

Nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity: environmental ethics in Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* (1986)

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Abstract

In the Anthropocene era, where human activities profoundly alter ecosystems, ethical reflections on human–nature relationships have become increasingly vital. Paul W. Taylor's environmental ethics—particularly the principles of nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity—provide a valuable framework for examining these relationships. Literature, especially young adult (YA) fiction, serves as a significant medium for shaping moral and ecological awareness among young readers. Despite its accessibility, YA nature writing has often been overlooked in ecocritical scholarship. This study explores the ethical dimensions of Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* (1986), a canonical YA wilderness survival novel that portrays the protagonist Brian Robeson's encounters with animals, plants, and other nonhuman entities in the forests of northern Canada. Through the lens of Taylor's *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (1986), this study analyses how Brian's experiences reflect the recognition of animal agency, human vulnerability, and adherence to ethical principles governing human–nonhuman interactions. The findings suggest that Paulsen's narrative embodies a deep ecological sensibility that aligns with Taylor's nonanthropocentric ethics. This research enriches the understanding of *Hatchet* (1986) and contributes to broader ecocritical discussions on environmental ethics in young adult literature.

Introduction

A growing body of environmental scholarship identifies human behaviour—particularly that rooted in anthropocentric worldviews—as the fundamental cause of ecological degradation. Scholars have long argued that the environmental crisis is not merely a scientific or technological issue, but an ethical and philosophical one. Lynn White Jr. (1967) traces the roots of modern ecological destruction to the Western religious and cultural tradition that places humans above nature. White's (1967) seminal essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," contends that Christianity's anthropocentric theology legitimised human dominance, fostering exploitative behaviours toward the natural world. Peter Singer writes in *Animal Liberation* (1975) that humanity privileges itself simply because it belongs to the human species. Similarly, Carolyn Merchant (1980) examines the intellectual shift during the Scientific Revolution that redefined nature as a mechanical system, thereby transforming it into an object of human manipulation and control. According to David Abram (1996), Western culture has alienated humans from the animate earth by privileging abstract rationality over sensory ecological relationships. In response to René Descartes's mind–body dualism, which classifies humans as rational subjects and animals as mechanical bodies, Val Plumwood (2002) contends that such dualism establishes a hierarchy separating culture from nature and humans from animals, thereby

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enabling the domination of nonhuman life. These critiques illuminate how Western thought has historically justified the exploitation of nonhuman life, shaping a cultural ethos that privileges human needs above ecological balance.

In response to this anthropocentric legacy, environmental philosophers such as Aldo Leopold (1949/2017), Arne Naess (1984), and Paul W. Taylor (1986) have proposed ethical frameworks that call for a reconceptualisation of humanity's place within nature. Leopold's (1949/2017) "land ethic" extends moral consideration to soils, waters, plants, and animals, arguing that ethical behaviour must preserve the integrity and stability of the biotic community. Naess's (1984) theory of deep ecology similarly challenges human-centred moral systems, advocating for a recognition of the intrinsic value of all beings and promoting what he terms biospheric egalitarianism. Taylor (1986) advances this ecocentric turn by articulating a systematic environmental ethic of respect for nature, grounded in the principles of nonmaleficence, noninterference, fidelity, and restitutive justice. For Taylor, environmental problems arise from humanity's behavioural failure to recognise the equal worth of all life forms. He is convinced that ecological harmony can only be achieved when humans cease treating nature instrumentally and begin to live as members—not masters—of the biotic community.

Contemporary environmental thinkers have examined both the philosophical assumptions and the material consequences underlying modern ecological crises. Environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston (1988) argues that dominant Western ethical frameworks have historically restricted moral value to human interests, thereby overlooking the intrinsic worth of nonhuman nature and the complex interdependencies within ecosystems. Similarly, J. Baird Callicott (1989) expands upon the land ethic tradition to emphasise that ethical responsibility should extend to ecological communities rather than remain confined to human-centred moral systems. From a different but complementary perspective, Val Plumwood (1993) critiques the dualistic logic embedded in Western rationalism, arguing that hierarchical separations between humans and nature, reason and emotion, have historically justified the domination of both women and the natural world. While these philosophers interrogate the ethical and conceptual foundations of anthropocentrism, the environmental writer Bill McKibben (1989) foregrounds the material consequences of modern industrial activity, arguing that human technological power has altered atmospheric and ecological processes to such an extent that "nature" can no longer be understood as an independent force.

