



Ecocritical Survival through Psychological Defense Mechanisms in M.R. Carey's *The Girl With All the Gifts*

Ruzbeh Babae, University Putra Malaysia;
Sue Yen Lee, University Putra Malaysia;
Siamak Babae, University of Kashan.

Abstract

M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* unveils a devastated Great Britain in which humans are beset by deadly monsters that threaten their very existence, making survival the story's central issue. This study examines the profound relationship between Melanie, a cannibalistic hungry, and Helen Justineau, her human teacher, through a psychoanalytic lens. This study will demonstrate how psychological defense mechanisms underpin their dependency upon one another as they struggle to survive. Psychological defense mechanisms are employed by the unconscious mind to manipulate, deny, or distort reality to defend oneself against anxiety. In Carey's novel, these psychological defense mechanisms create a mutual dependency between a human and a monster. This dependency ultimately transforms *The Girl with All the Gifts* into an optimistic example of ecocritical science fiction by allowing Miss Justineau and Melanie to survive through peaceful coexistence in world dominated by non-humans.

Keywords: *Survival, relationship, psychoanalysis, defense mechanisms, ecocriticism, dystopia.*

Introduction

The societies depicted in science fiction are diverse and investigate issues ranging from totalitarian states to extreme anarchy. Popular themes uniting most science fiction societies include an exploration of the role and condition of human beings living in them and a call for change. Science fiction narratives typically use dystopias to exaggerate flaws in society in order to inspire a need for revolution. Such speculative fiction addresses concerns about individuality and humanity in societies where political and moral autonomy have been lost and can be regained. Science fiction texts of the past century reveal contemporary anxieties about the times in which their authors wrote, disclosing much about the effects of technological, cultural, social, psychological, and ecological changes on humanity.

The need to survive is a basic human need and, as Robert Heinlein (1959) argued, every aspect of one's personality derives from this one need in order to allow one to endure challenging circumstances threatening their continued existence (p. 94). The manner in which we humans perceive and handle our emotions in turn evokes behaviors that could increase our chances of long-term survival. In his novel *Life of Pi* (2015), Yann Martel observed that survival is a state of mind (p. 215). The human "fight or flight" reaction may be the best-known expression of our survival instinct because it presses us to choose whether to flee in the face of danger or to accept risks and stay the course. Ayn Rand (1992), an American novelist and philosopher, remarked that a man's mind is his basic tool for survival (p. 64). Cheryll Glotfelty



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(1996) defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (p. 25). An ecocritical analysis of survival in science fiction literature allows for the study of human interaction with the surrounding environment while humans try to survive in a dystopian world. Loretta Johnson (2009) noted, “Over the last three decades, literature has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how human relate to nonhuman nature or environment in literature” (p. 7). Similarly, Glotfelty’s (1996) ecocritical analysis examined the relationship between humans and their environment by placing equal emphasis on the importance of human and non-human species. In his essay, “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger (2009) further examined the interaction between humans and the wild as a social and aesthetic issue (p. 5). He noted, “When we look at animals, they return our gaze, and in that moment we are aware of both likeness and differences” (Berger, 2009, p. 8). This study will explore how the relationship between Miss Helen Justineau and Melanie, like humans recognizing and acknowledging the wild in animals, centers on achieving this very awareness in terms of human and non-human.

The Girl with All the Gifts (2015), a dystopian novel by Michael R. Carey, revolves around the theme of humans struggling to survive in the face of nature’s unwavering forces. The novel is exceedingly visual, vividly portraying a bleak Britain ten decades after the nation suffered the outbreak of a mysterious pandemic and ensuing chaos caused by a lethal infection that transforms humans into cannibals, or *hungries*. Survival becomes the primary focus of the novel as the few remaining humans establish a kind of totalitarian government on military bases

that imposes specific responsibilities upon base denizens in order to preserve their battered race. The ordinary *hungries*, devoid of any intellect, possess a cannibalistic nature which has been programmed by the mutant plague within them to solely exist in two states—sleeping and hunting. Some *hungries*, however, still retain their intellect despite the infection and are almost able to control the hunting state—unless they smell humans. Scientists believe these highly intelligent *hungries* carry the elixir that would allow humanity to overcome the plague and regain control of the land.

