

A Friend of the Earth, T.C. Boyle's satirical novel, humorously critiques peoples' attitudes toward the environment. These fictional attitudes, however, are not much different from the attitudes of people today. Boyle critiques peoples' attitudes by creating situations in which people attempt to establish a relationship with the environment, reenter the natural world, and try to preserve the environment by being near it. Upon realizing that there is an inherent, unavoidable separation between humans and wilderness, humans encounter environmental ethics and deal with their individual guilt regarding the state of the environment. Characters in the novel attempt to bridge the separation by taming the wild, eventually leading to the environment's demise.

During the part of the novel that takes place in the 1980's, many of the characters spend their time trying to reenter nature. The characters' attitudes can be described as both nostalgic and concerned. For example, Ty and Andrea spend 30 days immersed in nature and live off the land, and Sierra lives in a tree for several years. Both of these actions are parts of the environmental movement and are intended to display a relationship between humans and nature and humanity's desire to preserve wilderness. In the end, however, these actions are futile. Ty and Andrea ultimately leave nature, with no obvious outcomes resulting from their actions, and Sierra dies anticlimactically by falling out of the tree. These shortcomings are prevalent throughout the novel.

Boyle is able to effectively illustrate the dichotomy between humans and wild nature, by way of these failed human efforts to reenter nature. Humans may want to reenter nature and positively impact the environment, but their inherent separation from the natural world makes this impossible. Humans themselves are sensitive creatures with no effective defense

mechanisms other than weapons of their own creation, making it nearly impossible for them to survive in wilderness completely unaided, for extended periods of time.

Boyle also uses Mac to critique the good intentions of humans to try to preserve and reenter the environment. Mac wants to “save the animals nobody else wants,” and he thinks that this is “selfless and cool and brave” (15). Boyle creates Mac’s menagerie to depict the complications that occur when humans try to interfere with the natural, wild world. Mac does not understand the intricacies of natural ecosystems and thinks that by intensely caring for these select animals, he can potentially make a difference. Mac and his guests essentially try to enter the wild, but rather than going out into the wilderness, they bring the wilderness inside. Mac’s intentions, however, are not in the best interest of the animals, and this hinders a potential relationship between humanity and nature.

Boyle critiques the selfish intentions of humans when he describes Mac’s egocentric character. Mac’s own memorabilia adorn his entire mansion, and Mac’s attitude reveals that his menagerie is for his own benefit, not the animals. Mac wants to appear “cool” and “brave.” While Mac may have established the closest physical relationship to the animals by living with them and even entering the same room as a hyena, Boyle illustrates that simply being physically close to the natural world does not mean that a healthy connection can be established. While Mac may be in close physical proximity to his animals, his selfish intentions and ignorance of complete ecosystem health hinders a meaningful reentry into the natural world.

Mac is further depicted as being far removed from wildlife with the names he gives to his animals. Because all of his animals are named after flowers, the animals’ unwieldy and wild nature is masked. The endearing names transform wild beasts into domesticated pets.

Boyle critiques the lack of understanding the characters have of their surrounding environment, because the wildness of the animals is undermined. Interestingly, the names of Mac's bodyguards are plain and impersonal. Because his bodyguards both have the same name, Al, there appears to be more of a separation between the humans and the more fancifully named animals. Boyle may do this to emphasize the absurdity of Mac's menagerie and downplay the authority of humans over nature.

Boyle further describes the attitudes of humans toward the wild and their resulting relationship when describing why Ty cannot sleep. "So this is why I can't sleep – the animals. It was the animals all along. Lions in the basement, vultures round the indoor pool, the hyena in the gift-wrapping room on the second floor. It's crazy, that's what it is. And all the while the water is rising" (141). Ty, in particular, has a difficult time dealing with all the environmental destruction he sees. He cannot sleep because he is aware that Mac's efforts to save the animals are not genuine or effective. Mac is disconnected from the animals and Ty and Chuy are the animals' main caretakers. Because of Ty's experience as a radical environmentalist, he is able to form a deeper connection to wildlife than Mac, and loses sleep over the state of the menagerie. While the water is rising due to the floods, environmental degradation is also on the rise, both in the fictional book, and in today's natural world.