Although these scholars differ in emphasis, their work collectively underscores the need to reconsider prevailing assumptions about human superiority and humanity's relationship with the natural world. Within ecocritical studies, this philosophical discourse informs literary analysis by revealing how narratives both reflect and resist human-centred ideologies. Works of young adult wilderness fiction, such as Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*, serve as narrative explorations of these ethical tensions. Salvner (1996a) notes that Paulsen's portrayal of the wilderness emphasises humility, respect, and coexistence—qualities that mirror Taylor's (1986) nonanthropocentric ethics.

Young adult (YA) literature, though often marginalised in academic criticism, functions as a vital space for exploring moral and ecological education. As Ostry (2013) observes, YA narratives that address environmental themes can cultivate in young readers an awareness of ecological interdependence and moral responsibility toward the natural world. Thomas W. Bean and Karen Moni (2003) argue that YA fiction provides a framework for developing critical literacy and social awareness, enabling readers to analyse social conditions and power relations through literature. According to Steven Wolk (2009), YA literature can be used pedagogically to nurture adolescents' social responsibility and ethical reflection. Research on YA fiction also shows that it allows adolescents to examine moral dilemmas and ethical decision-making via fictional scenarios, contributing to the development of moral reasoning and social understanding (McNerny and Bushman 2004). In addition, YA texts often introduce young readers to environmental ethics and the human–nature relationship (Dobrin and Kidd 2004), cultivating ecological imagination and environmental responsibility (Keeling and Pollard 2009), and fostering ecological awareness and ethical engagement with the natural world (Curry 2013). As emphasised by Hans Jonas (1984), responsibility obliges its respective bearer to enable the existence of future generations, because anticipations of ecological devastation merit more serious consideration than projections of future harmony. More recent work in the field of technology assessment further develops this concern with responsibility. Armin Grunwald (2019) emphasises that technological societies must adopt anticipatory and ethically informed approaches to managing environmental risks, highlighting the need for responsibility in the face of uncertain but potentially far-reaching consequences.

Within this context, Paulsen's *Hatchet* stands as a paradigmatic text that transcends the conventional survival genre. The novel follows thirteen-year-old Brian Robeson's struggle to live in the Canadian wilderness after a plane crash, depicting not only his physical endurance but also his ethical awakening to the interconnectedness of life. Critical appreciation of Paulsen's *Hatchet* has largely focused on literary style, young adult readership, and pedagogical application rather than environmental ethics. Critics highlight the autobiographical foundations of Paulsen's wilderness narratives and the coming-of-age pattern in which young adult protagonists achieve transformation through solitary encounters with nature (Butts 1995; Blasingame 2007; Mao 2009; Hall 2011). Within this framework, *Hatchet* is interpreted as a survival or developmental narrative. A case in point is that Kathleen Hall (2011) categorises the novel as "the epitome of a Wildungsroman piece" (p. 96), highlighting the protagonist's maturation in the wilderness rather than within conventional social structures.

Paulsen's distinctive narrative style also draws the attention of other scholars. Rohman (1998) notes that the novel's "economical language and vivid natural imagery" contribute to its intense representation of the wilderness experience (p. 58). Salvner (1996b) similarly observes that Paulsen's concise storytelling heightens the immediacy of Brian's survival struggle (p. 122). In pedagogical research, *Hatchet* is frequently examined as a teaching resource. Leonora Macy (2004) argues that *Hatchet* is "a novel study in the elementary classroom can be an exciting undertaking...when it is experienced through drama" (p. 240), suggesting that dramatic strategies enable students to engage with the narrative on imaginative and experiential levels. Likewise, David T. Gordon (2002) discusses the use of *Hatchet* in digital literacy instruction, noting that interactive platforms allow students to "summarise what they've read, predict what happens next, [and] clarify confusing passages" (p. 3). Although these studies acknowledge the centrality of the wilderness setting and Brian's encounters with animals and landscapes, they largely treat nature as merely a setting for psychological growth, narrative technique, or classroom practice. Despite *Hatchet*'s enduring popularity and influence among young readers, critical engagement with its environmental ethics remains limited. In particular, little scholarship has explored how the narrative implicitly articulates environmental ethical principles such as preventing harm to nonhuman life, refraining from involvement in ecological processes, and loyalty to the more-than-human community.

Building on these critical insights and addressing the gap, this study applies Taylor's (1986) framework of environmental ethics—particularly the rules of nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity (pp. 172–188)—to examine how *Hatchet* dramatises an ecologically grounded moral vision. Drawing on the outlooks in Taylor's *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*, the study employs textual analysis to interpret the text. It argues that Brian's transformation in the wilderness exemplifies a nonanthropocentric worldview, wherein humans are re-situated as participants within—rather than masters over—the ecological community. This analysis demonstrates how the narrative not only reflects Taylor's ethical principles but also functions as a pedagogical model of environmental responsibility for young adult readers.

