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Nature's Metaphor: Ecological Symbolism and Ecocritical Reflections on Gender Transition in David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl*

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Abstract

How does nature serve as a mirror for human transformation? Can the changing landscapes, seasons, and elements of the natural world reflect the inner conflicts and self-discovery of a transitioning identity? The Danish Girl employs ecological symbolism to convey Einar Wegner's gender transition, where water, seasons, flowers, and light are metaphors for his psychological and material evolution. These natural motifs are aesthetic elements and symbolic structures that mirror Einar's internal conflicts, liminality, and emergence. Applying the concepts of ecocriticism and material ecocriticism, this deconstruction probes these natural segments, consequently formulating Einar's metamorphosis as an organic approach weaved with the cadences of the natural world. The analysis reveals how ecological symbolism demonstrates that gender, like nature, is a fluid, evolving, and profoundly entangled phenomenon, reinforcing the environmental dimensions of trans identity and how The Danish Girl reimagines gender transition as a natural, embodied, and environmentally resonant experience.
Keywords: Identity, Environment, Gender Transition, Ecological Symbolism

Introduction

The Danish Girl is Ebershoff's debut novel, published in 2000, which chronicles the life of Lili Elbe, the first documented transgender woman to have "Sex Reassignment Surgery." Ernst Ludwig Harthern-Jacobson, under the pseudonym Niels Hoyer, compiled Elbe's life story from her journals and published it posthumously. The initial versions of "Man into Woman" were published in Danish, German, and English in 1933. Ebershoff translated the book Man Becoming Woman into a novel titled *The Danish Girl* in 2000. The novel was a finalist for the Young Lions Award from the New York Public Library, an American Library Association Award, and a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. It received the "Rosenthal Foundation Award" from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the "Lambda Literary Award" for Transgender Fiction. It has been translated into over 25 languages and is a global bestseller. A film adaptation of the book came out in 2015. In the narrative, Einar Wegener was identified as male during his early years. However, when Greda Wegener, his wife, wants him to appear as a model for her painting in feminine attire, this incident represents a crucial milestone in Einar's life and uncovers his hidden identity as a transwoman, which he had disguised for so long and

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compelled a literary case where ecological symbolism— atmospheric elements—mirrors his transition into Lili Elbe.

The intersection of gender identity and ecological discourse has recently emerged as a fertile ground for rethinking the body, subjectivity, and transformation. Ecocriticism, in its evolving frameworks, has moved beyond environmental preservation to interrogate the interrelation between nature, culture and identity. Within this trajectory, material ecocriticism expands the ecological imagination to include the body as a site of becoming, dissolution, and relationality. In this light, Einar's trans identity—especially in literary narratives—can be understood as a profoundly ecological process rather than just a social change that speaks to the fluid, changing rhythms of the natural world

Literature Review

Eco-trans reading situates trans identity within ecological continuity and transition, challenging rigid binaries between human and nonhuman, male and female, nature and culture. It proposes that *The Danish Girl* articulates a vision of gender as fluid and embodied, akin to nature: porous, cyclical, and in constant motion. By doing this, it adds to the expanding research placing trans stories inside the environmental humanities and creating a link between queer theory, ecocriticism, and transcultural studies.

Queer ecology explores the intricate relationships between 'Queer studies' and 'Environmental Studies', highlighting the importance of re-evaluating foundational concepts in both fields. It critically investigates the ideas of what is "natural" and what is "constructed," interrogating overarching terms like "gender" and "nature," and ultimately works to create a form of "productive disruption" within established discourses (Giffney and Hird 140). Byrd (2020) says Queer ecology integrates these concepts through a distinctly "queer" perspective, scrutinising their interrelations and issuing a broader appeal to investigate the categorisation of specific bodies, orientations, and identities as 'natural' or 'unnatural', as well as the conceptualisation of 'nature' following normative hetero-reproductive logics and values.

