received a phone call informing her that the whale had disappeared and that they had been unable to locate her. While he waited for the first airplane to arrive, he received another telephone conversation informing him that there had been no evidence of the whale in the pond and that she had left it.

Finally, Mowat informed him, "My God, man, she can't be dead! She must have swum clear! There'll be living hell to pay if the papers and radio get the idea she died here. They'll murder us!" (198). The Sou'westers club asked Mowat to declare that the whale had fled because he was afraid that the people would attack the club members. Mowat refused and said, ". . . You're right about that. Indeed, you are. They'll murder you, just as Burgeo murdered the whale. Wouldn't you say that was fair enough?" (198).

As a result, the struggle to preserve the whale was lost. With a deeper perspective, Mowat weeps: “Man, having made himself the ultimate stranger on his own planet, has doomed himself to carry into the silence of his final hour” (201). In Chapter 20, Mowat pictured the pain: The harmless whale decomposed into a pile of diseased, rotting meat in the ocean. Mowat expressed remorse that the guys who shot the whale may not have recognized how serious the situation was. The whale became a living memory, instilling a tale in the name “Moby Joe.” A Whale for the Killing is a metaphor for mankind as a whole. In one of the interviews (Authors and Artists for Young Adults), Mowat shared his objective for writing this book.

### Conclusion

It was not simply to depress everyone, including myself, but to warn that we must change our attitudes toward the species with which we inhabit this earth. We must, in every sense, share the planet with them, or we will become its ultimate destroyers. The earth was once very different and much richer than it presently is. We have a terrible tendency to assume that what we see is always what it always was. Not so. We have a responsibility to look back in anger and use that anger to try to salvage the present and ensure the future. (Gale 15)

### Acknowledgment

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