In Günther Anders' (1980) critique of technological civilisation, he argues that humans are smaller than themselves in the sense that they are unable to imagine what they are capable of producing (p. 198). This discrepancy between technological power and ethical awareness underscores the necessity of moral restraint and responsibility in human actions toward the environment. By engaging Paulsen's novel through the lens of environmental ethics, this study contributes to the growing discourse in ecocriticism and YA environmental literature. It highlights the potential of YA fiction to foster ecological consciousness and moral reflection, suggesting that survival in the wilderness ultimately represents an ethical negotiation between humans and the more-than-human world.

Methodology: Environmental ethics

Drawing on the framework of environmental ethics in Taylor's theory, the study employs textual analysis to interpret Paulsen's *Hatchet*. The discussion begins by examining how environmental ethics are represented through Brian's interactions with the nonhuman world in the novel. One of the central themes present in the narrative is survival through adaptation to nature rather than conquest over it. Unlike traditional adventure narratives that portray the wilderness as an enemy to be combated, Paulsen depicts nature as a living environment that requires ethical

engagement. The study thus refers to Taylor's environmental ethics as a guide to identifying moments in which Brian demonstrates respect for nonhuman life and ecological balance. Although the novel contains numerous survival-related encounters between Brian and the natural world, the discussion centres specifically on two key aspects. First, the analysis focuses on Brian's decision to use only dead wood to build a shelter, make tools and sustain his fire. This action reflects the principle of nonmaleficence because Brian avoids unnecessary destruction of living trees and instead relies on materials already detached from living organisms.

Another significant theme explored in the text is how Brian's encounters with wild animals, particularly the skunk, the birds, the bear, the wolves, and the moose, engage with the principles of noninterference and fidelity. Contrary to narratives that depict animals as threats to be dominated or destroyed, Paulsen portrays these meetings as moments of mutual recognition and coexistence. Brian's reaction to the bear, in which he chooses observation and retreat rather than violence and fear, reflects Taylor's (1986) principle of noninterference by acknowledging the animal's right to exist within its own habitat without being disturbed (p. 173). Similarly, Brian's encounter with the wolf demonstrates an emerging sense of fidelity toward nature, as he begins to understand that the wilderness is not an adversary but a community with living beings deserving respect. Therefore, tricks that violate the rule of fidelity for human interests (Taylor 1986, p. 179) do not work in the natural world. Through these experiences of interaction with the animals, Brian undergoes ethical transformation, learning that humans are not superior to the nonhumans. These under-examined dimensions demonstrate how the novel extends ethical inquiry beyond human-centred concerns by situating ethical relationships within the wilderness, thereby foregrounding the more-than-human world as a central concern of environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics examines the moral principles that govern human interactions with the nonhuman world. It addresses ethical dilemmas concerning the environment by evaluating the values and responsibilities humans attribute to nature and by proposing frameworks for its protection. Palmer, McShane, and Sandler (2014) define environmental ethics as the study of human obligations toward the nonhuman environment, emphasising the need for moral reflection on humanity's ecological impact (p. 419). A foundational appeal in environmental ethics is that moral consideration should extend beyond human society to encompass the entire biotic community (Leopold 1949; Regan 1981; Naess 1984; Rolston 1988).

Environmental philosophers have proposed ethical principles to guide human behaviour toward nature. The principles as such regularly stress humanity's moral duty to minimise harm and interference with the natural world. Regan (1981) introduces a "principle of nondestruction, noninterference, and generally, nonmeddling" (pp. 31-32), arguing that ethical responsibility extends not only to individual animals but also to entire ecosystems. Similarly, Naess (1984) contends that "humans have no right to interfere destructively with nonhuman life except for purposes of satisfying vital human needs" (p. 266). Taylor's (1986) environmental ethics theory proposes four key principles: nonmaleficence, which holds that humans ought to refrain from causing harm to ecosystems and nonhuman beings; noninterference, which urges that nature should be allowed to function without unnecessary human intervention; fidelity, which maintains that humans should avoid deceiving or betraying animals, particularly when hunting or trapping; and restitutive justice, which affirms that when humans harm nature, they have a moral duty to restore it (pp. 172-188). Centring on humanity's responsibility to respect nature, Taylor's framework is distinctly nonanthropocentric, viewing nature as an independent moral entity rather than a resource for human exploitation.

