

# An Ecofeminism Reading of Nicholas Evans's The Horse Whisperer and Anne Clermont's Learning to Fall, Horse-Assisted Therapy Perspective

Bassim Mohammad Ali Al-Masri

Al-al-Bayt University, Mufraq, Jordan

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**Abstract:** This conceptual article aims to explore the nature of human horse relationships, in the selected texts, examine the connection between ecofeminism and the therapeutics effect of these relationships. The study represents the healing of horses and the power of the human animal relationships, the novels promote characters, who approach healing and overcome with obstacles. The main themes foxed in both novels how these characters are developed and promote and addressing the power between human and animals. The analysis this study based in the article on psychological theory in general and animal-assisted therapy or horse-assisted therapy (HAT) in particular. This study attempts to answer the following questions: firstly, what is the nature of the human-horse relationship in the selected texts? Secondly, what is the nature of the therapeutic effects that such ties have on the protagonists?

**Keywords:** psychology, horse-assisted therapy (HAT), ecofeminism, *The Horse Whisperer*, *Learning to Fall*.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

When we think of the horse-human relationship as it relates to therapy, Orbasis of ancient Lydia comes to mind as the first who documented the benefit of horseback riding as early as 600 BC. Hippocrates wrote about the physical benefits of horseback riding between 460 and 370 BC. (Berg& Causey, 2014). The literary representations of horses began very early in English with Chaucer in *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer uses imagery and proverbs of horses in his *Canterbury Tales* to illustrate the various values of relationships between horses and humans, horses are significant as they embody the nobility of people and their passion. Chaucer describes every accurate detail about horses and Pilgrims to show their value and significance in his Tales (Burkhardt, 2007). In texts such as Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or Anton Chekhov's *Misery* and many others by other authors, human-horse relationships have figured as major parts of the topics and themes of such works. Sometimes, it is used as a positive symbol of strong personality.

Clarice Lispector says that the "the form of the horse exemplifies what is best in the human being. I have a horse within me who rarely reveals himself, but when I see another horse, then mine expresses himself. His form speaks" (Pollock & Rainwater, 2016). Horses have a variety of interesting and attractive ways of showing care, love, and admiration of their human counterparts. It is known that from "antiquity until the 1930s, horses were fully present in the day-to-day world." (Edwards, Enenkel & Graham, 2011). However, modernity marks the end of the classical human-animal deep bond, as well as the exclusion of animals from real modern life. As a result, most people only see animals in cartoons and zoos. Horses were an essential part of human lives; they have practical applications in so many areas.

In addition, Horses were used by humans for sports, companionship, and as a working animal (Merkies & Franzin, 2021). The use of horses is primarily determined by the cultural and economic backgrounds in which they exist; they are in high

demand for work in poor countries, which has an impact on the owner's financial situation. In high-income countries, horses are mostly used for sports, breeding, animal assisted therapy, or as companions (Lönker, Fechner & Abd El Wahed, 2020). Their permanent presence in people's lives established the foundation for close connections between people and their horses. However, machines in modern times have occupied the place of horses. Horses possess high intelligence, and they "can experience emotions such as pain and fear" (DuBois, Nakonechny, Derisoud & Merkies, 2018). Close relationships with domestic pets, according to human-animal relationship research, may have therapeutic effects on humans.

Furthermore, it is established that every "horse has its own distinct personality, attitude and moods" (Bronkhorst, 2009). There has been a growing interest in the ways in which animals have been used to benefit humans psychologically; that animals have particular criteria is a vital part of a therapy might help enhance human's lives physically, mentally and socially. Horses are among the most important animals and they play as an essential role in the treatment of humans. They "have been a part of the physical therapy field since the early 70s and are more recently playing a role in the field of mental health" (Rothe, Vega, Torres, Soler & Molina, 2005). The social environment of the horse will also influence their voluntary interactions with humans (Søndergaard & Halekoh, 2003). Also, horse-assisted therapy (HAT) "uses equines in the treatment of disorders associated with several neurological and neuromuscular pathologies" (Sánchez, Castro, Herrera & Juárez, 2014).