In addition, by describing the odd living quarters of the animals, Boyle addresses the inherent separation between the animals and a human-created society. The extravagant nature of Mac's mansion, including an indoor pool and gift-wrapping room, are polar opposite to the animals' natural habitat. Boyle depicts the artificial habitat in Mac's mansion as a microcosm of the artificial habitat humans have created in essentially every part of the world. Overall, while Mac has attempted to form some type of connection to the wild by keeping a menagerie,

the separation of humanity from the wild prevents a nurturing relationship. Ty stays in the mansion, quite simply, because he has nowhere else to go.

While many of the characters do not appear to be overly concerned with the wild animals staying in the house, one of the reporters that arrives at the house after Mac's death understands the gravity of the situation. Upon hearing that there are wild animals staying in the house, the reporter states, "“Maybe you can explain it for me, because I think I'm missing something here – isn't that dangerous?”" (279). While the people living in the house were, for the most part, oblivious to the fact that they were living in such a dangerous environment, an outsider did notice. Boyle is criticizing society's false impressions of the natural world. When people become accustomed to their environment, for example wild animals living in their house, they lose the sense of wildness. When exotic animals are domesticated and kept as pets, people are surprised when the creature acts on instinct and bites them. The inherent separation between humans and wild animals needs to be acknowledged and embraced, rather than changed to suit human desires. When people tame and domesticate nature, there will be consequences and the reporter, as an outsider, is the only one that can see this.

The slaying of Mac demonstrates one of these consequences. If the wildness of nature is not respected and humanity's inherent separation from the environment ignored, there will be consequences. These consequences of the tumultuous relationship between humans and the environment may not be experienced in the short-term, but will surely be experienced in the long-term. While humans may try to establish a healthy relationship with nature, the separation is inevitable. Mac was killed by the very creature he was trying to protect because he ignored the separation. Boyle is criticizing the oftentimes oblivious actions and attitudes of humans. As stated previously, Mac did not act to reverse any type of ecosystem destruction, but tried to

save a select group of animals, which will never solve the plethora of environmental problems plaguing the world Boyle creates.

Mac, Andrea, Ty, and Sierra all try to enter and preserve the natural world in their unique ways, and shortly after come to terms with the unavoidable separation between humans and wilderness. There are several psychological effects caused by trying to preserve the environment despite the inherent separation. Because of the consequences of global warming and environmental destruction depicted in the novel, Ty becomes so guilt-stricken that he is completely consumed by it. “I’m a mess and I know it. Jewish guilt, Catholic guilt, enviro-eco-capitalistico guilt: I can’t even expel gas in peace” (135). Boyle is critiquing the ethical nature of the environmental movement. There is more to the movement than facts and figures, but a more intrinsic, emotional side to the movement. As is illustrated by the proceeding scenes in the book, people’s guilt does not actually do anything to improve the state of the environment. People need to actually take initiative and act if any progress is to be made. Although the dichotomy between humans and nature is apparent, human actions can still protect the environment and humans need to act in ways that do not ignore the separation, but embrace it.

Although environmental destruction does make many people feel guilty, certain circumstances prevent guilt. Boyle acknowledges this when he critiques the behavior of Ty and other inmates in prison. “Of course, guilt itself is a luxury. In prison we didn’t concern ourselves overmuch about environmental degradation or the rights of nature...and if the world collapsed as a result, all the better: at least we’d be out” (135). Ty’s attitude evolved from optimistic to apathetic. People lack concern for the environment for a variety of reasons.

Among these reasons are selfishness, lack of vision for the future, and simply the lack of resources to reduce ecological footprints. A Friend of the Earth tackles all of these reasons.

For example, because the prisoners themselves are removed from the environment, they do not have any motivation to preserve it. This is in contrast to Ty and Andrea trying to reenter nature to help preserve it, although ultimately failing. Oftentimes, people living in urban environments, people removed from a more natural environment, do not have as much of a connection to the land as people living off the land for sustenance. Because people who are removed from the environment do not necessarily see environmental degradation first hand, they have no incentive to try to conserve. It is necessary to establish a relationship with nature and truly understand its intricacies in order to preserve it, and this is not possible when one is imprisoned.