Although Regan's (1981) rights-based theory and Taylor's biocentric ethics both defend the moral standing of nonhuman beings, they differ significantly in analytical orientation. Regan's framework concerns whether an entity possesses the characteristics necessary to qualify as a "subject-of-a-life," thereby grounding moral claims in rights attribution. Such an approach is significantly effective when the central ethical issue concerns the recognition or denial of rights. However, the present novel does not primarily dramatise disputes over rights status. Instead, it portrays ethical tensions arising from human participation within an ecological community characterised by dependence, conflict, and survival. The recurring questions concern how humans should act toward nonhuman life under conditions of coexistence—whether they should interfere, inflict harm, or respect the integrity of natural processes. Taylor's principles of nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity therefore offer not merely greater applicability but stronger explanatory power because they correspond directly to the ethical dynamics represented in the narrative. For example, instead of cutting down living trees nearby, Brian chooses to walk a longer distance to

gather dead wood from the forest to maintain his fire and construct shelter and tools. The ethical issue is not whether plants possess rights as “subjects-of-a-life.” Rather, the dilemma concerns the extent to which he can satisfy his survival needs while minimising harm and interference with the existing ecological system. Taylor’s framework can distinguish among harm, interference, and fidelity obligations in a way that Regan’s rights criterion alone does not readily explain.

Rather than treating environmental ethics solely as a general call for extending moral consideration beyond humans, this study adopts a more specific framework derived from Taylor’s outlook in environmental ethics. Taylor’s principles are possible to provide a nuanced lens for examining how human subjects ought to behave in relation to nonhuman life. By applying Taylor’s framework to examine *Hatchet*, this study shifts the focus from survival as mastery to survival as ethical negotiation, foregrounding how Brian’s evolving conduct reflects an emerging respect for the autonomy and intrinsic value of nonhuman beings. This approach repositions wilderness survival as a narrative showing wild nature as a site for ethical reorientation towards nonhuman life.

While Brian’s actions in *Hatchet* can be interpreted as practical strategies necessary for survival, this analysis does not regard survival and environmental ethics as mutually exclusive. Instead, it argues that Brian’s struggle for survival gradually develops into an ethical awareness of his dependence on, and responsibility toward, the more-than-human world. The criteria used to identify Taylor’s principles are therefore based on whether Brian’s actions minimise harm to living organisms, avoid unnecessary interference with wildlife and the environment, and reflect respect toward nonhuman beings beyond immediate self-interest. For instance, Brian’s choice to use dead wood rather than destroy living trees is interpreted as an act of nonmaleficence because it reduces unnecessary harm to living nature despite the availability of other survival options. Similarly, his decision not to disturb the bear and wolf embodies the principle of noninterference because he recognises the animals’ independent existence in their natural habitat rather than treating them merely as resources to meet his survival needs. Thus, the interpretation depends not solely on the outcome of survival but on attitudes, restraint, and ethical awareness.

The findings of the study reveal that Paulsen’s *Hatchet* exemplifies the principles of nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity through Brian’s survival experiences in the wilderness. Given the narrative’s emphasis on minimal ecological harm, Taylor’s concept of restitutive justice remains largely underrepresented in the ethical structure of the text. This framework provides profound insight into the novel’s ethical dimensions. The narrative portrays a shift in Brian’s perspective—from perceiving nature as an obstacle to recognising his own vulnerability, relinquishing superiority, and emerging fidelity toward the environment. By analysing Brian’s ethical choices, this study explores how *Hatchet* challenges anthropocentrism and advocates a moral responsibility toward the natural world.

Coexistence with nonhumans through nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity

Paulsen’s *Hatchet* offers a compelling narrative of survival that simultaneously reflects a profound engagement with environmental ethics. Through Brian Robeson’s encounters with the wilderness, the text foregrounds an ethical mode of coexistence that aligns closely with Taylor’s (1986) principle of nonmaleficence: moral agents must minimise harm to nonhuman life and act with “respect for nature” as a moral ideal (p. 172). Within this framework, Brian’s survival decisions—his restrained use of resources, careful handling of fire, and selective foraging—illustrate an emergent ecological consciousness grounded in respect rather than domination.

Fire, often symbolic of human mastery and technological advancement, becomes in Paulsen’s narrative a test of ethical restraint. Although Brian relies on fire for warmth and protection from mosquitoes, he consciously minimises his impact on the forest ecosystem by gathering only dead tree limbs for fuel rather than cutting down living trees. Paulsen (1986) describes his actions with moral precision:

He worked all through the morning at the wood, breaking down dead limbs and breaking or chopping them in smaller pieces, storing them neatly beneath the overhang... He went back to the fallen trees and found more dead limbs, carrying them up on the rock until he had enough for a bonfire (pp. 39–40).

