

## Anthropocentrism in English Literature Studies

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyses how anthropocentrism affects perception and literature studies [1]. Anthropocentrism is here defined as the belief that humans are morally set apart from nature and are the only source of meaning or value [2]. The project offers methods to minimise anthropocentric influences in literature practices.

**KEYWORDS:** ANTHROPOCENTRISM, LITERATURE PRACTICES, POSTHUMANISM, PRONOUNS, SPECIESISM.

### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the impact of anthropocentrism on aspects of literature studies. Anthropocentrism is recognized as a factor in contemporary social power imbalances. The field of literature is a platform for unsettling anthropocentrism and alterations to linguistic practices in the English language can help to dislodge anthropocentric assumptions.

### II. ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE PRACTICES

*A gift of gods to men, as I believe, was tossed  
down from some divine source. Plato [3].*

Robyn Eckersley's interpretation of anthropocentrism is 'the belief that there is a clear and morally relevant dividing line between humankind and the rest of nature, that humankind is the only principal source of value or meaning in the world [2]'. Whether the measurement of environments depends on their material use to humans or intangible values like awe and respect, anthropocentrism denies that the natural world has an intrinsic value [3]. The dogmatic assertion of human dominion [4] drives Western industrial processes, which makes conversations about alternate methods of addressing environmental crises difficult [5]. Western civilisation exists in massively restructured settings [6], which distort humanity's importance like a carnival mirror. The result of the anthropocentric gaze is the loss of being able to envision a different way to live, an existence that turns the 'guilt of complicity [7]' into an 'appreciation of finitude [7].'

Anthropocentric philosophy is pervasive in ontological and ethical tenets, and English literary theories similarly espouse an anthropocentric outlook. The humanities are by definition anthropocentric and so too is writing. However, there are areas of focus that could be altered to lessen the impact of anthropocentric interference. Postmodern theory has 'a tendency toward reflexivity, or self-consciousness [8],' turning attention to the embedded cultural codes and assumptions that guide thoughts, values and behaviours. While postmodernism seems like the first step in undoing anthropocentrism by giving voice to and understanding of the position of the other, these theories also privilege the personal subjective view, mirroring and supporting the anthropocentric gaze. For example, landscape theories 'consider the social, political and historical

experience[1]’ of the landscape, identifying it as a cultural product. Deborah Bird Rose says that an ‘egocentric view of landscape, wherein one either sees oneself or one sees nothing at all, constitutes a kind of blindness; it closes off the evidence of what really is there [9].’ Embedded anthropocentric understandings mean natural environments are dependent on humanity for value.

*All the trees here are your countrymen, your relations.*

*All the trees and the birds are your relations.*

Paddy Fordham Wainburranga, a Rembarrnga man  
of Arnhem Land [9].

Posthuman thought suggests that humans relocate themselves in reference to non-human animals and the environment and position themselves as part of a shared continuum [9] but using the language of the meta-narrative to describe something outside of its understanding can be limiting [10]. Necessarily adopting this language can result in an accidental perpetuation of the paradigm. For example, Rose suggests that the use of the word *landscape* removes humans from any understanding of synergistic interrelation [9]; the word suppresses the dynamic, complex inter-weavings of the biodiversity it describes. The language employed to describe the ‘geopsyché[11]’ could incorporate awareness of ‘anotherness[12],’ rather than exclusion. Prudent language usage can transform anthropocentric hierarchies and increase humanity’s association with their natural environment.

When referring to non-human animals, English grammatical rules dictate that animals are described as *it* or *that*, rather than *who*, *him* or *her* which are reserved for humanity [13]. Leslie Irvine says that the omission of animal sentience results from ‘anthropocentric assumptions rather than from a lack of evidence[14],’ and examination of this topic is ‘long overdue [14].’ Europe, New Zealand and Canada have passed laws declaring that animals are sentient. In Australia, the Australian Capital Territory recently passed legislation which recognises animals as ‘sentient beings [15].’ This suggests that the embedded anthropocentric assumptions of English pronoun usage need to be altered so that animals receive personal and relative pronouns usually only given to humans, ending the illusion of distance created by language choice.

## CONCLUSION

Linguistically treating animals like humans reflects the shifting sociological paradigm on animal sentience and narrows the divide between species. The use of pronouns typically reserved for humans affect perception; they suggest empathy and innate value and disrupt anthropocentric assumptions. This alteration continues the process of acknowledgement of non-human sentient presence.

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