The major relationships to examine in the selected novels are between females and horses, where horses help them rediscover their strength and capacity to improve their lives. The horse-assisted therapy method is used to demonstrate improvements of the characters' psychological attitudes and show how closeness to horses, this particular type of intimate connectedness, helped them overcome painful experiences they had in the past. In the selected novels, the authors emphasize the horses' healing powers, which explains why I chose the horse-assisted therapy theoretical framework as an analytical tool along with ecofeminism. The significance of the horse-human relationship is highlighted in the trauma healing process. It indicates that this relationship helps individuals obtain confidence, trust, and self-worth which are vital in the healing process as a whole. Moreover, these characteristics can be gained through engagement with horses (Yorke, Adams & Coady, 2008).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Animal-Assisted Therapy

Since early history, people have used animals for a variety of purposes, mainly for food and transportation. Later, the function of animals and the ways in which humans utilized them have evolved to include companionship and sharing human lives. In both circumstances, there is an interest in understanding the ethical side of the way humans treat animals and also in laying down general guidelines for humans to follow in their interactions with animals. Over the last century, new rules and regulations have been created to safeguard animals, which are also utilized in military and welfare organizations. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the "use of animals to assist human therapeutic activities has a long history, but extensive, documented, and organized use is relatively new" (Beck, 2000). Animal Assisted Therapy has been presented throughout human history; it is tied to the ideals of healing and illness. "Animal-assisted therapy: AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process" (20). As a result, the animal is not only a fulfillment of these ideas, but also a submission to the supernatural or scientific beliefs and laws that they are integrated with.

In the same context, The human-animal bond has been linked to positive outcomes throughout history. Animal treatment has also been shown to have several positive results that can be verified subjectively, when people measure their own improvement, and subjectively when evaluation of a person's psychological state is done by professionals. Furthermore, evidence suggests that human contact with animals may help to prevent heart disease and high blood pressure. Interaction with animals may also help determine or detect some diseases in their early stages.

Animals have been used in therapeutic settings for a long time, but prior to that, interactions with animals' enhanced people's physical and mental health. Let us keep in mind that animals may provide entertainment or the pleasures of pet ownership, and they can leave a positive impact on more than one person than conventional treatments. It is also important to note that the animals are expected "to provide a diversion or the joys traditionally associated with pet care. These expectations may be correct, as often the best "medicines" are appropriate concentrations of what is generally beneficial"

(Beck, 2000). The primary goal of AAT is to strengthen the therapeutic connection and to ensure that the person's mental conditions improve, but it may also be used to begin a patient's psyche analysis, deal with cognitive distortion, or improve behavioral skills. To begin with, introducing a therapy animal to sessions may make it simpler for therapists to connect with and improve their understanding of their patients.

It is worth mentioning here that verbal communication with an animal generates positive results for the animal involved in the treatment process. Furthermore, it tends to strengthen the relationship between the patient and the therapy animal. The therapeutic partnership entails the mutual and collaborative formation of goals and intentions for each session, as well as the establishment of an emotional bond between the therapist and patient (Compitus, 2021).

Andrea Beetz and colleagues (2012), maintain that the beneficial outcomes of human-animal interaction (HAI) are manifested in various areas and in individuals of varying ages, regardless of any specific medical or psychological health states. They state that the "findings indicate that interactions with animals can improve societal focus, interpersonal communication, emotional state, and stress-inducing factors such as cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure" (10). This engagement can help improve the patient's mental and physical health and assist them while trying to overcome his or her condition in order to be able to reintegrate socially into their communities.