Although much of the wood Brian gathers is intended for future use, he deliberately spends additional time searching for fallen branches or dead wood rather than cutting living trees. His willingness to incur greater effort in order to minimise even minor disturbance to the surrounding environment demonstrates an ethical commitment to avoiding unnecessary harm to the ecosystem, embodying Taylor's (1986) nonmaleficence. By rejecting the anthropocentric impulse to exploit living resources, Brian's conduct serves as an example to young readers, and it teaches them how to behave when interacting with the plants in nature.

When rebuilding his shelter after a storm, Brian once again demonstrates an awareness of preserving the environment through doing the least harm. Despite greater inconvenience and physical effort, Brian decides to climb the hill in search of "dead pines," bringing down heavier logs and using "the branches" to weave a "tight wall" for his shelter (Paulsen 1986, p. 48). The use of dead pine indicates a sustained commitment to nonmaleficence. His actions are neither extractive nor careless; instead, they align with the ecological ethos that Garrard (2012) identifies as "the moral imagination of living with rather than against nature" (p. 84).

Paulsen further broadens this environmental ethic by extending nonmaleficence beyond plants and landscapes to the animal world. Whereas the earlier sections focus on Brian's treatment of natural resources, this stage of the narrative expands the moral scope of his ecological awareness to include sentient life. Brian's interactions with animals consistently reflect Taylor's (1986) demand for moral consideration toward all living beings. Even when survival necessitates hunting or fishing (Paulsen 1986, p.116), he avoids unnecessary violence and kills only for sustenance. Significantly, when crafting a spear, Brian chooses not to decorate it with feathers (Paulsen 1986, p. 117), thereby refusing to kill a bird for aesthetic or nonessential purposes. This moment may appear minor, yet it reveals an important ethical distinction between necessity and excess. Paulsen thereby suggests that ecological morality is measured not only by what humans do to survive, but also by the harm they refuse to inflict when survival does not require it.

Through these progressively developed acts of restraint, *Hatchet* presents Brian's survival as a process of moral transformation. Brian's development from a modern, consumption-oriented adolescent into an ecologically conscious individual reflects a broader critique of human-centred moral hierarchies. In this sense, Taylor's (1986) principle of nonmaleficence provides a concrete ethical framework through which respect for nature can be translated into moral action and everyday behaviour.

In *Hatchet*, Paulsen uses narrative experience to guide readers toward a nonanthropocentric worldview grounded in responsibility and restraint. Literature, as Eagleton (2008) argues, does not merely communicate ideas but reshapes perception and moral sensibility. The novel therefore functions not only as a survival story but also as a form of ecological pedagogy. This pedagogical dimension resonates with Hans Jonas's (1984) argument that human actions must be guided by the imperative that their consequences do not endanger the future conditions of authentic life. By portraying survival as dependent upon respect rather than exploitation, Paulsen encourages readers to reconsider how humans should ethically inhabit and preserve the natural world.

While the preceding episodes demonstrate Brian's increasing commitment to minimising harm towards nonhuman life, his coexistence with other organisms demonstrates that such ethical restraint arises from an awareness of human vulnerability within the ecological community. Therefore, Brian's journey also exemplifies what Paul Taylor (1986) defines as the rules of noninterference and fidelity. In *Hatchet*, Brian's encounters with nature epitomise the moral understanding that the wilderness neither privileges nor spares him, and he is not legitimised to exert human impact on the course of nature. His survival hinges on acknowledging nature's independence and indifference. The encounters with different species of animals prove this. For example, a porcupine attacks Brian by piercing its quills into his leg (Paulsen 1986, p. 80). In another instance, a skunk steals the turtle eggs the protagonist has stored and sprays him, leaving him temporarily blinded for an extended period (Paulsen 1986, p. 122). Later in the story, a moose attacks Brian without warning, striking him with enough power to hurl him into the lake and leave him seriously injured. This episode renders him entirely vulnerable: his rib is broken, his tools are lost, and his capacity for control is feeble (Paulsen 1986, pp. 141–142). The protagonist's instinctive response of remaining low and still to crawl away (Paulsen 1986, p. 143) signals not mastery but submission, a necessary adaptation to the animal's dominance. Brian learns that human authority dissolves in the face of ecological autonomy. These encounters collectively function as a progression in Brian's moral education. Rather than portraying animals as obstacles to

human survival, Paulsen represents them as autonomous beings with agency, whose actions expose the limits of human control.