A considerable amount of scholarship has explored how heteronormative, binary gender roles relate to the natural world—for instance, Roberts (2008), puts it how masculinity is often linked to controlled or cultivated landscapes while femininity tends to be associated with either wild, untamed nature or idealised maternal symbolism. However, discussions around how queerness intersects with nature across its diverse expressions remain comparatively sparse. Specifically relevant to this volume is the noticeable lack of attention paid to how environmental themes connect with trans identities, even though much work has been done on gendered perspectives of nature. Alaimo (2010) mentions that a fundamental concept in the nonhuman turn is "trans-corporeality", a term that inherently incorporates "trans-" and so suggests various associated implications. Trans-corporeality denotes the concept that bodies are permeable and continuously interconnected with the nonhuman, indicating that we are never "distinct" from our surroundings and are perpetually more than human. It firmly underlines the interconnectedness. MacGregor (2017) contends that it is "conceptually aligned with transgender studies"(255): it is not nonbinary, but non-boundary, perpetually "moving" and "crossing" (2017, 2). Framing of ecocritical modes provides the lexicon to explore how natural metaphors operate as a narrative strategy and an ontological mirror. Simultaneously, Oppermann's (2006) theorisation of material ecocriticism allows for analysing gender not as a fixed matter but as an ecological assemblage—interacting

with the environment, cultural forces, and personal desire. Further extending this, Cooke's (2018) concept of transcultural ecologies emphasises the negotiation of identity across cultural and geographic landscapes, offering a lens through which Einar's gender transition is personal and interwoven with the world's ecological fabric.

Methodology

This article analyses David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* using a qualitative textual analysis to investigate environmental and ecological imagery and how environmental elements reflect and shape trans identity. The study examines the protagonist's gender transition by deciphering the novel's ecological metaphors and geographical symbolism using close reading techniques that place trans embodiment and psychological development in the framework of natural images. By situating gender as a dynamic interaction with space, atmosphere, and natural surroundings, the paper positions Einar's transformation as a personal or psychological journey and an embodied, ecological becoming.

Discussion

In *The Danish Girl*, David Ebershoff uses vivid ecological imagery and natural metaphors to mirror Einar's inner dissonance and the gradual emergence of Lili. The novel intricately intertwines the experiences and transformations of both human and nonhuman entities, culminating in a synthesis of anthropocentric and ecocentric viewpoints—offering a distinct "queer reframing" of "human-environmental relations" (Anderson, et al. 95). At the beginning of the text, when Einar is not aware of his true self, but the writer gives hints of his inner conflicts, the picture of The Cold Kattegat Sea—"black water... white-capped and cruel, the grave of hundreds of fishermen" (3)—reflects the bleak emotional depths of gender dysphoria, with water becoming a metaphor for the self that is hidden yet surfacing. Einar, who painted "from memory a winter scene of the Kattegat sea" (3), created landscapes and seascapes steeped in psychological realism, not mere topography but reflective of his internal unrest. In these images, the sea is not neutral but "grey enough to swallow a man like that," echoing the danger and weight of repression. Later, while cross-dressed, Einar experiences "a strange watery feeling... as if dipping into a summer sea" (12), marking a shift from suffocation to gendered euphoria—water now becoming a space of comfort and truth.

Ecological metaphors further symbolise identity formation. The fox chasing the mouse "through the folds of a pulse field" (8) reveals the instinctive, bodily search for the hidden self, Lili, within Einar. The domestic space, too, is alive: "sea mist wrapped the dormer windows," "a faint smell of herring... seeped from the walls," and "the skylights would leak" (5), suggesting gender identity is porous and shaped by one's physical and emotional environment.

Greda's naming of Einar as Lili—after painting lilies "moon-white, stained with rusty pollen" (7)—symbolises a femininity that is both lovely and laden with suffering. The Lili, typically representing purity, carries hints of suffering, mirroring Lili's path. This deed symbolises the lyrical birth of Lili, predicting a change fashioned by both anguish and self-recognition. Greda's gesture becomes a catalyst, linking art, identity, and the embodied emergence of truth.