Another widespread reason why people do not try to preserve the environment, in addition to being physically disconnected to it, is a lack of resources. Boyle's depiction of the prisoners tackles this issue as well. The prisoners do not have control over the food they eat or the way the facility is run, therefore their attitudes toward the environment likely differ from their attitudes in an environment where they were free to make their own decisions. Boyle's depiction of prisoners may be considered analogous to poverty-stricken people in today's society. One major issue facing the environmental movement is the expensive nature of preservation and conservation. In a lot of ways, poverty-stricken families have bigger problems to deal with than people who have the means to live comfortably. For example, paying bills and putting food on the table is a higher priority for many people than saving the environment. Furthermore, buying organic foods and recycled products is usually more expensive than buying virgin products, so many people simply cannot afford to be as

environmentally friendly as others. Simply stated, economics may prevent a connection between people and the environment, hindering conservation.

Ty's attitude towards the environment continues to evolve throughout the novel. Ty first tries to reenter nature, deals with the inherent separation and resulting guilt, and finally tries to bridge the separation. Many humans have tried to bridge the gap between wilderness and the human-built world, and this has been done through domestication. Humans have persistently tried to tame nature to satisfy their own lifestyle. While many enjoy the natural world, there are certain wild aspects of it that some people cannot tolerate. For example, people have suppressed fires and removed wolves to allow humans a comfortable existence within the environment, while still enjoying some aspects of nature.

Boyle criticizes this taming of nature to bridge the separation when Ty states, "Petunia is not a dog. She's a Patagonian fox. Above all, I've got to remember that. It seems important. It's the kind of distinction that will be vitally important in the life to come..." (336). In his fictional depiction of the world in the 1980's, Boyle addresses the attitudes' of people that want to keep nature wild. For example, Sierra wants to prevent the felling of an old growth tree. Ty wants to remember that Petunia is, in fact, a wild animal and not a domesticated pet. While at one point Ty recognizes the importance of keeping nature wild, he ultimately tames it at the end of the novel. Ty domesticates Petunia, because the fox is one of the last remnants of a wilderness that no longer exists. Ty yearns for some sort of relationship with the natural world. The taming of Petunia parallels the ultimate ending of the book: the environment has been so greatly degraded, that the entire natural world is essentially tamed. While nature is resilient and plant communities begin to reestablish themselves, the environment has lost its sense of wildness.

At the end of the novel, Boyle critiques the unavoidable separation between humans and nature once more. He addresses humanity's desire to have a relationship with nature, while taming it to suit their needs. Boyle does this by describing the actions of Ty and Andrea upon returning to the Sierras. "We crush carpenter ants, battle wasps, chase mice and birds and bats back out into the wild, where they belong. Andrea...comes back with sixteen precut and measured windowpanes and wields the putty like a glazier's apprentice" (348). Ty and Andrea remove the wild from their domicile, and separate themselves from the natural world through the walls of their house. Boyle makes a point of describing Andrea's actions in putting windows in. While Ty and Andrea may be physically separated from the natural world that surrounds them, it is still visible through the window. This is important because while they are partially separated, there is still a connection between them and nature.

Boyle's entertaining novel describes the attitudes of humans toward the environment and their resulting relationship. Through his creation of humorous scenes and characters, Boyle describes humanity's attempt to reenter the wilderness. The struggle that follows this attempt at reentry illustrates the inherent and unavoidable separation between humans and wild, untamed nature. The inability of humans to connect with nature and preserve it in a way that addresses ecosystem function may lead to guilt, but the resulting guilt does not lead to action. Finally, Boyle addresses yet another attitude of humans toward the environment, when Ty tries to reconnect to the natural world and takes Petunia as a pet. The separation between humans and nature, however, will always be present and it is up to humans to overcome that separation if natural ecosystems are to be preserved. It is the responsibility of citizens and industry to protect the environment, because a healthy environment is essential to human emotional and physical well-being, in both Boyle's fictional world and the society in which we live today.