Realising the fact that he is vulnerable, Brian refrains from interfering with the bear's and the wolves' existence with a sense of fidelity. Before coming up with them, Brian had already developed practical survival knowledge, learning to catch fish with his bow and arrow without playing tricks (Paulsen 1986, p. 113). Yet when he begins to seek easier prey in the form of the "foolish birds," his intention is interrupted by an instinctive sense of caution from a female bear, leading her cubs. Brian's response to the coming of the bear is not anger or despair but humility and understanding: "If the bear had wanted you, it would have taken you... The bear was eating berries. Not people" (Paulsen 1986, p. 71). Brian trusts the bear's warning growl that "something" dangerous is coming (Paulsen 1986, p. 114). In this moment, the narrative also foregrounds Brian's noninterference as an ethical posture: Brian refuses to disrupt the bear's living domain and instead recognises the legitimacy of the animal's claim to the space. The encounter therefore marks an important shift from fear of nature to ethical recognition of animal agency.

In addition to respecting the mother bear's warning, Brian's fidelity to nonhuman life is pronounced in his subsequent encounter with the wolf, whose approach the bear first perceives. When Brian confronts the wolf, he neither attempts to assert dominance nor resorts to aggression in self-defence, despite possessing weapons that could potentially be used for defence. Instead, he meets the animal's gaze and remains still, acknowledging its presence without attempting to manipulate the situation to his advantage. As is written by Paulsen Brian knows that the wolf is "another part of the woods, another part of all of it" (Paulsen 1986, p. 115). The wolf, observing him from an elevated position, appears to "claim" the territory below (Paulsen 1986, p. 115), reinforcing the sense that Brian has entered a domain governed by nonhuman life. Brian's response—maintaining distance and refraining from interference—demonstrates faithful respect for the wolf's sovereignty within its habitat. This posture reflects a form of ethical sincerity: Brian does not conceal his vulnerability or pretend mastery over the wilderness but accepts his position as one living being among others. Unlike the earlier animal attacks that force humility upon him, this encounter reveals Brian consciously choosing fidelity as an ethical stance. In this moment of silent communication, neither Brian nor the animal violates the other's integrity.

This awareness of noninterference becomes most apparent in the tornado episode, where nature's indifference is rendered through imagery of overwhelming force. If the animal encounters teach Brian to respect individual non-human beings, the tornado expands this lesson to the ecological system itself, demonstrating that humans remain subject to forces far beyond their control. Paulsen (1986) writes that the tornado was a "mad force" that hurled Brian into his shelter, "took his ears and mind and body," and obliterated everything he had built (p. 145). Here, the natural world asserts itself as an autonomous agent, acting beyond moral categories of good or evil. The destruction it inflicts is not retribution but revelation—an ecological truth that humans are subject to the same forces that govern all life. However, humanity is not able to interfere with such destructive forces, but must accept them with a calm attitude, as Brian does. Reflecting on the encounter, Brian feels "lucky once more that he had not been killed or more seriously injured" (Paulsen 1986, p. 151) because he realises that "if he couldn't hunt he would die and if he were injured badly he would not be able to hunt" (Paulsen 1986, p. 151), acknowledging both his physical vulnerability and his complete dependence on the wilderness for survival.

Through his physical vulnerability, Brian learns that survival in the wilderness is not achieved by imposing human order upon nature but by accepting nature's indifference. This realisation echoes Naess's (1989) deep ecology, which advocates an "ecological self" grounded in identification with all living beings rather than separation from them. As stated by Hoffmaster (2006), "only by recognising the depth and breadth of our vulnerability can we affirm our humanity" (p. 41). By situating Brian's vulnerability within a nonanthropocentric frame, Paulsen portrays the change in humanity's idea about his position. The tornado strips away the illusions of mastery and possession that underpin anthropocentrism, aligning instead with Plumwood's (1993) call to reject the "master subject" position that separates the human from the nonhuman.

This realisation marks a moral shift consistent with Taylor's ethical vision: Brian learns that integrity in human-nonhuman relations is maintained only when one respects the natural agency of other beings. The ethical implications of this stance also reflect Garrard's (2012) argument that the wilderness narrative functions as "a site of moral testing" where human identity is recalibrated in ecological rather than anthropocentric terms (p. 142), as Brian's

transformation ultimately embodies the ideal of humility and ecological awareness (Slovic 1992, p.2 4), demonstrating that human survival depends upon recognising ecological dependence rather than asserting human superiority. Similarly, Naess's (1989) deep ecology posits that genuine self-realisation arises through identification with the natural world rather than separation from it. Through this lens, Brian's noninterference with and fidelity to nature represent not a passive submission but an ethical maturity grounded in mutual respect. His evolving understanding demonstrates that coexistence in the wilderness is sustained not through conquest but through respect for nature with ethical responsibilities.