Through ecological symbolism and transcultural metaphors, Ebershoff portrays gender not as static but as a lived, sensory process—an identity emerging through natural landscapes, emotional textures, and the transformative power of art. As an adult, Einar is still emotionally bound to

his childhood, particularly the boglands that prominently featured in his works. As a painter specialising in topography, Einar is keenly oblivious to the presence of human figures, cities or indoor scenes, for he devotes all his attention and energy to the wetlands.

His art is described as being intensely enticed by the environment—he captures the "quiet Danish countryside," such as the empty meadows, marshlands, and seas, because they deliver him emotional relief and an outlet for self-expression. According to Ebershoff, Einar's journey into becoming Lili is less about change and more about uncovering the person he has always been—a process that unfolds through a deep, often subconscious, connection to the land of his origin. Through smudging these terrains, Einar unconsciously channels Lili. However, recognising her identity is not entirely conscious, and this disconnect between Einar's vision and reality leads him to a creative captivity. However, it is striking that many of his significant works show several trees rising from the swamp, representing Lili's slow surfacing from the depths of Einar's being. Ah-King and Hayward's (2014) sentiments that "sex might be better understood as a dynamic emergence with environment, habitat, and ecosystem"(1). The nonhuman exhibits a tangible presence throughout the story in its diverse manifestations—from the expansive terrains of Jutland to the myriad flora and animals of both actual and fictional realms. It is mainly linked to Einar's transformation into Lili. The nonhuman in this novel transcends simple projections of pitiful fallacy, appearing to reflect and actively influence the protagonist's evolving interactions with and shift between the constructs of "masculine" and "feminine."

Darkness in *The Danish Girl* (2000) is a physical condition and an ecological space of refuge and transformation in the trans experience. For Einar and later Lili, the night becomes a protective cocoon—an environment where visibility is reduced, but authenticity can surface. "It was difficult for Lili to see Henrik (her love interest) in the daylight, with the sun harsh in her face… she felt comfortable sitting with him only in the darkened Rialto movie house" (Ebershoff 69). The sunshine here reflects exposure, monitoring, and the harsh binary of the outside world—an ecological state that reflects social limitations. By contrast, darkness provides Lili with a liminal, soft, anonymous place between visibility and invisibility where she can breathe, feel, and be free from judgment.

Ecologically, darkness aligns with the trans body as a site of transition. Like nocturnal creatures who navigate by sensation rather than sight, Lili emerges in moments when the world dims and softens, when identities can bend and re-form outside the binary glare of daytime. Dusk and nighttime are metaphorical shadows and literal environments that allow Lili to express early gendered freedom. This connection between ecological darkness and emotional ease suggests that specific trans experiences flourish in the margins of visibility, not because they are shameful, but because those margins allow for growth, experimentation, and safety. Thus, darkness is an ecological metaphor for trans becoming: a necessary realm for self-discovery before the world is ready to see.

The recurring and changing window descriptions throughout several sites serve as metaphorical boundaries between Einar and Lili's interior and exterior spheres. Much like the bodies they occupy, these windows sometimes reject visibility, restrict clarity, or warp reality. The window "nearly opening into the window of the opposite side" (50) in Copenhagen limits sight and breath; it offers no horizon, escapes, or uniqueness. Though the chamber is illuminated by one ceiling lamp, the chill of the room and the smoke-stained yellow walls (120) confine Lili in a stagnant existence where warmth and truth are concealed. In some places, like the Dresden

clinic, the window opens to flowing rivers and open skies; in others, like crowded streets, to turmoil. Yellow appears again and again in these rooms—not as the brightness of hope but as the remnant of time, decay, and waiting, usually "streaked" and "tobacco-stained" (120), implying a life half-lived under oppression.

In Ebershoff's story, windows are never only architectural; they are ecological reflections of trans life. Sometimes, Lili cannot see through them; other times, what she sees is transient or lacking: a clouded sky, a patch of sunlight, a busy city, or the calm Elbe flow. From suffocation to partial visibility to the transient potential of flight, these many ecosystems mirror her inner turmoil and path. *The Danish Girl*'s gender architecture is constructed from walls and rooms and limited or broad views that shape and indicate the emotional and psychological terrain of trans becoming. Ebershoff skilfully maps the layered ecology of trans identity through this interaction of physical and emotional space, where every window becomes a metaphor for looking in, looking out, and finally, seeing oneself.