In the novel, scientists study, test, and, sometimes, kill and dissect captured intelligent *hungries* on an isolated military base to try to obtain the evolutionary advantage present in these child monsters. Though scheduled for dissection, the child hungry Melanie is saved by both the intervention of her teacher, Miss Justineau, and a massive *hungry* attack on the base. Miss Justineau, Melanie, and a few other staff members escape and flee to a deserted laboratory where they encounter a group of intelligent child *hungries*. Melanie ultimately learns intelligent *hungries* are the biological offspring of ordinary *hungries*, and she realizes humans must all become infected *hungries* in order for their race to survive the ravaging plague. In the end, the only remaining survivor who fled the military base with Melanie is Miss Justineau, and she chooses to remain forever with the child *hungries*.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, conceived of several subconscious psychological defense mechanisms that correspond to survival and many psychoanalytic researchers today acknowledge that humans instinctively use



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these mechanisms to defend themselves against definite threats. This study will utilize four of these psychological defense mechanisms—namely denial, repression, identification, and altruism—to explain the affectionate relationship between Melanie and Miss Justineau. This paper will also employ the concept of ecocriticism to explore the close relationship between human and non-human beings caused by environmental catastrophe in *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

The Function of Psychological Defense Mechanisms in *The Girl with All the Gifts*

By presenting its readers with a grim dystopian world where human lives are endangered by a devastating plague, *The Girl with All the Gifts* creates a narrative of survival despite seemingly impossible odds. This novel portrays the devastation and despair caused by the loss of thousands of lives in quick succession while still conveying the ultimate message that the human ability to adapt in times of crisis empowers humans to rise above dire situations. The function of psychological defense mechanisms in such overwhelming circumstances directly pertains to the struggle of inner willpower versus outward helplessness (Cramer, 2008, p. 1968), a struggle that, in the novel, promotes a relationship between Melanie and Miss Justineau that defies human logic in their dystopian world.

Miss Justineau is warned and threatened by one of the officers from the base for her showing care to Melanie because *hungries* are so dangerous. Sergeant Park, an armed officer, risks attack by seemingly innocent child *hungries* to talk Miss Justineau out of her capricious desire to teach them. Park exclaims, “Not everyone who

looks human is human” (Carey, 2015, p. 16) in his futile attempt to convince Miss Justineau that her personal safety is at risk. Despite the cruel circumstances of her captivity, Melanie vows to herself never to hurt Miss Justineau, despite a growing sense of awareness about her true cannibalistic self. Miss Justineau, at various junctures, encourages Melanie to believe she is human because Miss Justineau herself is adamant in believing that these child *hungries* are harmless, passionately arguing her beliefs with her colleagues.

Other exchanges between Sergeant Park and Miss Justineau in *The Girl with All the Gifts* indicate that Miss Justineau is in denial about the grave consequences and risks of violating Park’s orders. The more she gets involved with educating the child *hungries*, the more she resists the thoughts that they are actually monsters, fully capable of harming her:

“They’re children,” Miss Justineau points out.
“Psychologically speaking, yes. They’re children.”
[...]

Sergeant says[, ...]“You carry on that way, you’ll start thinking of them as real kids. And then you’ll slip up. And maybe you’ll untie one of them because he needs a cuddle or something. I don’t need to tell you what happens after that.” [...]

But Miss Justineau starts to read again, like she can’t hear him, like he’s not even there, and in the end he leaves. (Carey, 2015, pp. 16-17)

Because Miss Justineau has chosen to care for the child *hungries*, denial inevitably steps in as an unconscious psychological defense mechanism. While denial functions allows one to ignore reality,



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it is a primitive defense, which, in long term use, would endanger the person employing it to escape an unwanted situation (Freud, 1946, p. 239). By engaging in denial, Miss Justineau unintentionally leads Melanie to believe that she was as much a normal child as those depicted in the children's stories that Miss Justineau regularly read to the child *hungries*. Miss Justineau's refusal to give in to Sergeant Park's fearmongering does temporarily encourage the blossoming relationship between Melanie and Miss Justineau:

Melanie's feelings about Miss Justineau have changed too, after that day. Or rather, they haven't changed at all, but they've become about a hundred times stronger. There can't be anyone better or kinder or lovelier than Miss Justineau anywhere in the world[.] (Carey, 2015, p. 18)

Miss Justineau's willingness to stand up for the child *hungries* to Sergeant and her belief that the child *hungries* are like normal human children lead Melanie to identify herself with the human world. Even though she is aware of inhumane treatment she and the other child *hungries* receive at the base camp, Melanie conveniently puts off the unpleasant thoughts in Miss Justineau's presence.