The denial of human superiority

The previous section discusses how the three rules of environmental ethics—nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity—are represented in Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*. However, the narrative does not fully reflect Taylor's final rule, restitutive justice, which requires humans to restore ecological damage they have caused. Instead, the narrative ultimately reflects a central ideology of environmental ethics: the necessity of challenging the long-standing anthropocentric ideology that humans are unconditionally superior to nonhuman entities, an assumption widely regarded as a major cause of environmental destruction. Based on the earlier section's focus on Brian's ethical behaviour toward nature, this section expands the argument by examining how the wilderness fundamentally transforms Brian's understanding of humanity's place within the biotic community.

In *Hatchet*, Gary Paulsen tells the story of a boy who must learn to live within, rather than above, the natural world. When Brian Robeson's plane crashes deep in the Canadian wilderness (Paulsen, 1986, p. 26), his entry into the forest marks more than the beginning of a survival struggle—it begins a moral journey from anthropocentric ignorance to ecological humility. Alone and deprived of the technological protections of civilisation, Brian is compelled to confront what Taylor (1986) describes as the denial of human superiority, recognising that humans possess no inherent authority or privileged status over other living beings but exist as one member of the broader biotic community. What once seemed a hostile, chaotic environment becomes, through experience, a complex web of equal participants in which Brian is but one living member. This shift is significant because the novel does not simply portray nature as powerful, but presents human-centred assumptions as inadequate for understanding ecological reality.

At first, Brian embodies the anthropocentric mindset characteristic of modern civilisation. Conditioned to control and command, he sees the wilderness as an adversary—something to be conquered through reason and effort. Yet nature swiftly denies him that illusion. The swarm of mosquitoes that covers his skin “like a living coat” (Paulsen 1986, p. 14) reminds him that he is reduced to prey, stripped of the protections provided by civilisation. The insects are not represented as malicious antagonists but as ordinary organisms pursuing survival according to their ecological function. The significance of this scene thus lies in the collapse of assumed human exceptionalism. Taylor's (1986) rejection of species hierarchy becomes visible here because Brian experiences, physically and psychologically, that human comfort and dominance depend largely on artificial protections provided by civilisation rather than any natural superiority.

The novel develops this destabilisation further through Brian's encounter with the mother bear. Unlike the earlier mosquito scene, which primarily exposes human vulnerability, the bear encounter introduces the possibility of coexistence through restraint and recognition of nonhuman agency. Brian does not fight or flee but stands still, hearing her “low sound in her throat to threaten and warn him” (Paulsen 1986, p. 44). The bear does not pursue him aggressively. Her behaviour is protective rather than predatory. The narrative more cautiously suggests that the bear's maternal power, calm and commanding, redefines the notion of superiority. Taylor (1986) writes that moral worth is “reversible” among all living beings, for “any person may be in the role of subject, and any may be in the role of agent, without change in the justifiability of acts of self-defence” (p. 267). In this scene, Brian accepts his place as a potential subject rather than an aggressor, understanding that both he and the bear possess equal claims to existence. The episode therefore contributes a new stage in the argument: Brian moves beyond recognising vulnerability toward acknowledging the legitimacy of nonhuman presence and agency.

This acknowledgement of animal agency deepens during Brian's encounter with the wolf. From a ridge, the animal looks down on him with "wide yellow eyes," claiming "all that was below him as his own, took Brian as his own" (Paulsen 1986, p. 44). The image of the wolf—majestic, silent, and secure—reverses centuries of human imagery in which man stands above the beasts. Brian feels fear, then awe, and finally comprehension: the wolf's dominion is not tyranny but belonging. Paulsen (1986) writes, "He knew the wolf now, as the wolf knew him," and Brian "nodded and smiled" (p. 44). This moment should not be overstated as a fully mutual ethical relationship. The wolf does not consciously enter a moral agreement with Brian. Rather, Brian psychologically reinterprets the encounter in a way that reflects his changing ecological awareness. Brian's nod symbolises a growing acceptance that the wolf possesses its own independent existence, territory, and behavioural logic beyond human control.

Even creatures deemed insignificant in human hierarchies—the so-called "foolbirds"—become teachers in this nonanthropocentric drama. Initially, Brian mocks their stupidity, but when he repeatedly fails to hunt them, he recognises their superior adaptation. Their camouflage and silence (Paulsen 1986, p. 50) demonstrate an intelligence of survival that surpasses human cunning. Only when he learns to observe more carefully and adapt his behaviour does he succeed in hunting them. Unlike the earlier scenes that focus on vulnerability and coexistence, this introduces an epistemological dimension to Brian's transformation: he must abandon exclusively human ways of perceiving and instead learn from the logic of the natural world itself. This shift aligns with Naess's (1989) deep ecological notion of self-realisation, the expansion of identity beyond the human ego to embrace other forms of life. Brian's transformation becomes not only moral but cognitive, as survival increasingly depends upon ecological understanding rather than technological or intellectual superiority.