David Ebershoff masterfully uses the description of physical spaces—particularly rooms and apartments—as ecological metaphors that mirror Einar's evolving sense of self and emotional condition. The confining architecture signalled the oppressive narrowness of Einar's early life in Copenhagen: "The street was too narrow for lamps, a window on one side nearly opening into the opposite window. The people were stingy about the light in their front room, and all was dark except for the few businesses still open" (50). The architectural limitation and gloom here mirror Einar's psychological suffocation and gender imprisonment, as society's expectations and internal suppression withhold both actual and metaphorical light.

By contrast, the Menton flat, where Einar spends the holidays, marks a transitional and freeing stage on the road to Lili's appearance. Described as "a cold, orange-floored space with a red bedroom and a terrace holding geranium pots" (72), the setting marks a state of liminality—neither home nor entirely foreign, but a threshold between past and future selves. Menton epitomises Einar's selfhood in transformation as a border town between France and Italy. The shift in style - from the stark, claustrophobic, and gloomy apartments of Copenhagen to the spacious and vibrant regions of colour - demonstrates further spread both psychologically and spatially. Decorative details like the "Chinese screen inlaid with Avalon shell" (72) evoke a world of ornamentation and sensory complexity, much like the layered emergence of Lili herself. In this place where no one knows Einar, Lili begins to flourish tentatively, making the apartment not just a physical escape but a metaphorical threshold for self-realisation. In contrast to the suffocating interiors of Copenhagen, where "the street was too narrow for lamps" and windows nearly touched one another (50), Menton offers the breathing room that both Lili and her identity require to grow.

The Paris apartment offers yet another ecological portrait of emotional estrangement. The green wool chair and tobacco-stained yellow walls suggest a lived-in but static environment, a transitional holding space where Einar remains disconnected from warmth or clarity. "The narrow room was always cold… he imagined that in August the dim walls… would sweat on their own" (120). This imagery conveys both physical discomfort and a latent internal pressure—a body and self, yearning for change but immobilised by fear and alienation.

Finally, the Dresden Women's Clinic represents a space of transformation. The institutional setting—sterile, clinical, yet open to a view of the Elbe—mirrors the paradox of rebirth in a medicalised, gendered landscape. "There was a bed with a steel pipe footrest… the room looked out over a little park… the river was steely blue in winter…" (222). The view of the sailor and the shifting clouds introduces a sense of movement, of possibilities not yet claimed, with the

river acting as a liminal ecological symbol of life, memory, and passage. This is the first space where the world outside truly enters and where Lili's rebirth aligns with natural imagery—fluidity, transition, and openness. Across each of these interiors, Ebershoff crafts a transcultural and ecological mapping of gender identity—one that situates Einar's and Lili's lives not just in personal but in atmospheric and architectural tension with the spaces they inhabit.

In *The Danish Girl,* Ebershoff weaves kite imagery throughout Einar's life as a powerful ecological metaphor for trans identity, fluidity, and the longing for release. As a child, Einar is unable to fly Hans's kite—"Einar was never capable of finding the right current of air", and the kite would repeatedly "rush up in a column of breeze, and then crash to the ground" (36). Einar's early attempt to control the wind becomes a metaphorical mirror of his failure to fit masculine standards, highlighting an ecological disconnection between body and surroundings. The constant crashing reflects his buried identity, his life out of sync with the cultural "current" he is supposed to follow. Hans "set the spool of string between Einar's knees," and Einar could feel "the foxholes beneath him," connecting gender struggle to landscapes of war and trauma, where masculinity becomes both inherited and wounding.

In a later scene, Einar witnesses a young girl losing control of her kite: "The string had slipped off her hand, and now the kite was tumbling from the sky... its black paper fluttering in its frame" (127) before it "crashed near Einar's foot" (127). This moment echoes Einar's earlier failure but displaces it onto a child whose panic and loss feel familiar. The kite's collapse near Einar, rather than by Einar, suggests a symbolic mirroring: the girl's scream and the governess's reprimand become reflections of society's control over feminine freedom, while Einar, now more aligned with femininity, shares in the ecological vulnerability of both the kite and the girl.

