

The Mystical Descent: An Ecocritical Reading of D.G. Driver's Dragon Surf

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Abstract:

This article titled, The Mystical Descent: An Ecocritical Reading of D.G. Driver's Dragon Surf sets out to argue that D.G. Driver's Dragon Surf is a young adult novel which eventually emerges as a vibrant manifestation of environmental ethics. This article diagnoses Driver as an eco-novelist, who grants profound agency to the dragon. For which, she pulls off a dragon from the Chinese mythology and ordains it the power of agency. The dragon is entrusted with the power of redemption. It hails from the non-human world, and more precisely, from the Chinese folkloric myth. Hence, the dragon here proposes itself, at first, to be a mystical element.

Driver, further uses the novel to establish, how the dragon enacts the ecological crisis. Hence, Eric, who is just fifteen, emerges not on heroic terms. Instead, he comes as an individual who listens, feels and even responds to the non-human world. Eventually, Eric emerges as a

pedagogic model for ecological awakening in the novel.

This article reaches its findings that the Dragon Surf literalizes a drowning into the oceanic glory which is an ambience of both danger and revelation. The dragon, in ecocritical terms, comes as an interstitial space or liminal space that blurs the boundary between the human and the non-human. Driver positions the dragon of the Chinese mythology as a symbolic guardian of the environmental depletion. And Eric's mystical connect with the dragon documents the immediate imperative need for ecological governance. This article also brings forth the statement that by intertwining the Chinese mythology with Santa Cruz, California's surfing, Driver asserts that the humanity's maturity lies in the recognition of the true relationship with the flora and the fauna.

Key words: Eco criticism, Oceanic sublime, Mythic Descent, Ecosystem, Non-human Agency, Chinese Mythology, Dragon, Environmental Resistance, Environmental Awakening, Ecological Harmony, Eco-mythology.

INTRODUCTION:

Dragon Surf advances the story of Eric Long. His dad is a surfer and his mom is an artist, obsessed with Chinese dragons. Eric is involved at Santa Cruz, California, while on a surfing competition, with visions of a Chinese woman and her dragon. As Eric explores the Dragon Bluff beach, he encounters the hidden underwater space and the mythical dragon that protects the harmony of nature. Driver blends this old Chinese mythology with her postmodern ecological concerns. The novel also highlights the fragile, oceanic sublime much contaminated by toxic pollutants caused by the humans. Eventually, Driver establishes Eric's journey as a discovery of the identity of the self and the ecological awareness.

When Eric's mom, who hails from China speaks of the dragons as protectors, Eric detests the kind of thing quite weird. His mom loves painting dragons everywhere, including the bath towels. To Eric, the son of the American father, "Dragons don't save people They eat people"

(*Dragon Surf* 9). Driver begins her novel with this conflict arising out of cultural hybridity. Ultimately, she uses this conflict to enact her ecological concern in the novel. Eric dreams of dragons quite often.

The following passage attests the point:

I stared that dragon in the face. It's cold, empty eyes stared back into mine. Sharp white teeth shone from a snarling mouth that was meant to look fierce and strong. What I saw instead was a face that mocked me, teasing me that I

would be known for nothing but its existence. I couldn't stand looking at it anymore. (*Dragon Surf* 15)

The above-mentioned passage foreshadows Driver's ecological concern. The dragon's appearance, all of a sudden, creates fragmentation of self in Eric. At the same, a deep look at the passage reveals Driver's unique narrative that transforms fear into harmony. Later in the novel Eric sees the dragon in the painting as it "stretches out its serpentine body, and half a dozen people are now under the shade the expanse provides" (*Dragon Surf* 58). This moment

symbolizes the possibility of peaceful co-existence by the humans with nature's creations. Driver uses almost all of Eric's dreams to reflect an ecological vision tinged with ecocritical perception.

It nails the point that the humans are not the masters of the universe but simply, participants of a larger ecological prism.

Nevertheless, one is awestruck by the fact that a woman is the tamer of that fierce dragon.

As the following passage suggests:

I [Eric] stand up, frantic, trying to figure out how I can rush to her in time. The young woman opens her eyes and puts up one finger. The dragon closes its mouth with a snap. The woman points to the dirt. The dragon scratches the ground, circles itself and then lies down like a pet cat. (*Dragon Surf* 59)

Here, Driver deviates from the mainstream ecological discourse. For example, the dragon is not a passive victim. Instead, it emerges, symbolically, in the hands of Driver, a radically reimagined creature of yore born to be an active, intentional and emotionally responsive agent. The dragon, thus, is not just a metaphor of nature's power. Instead, it emerges as a powerful tool in the hands of Driver as a character with drive and determination and with inspiration and purpose. Again, it becomes a character endowed with communicate and a demand for justice. The dragon exists all through the novel to remind the humanity of the ecological crisis. As Lynn White, Jr. observes, "People . . . in the present state of historical scholarship usually do not know exactly when, where, or with what effects man-induced changes came" (4). Lynn White is terribly scared of the ecological backlash, mounting feverishly.

The dragon, whose name is Baidu, is here to remind humanity of its change for the worse. When Eric tells his friend Mark about the dragon, he is not ready to listen. Once Eric is taken away deep into the ocean. Then he feels pressure under his body. He knows now that the dragon lifts him "right out of the water, balancing me top of its head.....to the dragon's scaly snout" (*Dragon Surf* 69).

Later, in the novel, Eric and his mom get caught in the rough waves only to be carried to the dragon's cave. It is just behind the treacherous cliffs. A swell of water rushes over Eric's head. He sees his mother gasp and struggle. Eric does not find time to cry for help. The water is up to his eyes and "the darkness around me got even darker" (*Dragon Surf* 192). Yet, the dragon comes to their rescue. As he observes, "The bright yellow of his fur and skin reflected on the water in

the cave, helping me see a little bit. It was enough to discover that my mom was lying still in the claw beside me" (*Dragon Surf* 193).

Here one sees the dragon metaphorically, "stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow part of the energy pathways which sustain life" (Rueckert 108). Dragons, in the hands of Driver, emerge as the ever-living source of vibrance and performativity. No wonder, Cynthia Deitering's observation warrants mention here, as she writes:

what I see as a new "toxic consciousness" in fiction reflects a fundamental shift in historical consciousness; for at some point . . . something happened,what happened, I believe, is that we came to perceive, perhaps inchoately, our own complicity in postindustrial ecosystems, both personal and national, which are predicated on pollution and waste. (197)

Thus, the surf theme intensifies one's reading of the novel. Surfing is one cultural exercise that engages itself with the oceanic rhythms as it positions the characters in harmonious relationships with nature. There is no issue of domination, but rather, a coexistence with nature. Driver employs the dragon with

the strategic purpose of a figure of environmental ethics. The dragon's warning to Eric and his mother is indicative of a protective instinct towards the pristine nature. It is obviously, a critique of the human intrusion in the name of cheap cultural materialism. Driver, eventually, suggests the inherent responsibility of governance, reframing mysticism as ecological connect rather than mere storytelling.

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