Besides denial, Melanie also unconsciously employs identification, which is a "psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 205). Instead of changing the reality of her situation, Melanie wants to change herself to imitate the person of whom she deeply respects. The new identity Melanie wishes to adopt radiates hope and joy, and Melanie

begins to envision herself as a heroic persona, possessing human attributes, capable of protecting and defending her beloved teacher from harm. Indeed, "Melanie wishes she was a [...] Titan or a Trojan warrior, so she could fight for Miss Justineau and save her[...] she likes the idea of saving Miss Justineau so much that it becomes her favourite thought" (Carey, 2015, p. 18). Thus, Miss Justineau's protection of the child *hungries* inspires Melanie to try to be more human, in turn making her want to protect her teacher, illustrating their growing mutual trust and platonic affection.

As events in Carey's dystopian novel unfold, they create an environment which facilitates Melanie and Miss Justineau's progressively interdependent relationship through subconscious, psychological defense mechanisms. While trying to protect Melanie from dissection by the base's scientists, Miss Justineau witnessed the unthinkable, "seeing the child turn into the monster, right before her eyes, has made her understand at last that both are real. There is no future in which she can set Melanie free, or save her" (Carey, 2015, p. 72). The occurrence evidently traumatizes Miss Justineau. In a sudden and vicious attack by thousands of *hungries* on base camp, Miss Justineau and her fellow teammates are forced to evacuate the combat field. During this attack, Melanie devours her first victim of flesh and blood while defending herself:

Now she bites and tears and chews and swallows, the sensations filling her and battering her like the torrent of a waterfall[...] the man's scream is a scary sound, shrill and wobbly. Melanie doesn't like it at all. But oh, she likes the taste! (Carey, 2015, p. 127)



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During this disaster, Miss Justineau is forced to come to terms with the reality of the monster before her. Despite the chaos around them, Miss Justineau regains her composure almost immediately and grabs Melanie, just as if she were “plucking a blood-gorged tick from a dog’s belly” (Carey, 2015, p. 129), before they sprint for their lives. Despite protests from her surviving colleagues, who are aghast that she had brought a *hungry* to their place of refuge, Miss Justineau secures space for Melanie in an enclosed vehicle. Here, both Miss Justineau and Melanie use repression as a vital psychological defense to block off the memory of pain and trauma. Again, this unconscious act of repression functions to distort the realities in both Miss Justineau and Melanie’s consciousness.

According to Anne Freud (1946), the psychological defense mechanism of repression is the cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory (p. 16), but its effects may be dissolved over time. Melanie, motivated by the deep need for a reconciliation between human and monsters, begins to repress the memories of her cannibalism. Although she has “always been a good girl”, “she ate pieces of two men, and very probably killed them both. Killed them with her teeth. She was hungry, and they were her bread” (Carey, 2015, p. 137). Here, Melanie attempts to rationalize and repress what she has done, but after a period of time, whilst in quieter moments, Melanie finds herself suddenly remembering what she has done and is thus jolted back to face her stark reality—the repulsive acts of murder she undeniably committed. When the reality and severity of one’s situation is suddenly thrown back into the conscious mind, this is referred to as a “Freudian slip” (Freud, 1946, p. 18),

a term which aptly describes Melanie’s experience during these moments of recall.

Altruism is yet another psychological defense mechanism evident in Carey’s novel that could explain Miss Justineau and Melanie’s relationship. The concept of altruism was first established by Sigmund Freud in *Libido Theory and Narcissism* (1920), and Anna Freud further developed the term as a coping mechanism which is employed by individuals as a means to deal with their emotional conflicts by whole-hearted dedicating themselves to help satisfy others’ needs (Freud, 1946, p. 122). It is through the function of this psychological defense mechanism that Miss Justineau’s utmost dedication for Melanie and the rest of the child *hungries* can be better explained. Much of her devotion for the children, even though they are *hungries*, stems from guilt of a past offence she committed. Later in the novel, Miss Justineau finally opens up about her past—and, perhaps, the reason why she was so protective of the child *hungries*: she had once accidentally killed a child:

I was driving home. After a party. I’d been drinking but not that much. And I was tired.[...] Someone ran into the road in front of me[...] He was just there, suddenly, and I hit the brakes but I was already on top of him.[...] he bounced off the car like a ball[...] A boy. About eight or nine years old, maybe. I’d killed a child. Broken him in pieces, inside his skin, so his arms and legs didn’t even bend the right way. (Carey, 2015, p. 247)