Through these encounters, Paulsen dismantles the myth of human mastery and sense of superiority. The wilderness, indifferent yet sustaining, enforces species equality through exposing the protagonist's vulnerability. As Leopold (1949/2017) reminds us in *A Sand County Almanac*, humans are "plain members and citizens of the biotic community" (p. 204), not conquerors of it. Brian learns this lesson experientially; the more he aligns himself with nature's rhythms, the more he thrives. His survival depends on attunement—reading the forest's signs, respecting its creatures, and accepting its laws. The novel's argument progresses beyond simple admiration for nature. The denial of human superiority becomes not merely a moral principle but a survival strategy. Paulsen systematically demonstrates that anthropocentric thinking itself is inadequate because it prevents humans from recognising ecological dependence and limitation.

Paulsen's narrative, then, is both a coming-of-age story and an ecological parable. Brian's growth mirrors a broader ethical reorientation away from anthropocentrism and toward a nonanthropocentric respect for life. By the novel's end, Brian no longer views himself as a solitary human against a hostile world. Instead, he has become part of a living continuum in which the insects, the birds, the bears, and the wolves possess equal significance. Through *Hatchet*, Paulsen participates in a wider conversation within environmental ethics and ecocriticism. The text illustrates Taylor's (1986) call for moral equality among species, Naess's (1989) vision of ecological selfhood, and Garrard's (2012) insistence that literature can destabilise human-centred narratives. More importantly, the narrative demonstrates these ideas through Brian's gradual experiential transformation rather than through abstract moral instruction. In denying human superiority, Paulsen's *Hatchet* restores moral balance, reminding readers that to survive on Earth is to coexist, not to command.

Conclusion

Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* exemplifies a nonanthropocentric worldview that aligns closely with Taylor's environmental ethics. Through Brian Robeson's transformative encounters with the wilderness, the novel embodies the moral principles of nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity towards the nonhuman world. Rather than portraying nature as an adversary to be conquered, Paulsen presents it as a community of life in which human beings learn to coexist respectfully. Brian's survival depends not on domination or exploitation, but on humility, adaptation, and an ethical awareness of ecological interdependence, reflecting Taylor's (1986) rejection of human superiority.

By foregrounding nonmaleficence, *Hatchet* challenges anthropocentric assumptions that privilege human interests over nonhuman life and instead constructs survival as an ethical practice grounded in restraint and respect. Rather than depicting wilderness survival as a triumph over nature, Paulsen presents it as an ongoing process of ethical negotiation, in which Brian's careful use of natural resources, avoidance of unnecessary harm, and adaptation to ecological limits exemplify the principles of nonmaleficence and sustainable coexistence. Likewise, Brian's encounters with nonhuman beings—including the skunk, the bear, the moose, the foolbirds, and the wolves—continually expose the limits of human control while affirming the autonomy of the more-than-human world. Fidelity to nature therefore emerges not merely as an abstract ethical principle but as a practical condition for living responsibly within the wilderness.

Although YA fiction has often been dismissed as overly didactic and therefore of limited critical significance (Daniels 2006), *Hatchet* demonstrates that environmental ethics can be explored through the protagonist's experiential relationship with the more-than-human world. Brian's restraint from unnecessary harm, his respect for the autonomy of nonhuman beings, and his willingness to adapt to the ecological order collectively illustrate how Taylor's principles in environmental ethics are enacted through wilderness experience. However, this study is limited to an examination of *Hatchet* through Taylor's framework of nonmaleficence, noninterference, and fidelity. The analysis is necessarily limited to one novel and one strand of environmental ethics. Other ecocritical perspectives, such as deep ecology, posthumanism, or material ecocriticism, may reveal additional dimensions of the protagonist's relationship with the more-than-human world. In addition, comparative studies of Paulsen's other wilderness narratives or broader young adult survival fiction could further examine how environmental ethics are articulated across different ecological settings and narrative contexts. Such investigations will possibly deepen our understanding of the ways contemporary young adult literature cultivates environmental ethics through human-nonhuman encounters. Even so, the findings indicate that *Hatchet* offers a compelling literary representation of environmental ethics, illustrating how wilderness can become a space in which anthropocentric assumptions are questioned and more respectful forms of human-nonhuman coexistence are imagined.

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Informed consent Null.

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