Animal Assisted treatment is broadly defined as any intervention in which animals participate in treatment activities. It also applies to special therapeutic interactions with animals. Sources of trauma are widely varied and they "may be disaster-related (e.g., auto accident, earthquake, tornado, war) or more interpersonal. In the aftermath of interpersonal trauma, an individual frequently experiences anxiety, emotional numbness, and or either personal" (Tedeschi et al., 2015). Because of the connections between the psychological and physical processes inherent in the human-animal connection, Animal Assisted Psychotherapy (AAP) may be especially effective in overcoming concerns, distrust, and challenges in the realm of relationships. It is a distinguishing aspect of AAP that makes it especially beneficial in the treatment of trauma. The participation of animals in treatment broadens the scope of the area and encourages the treatment and transfer since animals are real and human-like but not human. (Tedeschi, et al., 2015).

## **B. Horse Assisted Therapy**

Today, the number of individuals suffering from mental, behavioral, and physical health concerns is increasing, and this sort of treatment dates back to the 18th century. Animals such as rabbits, dogs, chickens, and horses are involved in the processes that rely on animal treatment; their presence influences the treatments; horses are a good example of this. Because of their stature as magnificent creatures and sensitivity, they are especially and regularly employed in Animal Assisted Therapy. In a therapeutic environment, it is sometimes used to generate an atmosphere through treatment activities (Buck, Bean & De Marco, 2017).

Horse Assisted Therapy (HAT), as the name indicates, is a more specific and narrower than the general frame of Animal Assisted Therapy. It is a method that uses horses in an appropriate setting to cure humans who are physically or mentally ill, with the assistance of a therapist who helps the patients in reaching their treatment goals. There is a variety of regulations and processes that must be followed for this goal, especially when dealing with traumatic circumstances. Horses may appear to be a simple concept, but quiet and well-trained horses are required. A therapist must also be effective in their therapy procedures and preparation (Robinson, 2022).

In the other hand, According to Buck Page et al., horses are prey animals and are considered particularly appropriate for psychotherapy treatment; they can accurately deal with emergency cases in their environment, keep the herd secure, can run away when they feel danger, and stay closer to their herd to protect each other. People identify the behavior of horses and their feelings when they interact with the herd, granting them the opportunity to reconsider the relevance of their relationship, especially during stressful, furious, or dreadful situations (390). Horses may detect persistent memories for specific persons based on past experiences and nuanced emotional displays.

Horses may form connections with good memory by rewarding them with grain and fruits such as carrots or apples. It has also been shown that horses can react to and recognize humans based on past interactions. As a result, horses, according to Scopaepla, can discern between positive and negative interactions since they are associated with a pleasant experience that is likely to be recalled (7). Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is connected to harm, be it mental or physical, and is usually resulted from exposure to sever bodily pain, death, sexual abuse and other causes. PTSD is widespread with

disabling conditions that lead to re-experiencing such past experiences with all they entail of pain. Persons with PTSD experience the past incidents in the form of nightmares and undesirable memories and, of course, they attempt to avoid such negative emotions and feelings. PTSD is usually long-lived and extends for years, which can lead to dysfunctional behaviors.

In the end, despite the absence of scientific research, Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has gained significant improvements. The majority of the cases that utilize Animal assisted therapy include horses as horseback riding practices frequently enhance the process of physical and mental therapy. It is worth mentioning that “therapeutic activities with horses are widely used also in individuals with autism spectrum disorder” (Scopa, Contalbrigo, Greco, Lanatà, Scilingo & Baragli, 2019). In addition, Patients have had a number of beneficial impacts in the areas of social, communication/language, stress/behavior, and a decrease in autistic symptoms

### III. ECOFEMINISM: THEORETICAL VIEWS

Ecofeminism is a theory that has developed from different feminist subfields. Ecofeminism has been practiced in areas of woman's health, labor movements, security, animal rights, environmental preservation, and anti-particular movement based on the vision of the environment feminism and socialism (Gaard, 1993). The expression was first used in 1974 by French author Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *feminism on la*. Ecofeminism as a branch of feminism states that women do not possess the same position of power as men. Therefore, it challenges men's dominance and calls for a cooperative society based on equality in which there is no single dominant group. There are different branches of ecofeminism such as liberal feminism, cultural feminism, and socialist feminism. Ecofeminism theories can be interpreted in a variety of ways according to each subfield of social justice, political philosophy, literary studies and/or religion.