Miss Justineau is obviously shaken by the turmoil of her past crime. At her lowest point in the novel, she reveals the agony and remorse that she had tried to bury in her heart and forget. She could never pardon herself for her cowardice, trying to run



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away from her crime. Thus, as a result of her guilt and altruistic compulsion, Miss Justineau wholly commits herself to caring for the needs of the child *hungries*. To her colleagues, her steadfast devotion for the care of these child *hungries* defies human understanding; yet when the few remaining other base survivors have died, Miss Justineau's devotion to the *hungries* remains unshaken:

I'm coming back. I'll take care of you.[...]

Melanie runs to her and embraces her. Gives her love without hesitation or limit, whether it's earned or not—and at the same time pronounces sentence on her. "Get dressed," she says happily. "Come and meet them."

The children. Sullen and awkward sitting cross-legged on the ground, cowed in silence.... (Carey, 2015, p. 454).

At the end of *The Girl With All the Gifts*, Miss Justineau seals her relationship with Melanie by dedicating the rest of her entire life to educating the intellectual *hungries*, without reservation in a relationship only made possible through Miss Justineau's altruism.

The Ecocritical Survival: A Reconciliation between Human and Non-human

Scholars are raising new, important issues in the study of postcolonialism, particularly the question of how analysis of postcolonialism can be analyzed without considering the environment. The modern planetary consciousness has been shaped by environmental illustrations of the vulnerable Earth, as seen around the world through the environmental arguments surrounding global warming, the destruction of local ecologies, and the poverty and migration caused by environmental

changes wrought by the spread of humanity.

Ecocriticism presents a new analytical perspective in science fiction scholarship that goes beyond more typical politico-economic and sociological analyses. Ecocriticism pushes scholars and readers to inquire beyond basic postcolonial issues such as sexuality and race and to turn a critical eye to topics such as reprocentrism, speciesism, and the relationship between the human and non-human. Trends in science fiction, such as the idea of planetary connectedness, of the relations between the human and the non-human and of the animate and the inanimate, illustrate a new and ongoing literary revision and criticism of postcolonialism.

Ecocriticism principally examines how the environment or nature is represented in a literary text. The development and expansion of ecocritical studies has resulted in a blending of the human-centric analysis of literature with a new perspective that also considers place, setting, and, most notably, the environment. When subjected to ecocritical analysis, literature of all periods and places—not only science fiction, ecocentric or environmental literature, or nature writing, but all literature—takes on richer meaning. Ecocriticism emerged from more traditional approaches to literary analysis in which the critic explores the local or global, the material or physical, or the historical or natural history in the context of a work. Such approaches can be interdisciplinary, invoking knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies. Furthermore, through an ecocritical lens, the relationship between human and their physical world can be seen in a clearer perspective.

Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "a critical



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MECHANISMS	DESCRIPTION	TEXTUAL EXAMPLES
DENIAL	Primitive defense which involves blocking external events from awareness or the refusal to accept a reality	Miss Justineau refuses to acknowledge the child <i>hungries</i> as monsters who would pose as potential threats to humankind. (Carey, 2015, p. 56)
REPRESSION	Involuntary exclusion of a painful memory from consciousness	Miss Justineau tries to suppress the memory of Melanie devouring human flesh and blood. (Carey, 2015, p. 71)
IDENTIFICATION	Unconscious modelling of oneself to conform to others	Melanie often associates herself with the human world through knowledge and action in futile hope of becoming more human. (Carey, 2015, p. 94)
ALTRUISM	Dealing with an inner emotional conflict by an outward dedication to the needs of others	Miss Justineau is deeply affected by her past accidental killing of a child and therefore channels her energy and care to the child <i>hungries</i> . (Carey, 2015, p. 99)

Figure 1: Summary of Psychological Defense Mechanisms Exhibited by Characters

stance which negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (pp. 18-19). As *The Girl with All the Gifts* comes to a close on a somber yet final note, the realization of what is left of the human race becomes an unalterable reality for Melanie’s teacher, paralleling Glotfelty’s definition of ecocriticism as negotiation:

Justineau understands what that means now. How she’ll live, and what she’ll be. And she laughs through choking tears at the rightness of it. Nothing is forgotten and everything is paid. (Carey, 2015, p. 449)

The surviving humans from the base where Melanie was kept have been utterly and completely defeated, except for Miss Justineau. In other words, Miss Justineau becomes the sole survivor of a dying human race who will spend the rest of her life dwelling amongst intelligent *hungries*. An indefinite environmental crisis has presented itself through the birth of a new generation of species called *hungries*.