Finally, at the end of the text scene of poignant transcendence, a white kite "lifting higher than the willows, higher than even the Augustusbrücke... a white diamond of bedlinen reaching, bright from the sun," breaks free from its string and flies alone—"swooping like an albino bat, like a ghost... coming for her" (310). This release, after the string "snapped," symbolises Lili's liberation from the body of Einar, an ascension beyond societal bindings. The kite becomes an ecological and transcultural emblem: crafted from cloth and animated by the wind, it crosses the Elbe like a spirit unmoored, signifying the fluidity of gender and the bodily transcendence Einar sought all his life.

These kite images—paper, cloth, string, air—anchor gender identity in ecological elements, emphasising how Einar/Lili's transformation is not merely internal or psychological but also elemental and atmospheric. In this way, Ebershoff portrays trans identity as an ongoing negotiation with cultural structures and ecological forces, aligning with the vision of transcultural ecologies where gender emerges through the body's interaction with environment, memory, and movement.

Einar's birth is not a conventional human beginning but an ecological emergence—"He was born on a bog. A little girl born as a boy on the bog" (200). The bog, a liminal landscape of both water and land, symbolises the fluid, indeterminate nature of Einar's gender identity, resisting binary classification. This moment marks the inception of trans identity as rooted not in social recognition but in personal, elemental feeling. Einar's first memory—sunlight through the eyelet lace of his grandmother's solstice dress—further embodies the connection between gender, memory, and the natural world. The 'white eyelet' image allows Einar, even as a baby, to associate softness, femininity, and warmth with his emerging sense of self. The surrounding elements—'water, light, heat'—frame identity as elemental and ecological, suggesting that gender, like nature, exists in

shifting forms. This section gently claims that the basic experience of being trans is profoundly sensory and atmospheric, with ecological textures that cross over imposed binaries.
By contrast, Lili's last balcony hours reflect this ecological symbolism not as a beginning but as a moment of calm conclusion. "She could feel the sun on her eyelids… and for once, Lili stopped thinking about the misty, double-sided past and the promise of the future" (300). The sun rests directly on Lili's closed eyes, no longer filtered through lace or distance, suggesting a complete merging with the elements. Just as her symbolic birth was shaped by a mixture of light, fabric, and unspoken femininity, her death is surrounded by warmth and clarity, unburdened by duality. The "double-sided past" of Einar and Lili dissolves, as does the forward-looking anticipation of transformation. Lili is simply present, unified with the natural world. While Einar was born into dissonance, Lili dies in wholeness; in both instances, nature envelops the self. The circularity of these moments—bog to balcony, filtered sun to whole light—marks an ecological arc of trans becoming: gender, like the elements, is ever-present, shaping and receiving the self from beginning to end.

Conclusion

David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* expertly combines ecological symbolism with the emotional, spatial, and psychological experiences of trans identity, transforming the landscape from a backdrop to an active participant in Lili's becoming. Einar's fluctuating relationship with her body and self is mirrored by the repeated motif of windows, light, darkness, enclosed quarters, and changing surroundings. While bright streams, broad terraces, and fluttering kites reflect Einar's desire for freedom and change, spaces filled with coldness, tobacco-stained yellow walls, or blocked views indicate Einar's internalised captivity. A constant return to ecological themes marks each step of Lili's development—whether in birth and death images, light and dark, or elements like wind and water—mapping her inner world onto the outside surroundings.
Ultimately, these patterns imply that gender, like ecology, is fluid, interrelated, and formed by emotional and physical environments. In Ebershoff's tale, the natural and constructed surroundings frame the narrative and reflect the limits and possibilities of trans existence. Every sensory aspect becomes a metaphor for transition, whether the difficulty of flying a kite, the fogged perspective through a window, or the cosiness of darkness. In this way, the novel builds a transcultural ecology of trans identity, where geography, architecture, and weather patterns become extensions of the self, revealing the intimate entanglement of body space and becoming.

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