As a branch of feminism, ecofeminism is a social and political movement that deals with the intersectional of feminism and environmentalism. It seeks to challenge the patriarchal structures that contribute to the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Horse-assisted therapy, on the other hand, is a therapeutic approach that involves people's interactions with horses in order to promote emotional growth and healing. In the two novels, both ecofeminism themes and horse-assisted therapy play significant roles in the narratives. These themes are intertwined, highlighting the connection between human and non-human animals, as well as the importance of respecting and nurturing the natural world.

It was in the late nineteenth century that female authors have argued that Western women and horses have an innate connection. The relationship is commonly categorized as one of female empowerment and freedom. Female equestrianism plays “a vital role in tackling women's oppression and their status in a masculinized society” (Savvides, 2011). Woman-horse relationships emerge from a symbolic woman-animal connection that is “rooted in a dualistic separation of feminized nature/emotion from masculinized science/rationality” (Savvides, 2011). Horseback riding was strongly linked with men's masculinity, however, riding a horse has also changed gender codes; horses and equestrian sports are now gender coded as female who has been engaged in this type of sport to gain more opportunities to participate in championships .

It is abundantly obvious that the woman-horse relationship has served as a fertile ground for addressing ecofeminism ideas. Several female authors, including Virginia Woolf's novel *The Voyage Out*, portray both women and horses as passive subordinates to male superiority and power in a male-dominated society. Woolf states that: "I believe we must have the sort of power over you that we're said to have over horses. They see us three times as big as we are or they'd never obey us. Words like “over” and “obey” exemplify women's and horses' complete submission to the dominating force of men. Both novelists depict the intertwined relationship of Man, horse, and Woman in order to reveal changes in gender relations. As eluded to earlier, one of the purposes of this study is to show that ecofeminism theory can help deepen our understanding of gender and how it is connected to power. The study will also explore how men are represented to possess and exercise more power in their interactions with women and animals. In both texts, Jason Lander in *Learning to Fall* (2016) and Tom Booker in *The Horse Whisperer* (1995) are portrayed as saviors and dominant male characters. This study raises the question of whether the men-horses relationships in the selected texts reflect the Men-Women relationships. Likewise, are horses and women portrayed as inferior characters to men?

#### A. The Horse Whisperer

Nicholas Evans (26 July 1950–9 August 2022) was born and raised in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, England. He later attended Oxford University before working for three years as a British journalist for the Evening Chronicle in Newcastle-

upon-Tyne. He later worked as a film producer in television and began making arts documentaries about famous writers, painters like David Hockney and Francis Bacon. He also received many international awards. During his career, he traveled extensively, which helped him become familiar with the United States. Later on, he achieved considerable success as a novelist with the publication of his prominent novel, *The Horse Whisperer* (1995). In 1995, *The Horse Whisperer* was the tenth best-selling in the United States, selling over 15 million copies. As a result, it is currently considered one of the best-selling books of all time. *The Horse Whisperer* was adapted into cinema bearing the same title and was released in 1998.

Describe the novel briefly. Annie Graves runs a successful business. She is also a wonderful mother to Grace Maclean and the wife of a lawyer named Robert Maclean. Because of her work, she had to live apart from her family, which strained her marriage and relationship with her daughter. The novel begins when two teenage girls, Grace Maclean and her friend, Judith, decide to ride their horses, Pilgrim and Gulliver, on a lovely snowy winter morning. Yet something horrible happened that morning while riding down an icy and dangerous slope Gulliver stumbled and fell on the other hand; Grace had no way to avoid it. Gulliver collided with Pilgrim, causing the horses to fall, dragging the girls on the road and clashing with a truck driven by Wayne. The accident resulted in the death of both Judith and Gulliver, while Grace and Pilgrim were gravely wounded and Grace's right leg was amputated. After witnessing what happened to her daughter and Pilgrim, Annie tries hard to deal with this deeply painful situation. Of course, it was not easy for her to handle the ramifications of this accident. For instance, Pilgrim becomes the subject of maltreatment from those who are supposed to care for him. They even considered putting him down. Annie didn't want to leave Pilgrim, recognizing he was too precious for Grace. The horse could be the reason to keep her daughter alive. She aims to save both her daughter and Pilgrim. Annie's husband breaks down when Grace is in a coma. Annie realizes her important role to do something, so she starts looking for a horse whisperer. She decides to travel to Montana with her daughter and Pilgrim to seek help from Tom Booker, a well-known horse whisperer.