Though at first the emergence of the *hungries* represented a crisis for the human race, by the end of *The Girl With All the Gifts*, a new different world has emerged that will one day be ruled by a society of intellectual *hungries*. Rather than display resentment at the fate of her species and the world, or regret for all that has happened, Miss Justineau embraces the dawn of this new world with open arms because she views this change as a form of cleansing and consenting to the natural order of the environment.

Miss Justineau’s relationship with Melanie, therefore, foreshadows a coming age where the human will be required to cohabitate with these new species of *hungries* in order to survive.

The ultimate survival of Miss Justineau clearly reflects ecocritical elements present throughout Carey’s novel. The optimistic—and, perhaps, cautionary—conclusion to *The Girl with All the Gifts*, features a new, natural world order in which humans and *hungries* can coexist harmoniously.

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Without psychological defense mechanisms, however, Miss Justineau and Melanie never would have forged their mutually-beneficial relationship that spurred them to survive in their harsh, unforgiving world.

Conclusion

This study of M.R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* employed both psychoanalytic and ecocritical perspectives to reveal the defense mechanisms that enabled Miss Justineau and Melanie to develop a relationship in the midst of a plague-infested Britain and reflects ecocritical principals of survival for the human race. Our analysis has revealed that psychological defense mechanisms are coping strategies which played pivotal roles in constructing and reinforcing the bond between Miss Justineau and Melanie. Melanie and her teacher manipulate their realities subconsciously through denial, repression, identification, and altruism, altering and distorting their respective perceptions of the world

around them to manifest a continual expression of love and care for one another. As the characters conceded to an ecocritical survival, they accepted the establishment of a calm and tolerable post-human state, transforming the former totalitarian and dystopian world of human military bases versus *hungries* to a new, free utopia where both species would ultimately survive.

The ever-changing nature of science fiction means there is always room for further analysis of the genre. In this study, we have considered the ecocritical and psychological factors present in *The Girl with All the Gifts* that contribute to the strange coexistence between humans and *hungries* at the end of the novel. The present study, however, does not extensively examine the transformation of human beings into post-humans in other works of science fiction, and we recommend future studies of *The Girl with All the Gifts* perform a comparative analysis of this transformation in Carey's novel and in other examples of ecocritical science fiction.

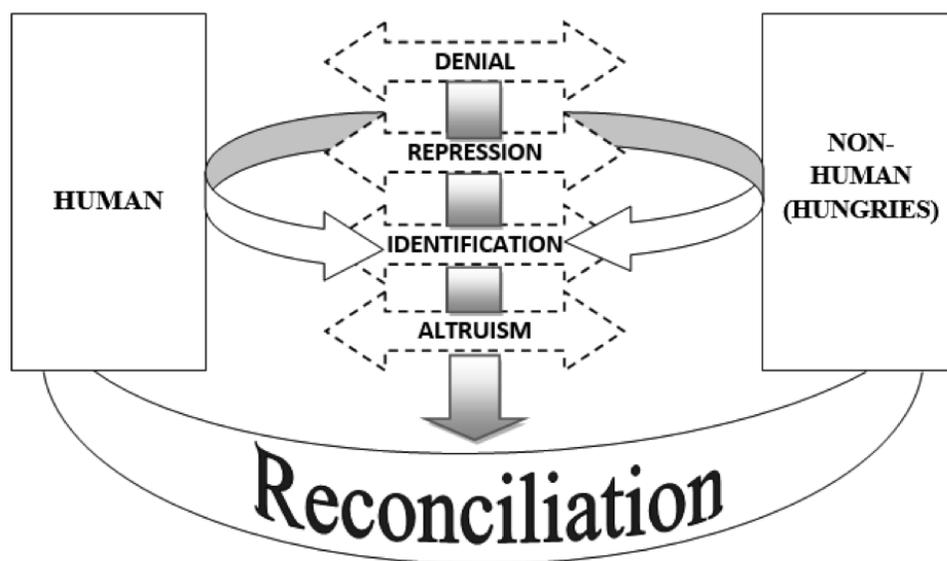


Figure 2: The Process of Reconciliation & Survival through Psychological Defense Mechanisms



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