In the context of embarking on a long journey to Montana, one cannot overlook the fact that it might be intentional on the part of the author to choose a significant name for the horse, Pilgrim. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines pilgrim "a person who makes a journey, often long and difficult one, to a special place for religious reasons" (pilgrim definition). It is appropriate to assume that the purpose of Pilgrim's journey is similar to pilgrims' journeys to sacred places to seek emotional healing, spiritual transformation, self-discovery, and personal growth.

Tom's ranch was far from Annie's and Grace's place of stay, a local hotel in Montana. Because Annie and Grace ride to the ranch every day, Tom decides to offer them the chance to live near him and his family in a house. Annie agreed to live there with Grace and Tom began working with Pilgrim. The wound of Pilgrim was too severe, but Tom refused to give up. It showed progress for a few weeks. She was constantly on the go. Annie and Grace just hardly spoke. But, as time passed, Tom realized what had happened to Annie and Grace. He began to support them in changing their relationship.

The story obviously has mass-market appeal, encompassing as it does an old fashioned tale of forbidden love, within the day-to-day dynamics of family life, enmeshed in the trauma of a horrific road accident and a physically and psychologically damaged horse and young girl (Kimber, 2009, 158).

Annie falls in love with Tom and finds everything she seeks. Annie and her daughter Grace grew closer. Grace was unable to ride Pilgrim, so to force the horse to lie down and having Grace stand on him. Grace and Pilgrim had been reconnected. Annie gets impacted by the experience. Grace noticed Annie and Tom's affair, and her reaction was to ride Pilgrim carelessly into danger. Tom went looking for her and discovered Pilgrim fighting the mustang stallion. Grace was terrified and felt she was in grave danger. Tom wished to protect Grace and Pilgrim and get them out of the dangerous situation. Tom willingly sacrificed himself to save Grace and Pilgrim, but he was fatally injured and then passed away.

### **B. Learning to Fall**

Brynn Seymour, the protagonist, rides horses in a showjumping competition. In a few months, she will graduate from national veterinary school and will begin working in her father's stable. A tragic trailer accident occurred while she and her father were on their way to a competition, forcing Brynn to postpone the program and return home. Since her father's death, she has taken on a lot of duties in mentoring and caring for the stable, and she has difficulty paying the debt payments while also training their client's riders and her stallion black horse (Jett). It is worth mentioning here that the author might have intentionally chosen Jett as a name for the horse. Jett is derived from the word, jet, which refers to a black gemstone. The

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rationale behind choosing this name is to signify Jett's actual color as well as its precious worth to Brynn and her father. Additionally, Jett is also associated with aviation and its connection to high speed. Based on this, it becomes obvious that Jett signifies power, energy, speed, and determination.

The horse, Jett, and trainer and horse expert, Jason Lander, are Brynn's only hope after finding herself in an extremely difficult situation, having to save her family's fortune and reputation as well as the father's legacy in horse sports and shows. She faced many challenges and felt that she was about to fail in saving her family business. Therefore, she hired Jason Lander who agreed to train and work with her in order to participate in and win a competition and use the money to get out of debt and save the horses and the farm—her father's legacy. Her uncle, Lan, knows Jason and is familiar with his achievements, like winning the Gold Cup. Brynn's plan is to train for and win the prestigious Million Dollar Gold Cup. Jason is rigid with rough manners. In order to win, Brynn must accept such undesirable traits. However, and during training time, Brynn feelings towards Jason grow stronger.

As a result, her relationship with her boyfriend goes through a difficult phase. The novel closes with Brynn and Jet winning the prestigious Million Dollar Gold Cup and ultimately saving her father's company and legacy. Horse-assisted therapy is central to the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and healing. The story follows Brynn, a talented equestrian who suffers a tragic accident that leaves her physically and emotionally scarred. Through her connection with horses, Brynn begins to rebuild her life and find a sense of purpose.

Additionally, the novel contains enough themes that Eco feminists highlighted such as the strong ties between humans, animals, and the environment. It defies the belief that humans are superior to nature and promotes a more balanced relationship with the natural world. Through Brynn's interactions with horses, she recognizes the importance of strengthening her feelings of empathy and resilience as well as focusing on the value of nurturing both herself and the environment.

### IV. PREVIOUS REVIEW OF THE STUDIES

Kolona Budi Lestari in "*The Horse Whisperer's* Novel's Psychological Conflicts of Annie Character Written by Nicholas Evans (2015), investigates both intrinsic and extrinsic components present in Nicholas Evans' novel (1995). Intrinsic elements are the components that make up the literary works such as plot, conflict and setting (3). While the extrinsic element investigates the main character utilizing the psychoanalysis in *The Horse Whisperer* and examines the text thoroughly, utilizing Sigmund Freud's Psychological Theory of the Id, Ego, and Superego. This article analyzes the power struggle that the protagonist experiences in novel. Additionally, this article attempts to answer the following questions: How are the theories of the Id, Ego, and Superego applied to the novel's protagonists' psychological conflicts? And how do intrinsic elements work to build the story of the novel? The author of the article finds out that the novelist depicts multiple psychological characteristics that make this novel appealing.

In Analysis on "*The Horse Whisperer* from the Perspective of Environmental Justice Eco criticism" (2021), Feifei Wang, explores the features of environmental justice Eco criticism. It uses the example of *The Horse Whisperer* to illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of Eco criticism and firmly believes that Eco criticism be founded on a solid scientific foundation in order to construct a physiology, particularly a Darwin evolutionary biology-oriented format of Eco criticism. "Human or Horse? Anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic Instances in *The Horse Whisperer*" by Emmad Pigney depicts the creation of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism in Nicholas Evans' novel *The Horse Whisperer*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defined that anthropomorphism "the attribution of human form or personality to a god, animal or thing" ("Anthropomorphism," n.) and zoomorphism is defined as something or someone "dealing with or represented in animal forms" ("Zoomorphic," adj def. 2). The terms horse whisperers and horse whispering are utilized to describe the bond between Grace, the main human character, and Pilgrim, the main horse character. Their relationship allows the reader to see the horse anthropomorphically and the human zoomorphically.

In "A Perfect Place to Love or Die - Wilderness and Culture in Nicholas Evans' *The Horse Whisperer and The Loop*", Nora Mattsson (2017), sheds light on themes of Western genre, wilderness, and culture in *The Horse Whisperer*. Her perspective is anchored in the concept of Western genre is "a genre of novels and short stories, motion pictures, and television and radio shows that are set in the American West. By investigating the ideology of Western romances found in novels. Mattsson eventually finds that in terms of protagonist types, East-West opposition, and human-animal relationships, both novels, notably *The Horse Whisperer*, embody the typical Western genre.

## V. CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism components exist throughout the novel. The characters' connection with nature and animals is portrayed as a source of strength and wisdom. While some parts of the novel shows tendencies on the part of some male characters to exploit nature and animals, the novel, as a whole, challenges the dominant ideology that views nature as something to be dominated. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of existence and respect for the natural world.

This article starts with an introduction that contains information about the two novels, *The Horse Whisperer* (1995) by Nicholas Evans and *Learning to Fall* (2016) by Anne Clermont. Additionally, there were a detailed discussion of the usefulness of ecofeminism theory, and Animal-Assisted Therapy and Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT) to this study. In addition, the introduction includes a discussion of ecofeminism perspectives on men, horses, and women relationships.

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