

# [Interspecies Relations in *Grass* by Sheri S. Tepper]

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**[Abstract]** *Sheri S. Tepper (1929-2016), an award-winning American science fiction, fantasy and horror writer whose works have been relatively underexplored from an academic perspective, adeptly guided readers into the realms she crafted. Renowned for her notable novel Grass, a cornerstone of her bestselling Arbai trilogy, Tepper prophetically envisioned the perils confronting humanity in the imminent future through the portrayal of a galaxy beset by a pandemic of untraceable origin. Infused with ecofeminist nuances, Grass tells the tale from a female perspective, as a heroine is chosen to prepare the unexplored planet for the imminent influx of settlers. The newcomers intersect with inhabitants whose lives are governed by rituals and regular encounters with mysterious creatures, whose existence is inextricably linked with the process of multi-metamorphosis. The primary aim of the article is to trace how the central protagonist encounters impediments not only in facilitating communication and negotiation with the extraterrestrial species, but also in pursuing a remedy for the disease.*

**[Keywords]** *American literature; science fiction; Sheri S. Tepper; species; ecofeminism*

Wallace McNeish, in his article entitled “From Revelation to Revolution: Apocalypticism in Green Politics,” calls cli-fi (climate fiction, or eco-dystopian fiction) a means of engaging in the contemporary discussion over environmental threats. A blend of science fiction and feminist writing, *Grass* is a 1989 literary composition by an American writer, Sheri S. Tepper, that looks into this subject matter. Set in a post-apocalyptic future, the story articulates the fear of world annihilation with the spread of a disease of unknown origin, so accurate in today’s post-pandemic existence.

The article seeks to investigate the interactions between species and their impact on a multitude of organisms and ecosystems depicted in Sheri S. Tepper’s *Grass*. Tepper accords paramount significance to the exploration of ecological and social themes as foundational components of her literary endeavours. Her writings prompt readers to contemplate the consequences of their actions on both the environment and the well-being of subsequent generations.

Sheri Tepper was renowned for creating richly detailed and imaginative worlds in her science fiction writing. Her novels often feature complex ecosystems and societies, reflecting her deep interest in environmental issues and the interplay between nature and civilization. Tepper’s science fiction is known for its thematic richness, frequently addressing ecological sustainability, ethical dilemmas, and the consequences of technological development. Environmentalism is a recurring theme in her works, which emphasize the importance of environmental stewardship and the dangers of ecological neglect. Her novels depict the results of degradation and the necessity of sustainable living practices. Additionally, Tepper’s stories pose ethical and moral questions, challenging readers to think critically about issues like genetic manipulation, bioengineering, and the ethical treatment of sentient beings. In her feminist literature, Tepper often featured strong, complex female protagonists who challenge traditional gender roles and fight against patriarchal systems. Her works provide a critique of patriarchal norms and advocate for women’s empowerment. Many of her novels depict societies dominated by patriarchal systems, revealing the inherent flaws and injustices within these structures.

The inaugural work of the Arbai Trilogy, *Grass*, published in 1989, unfolds a far-future dystopia in which Earth, known as *Terra*, grapples with the repercussions of overpopulation, scarce resources, and an apparently insurmountable plague. Tepper masterfully guides readers into the new ways of thinking about the environmental crisis, enabling the humans of her fictional world to seek refuge in space.

Tepper’s body of work has undergone little academic scrutiny, with scholars focusing on key aspects of her writings such as overpopulation. Samantha Morgan correlates this issue with population theories of the 18th century, asserting that “Tepper connects population growth with unhappiness” (222). Another field of primary concern is undoubtedly feminism, as in the paper by Diana Pharaoh Francis “Social Robotics: Constructing the Ideal Woman from Used Ideological Parts,” in which the author states that Tepper’s writings contain “criticism of both these patriarchal codes and conventions which contain women, and of the feminists reactionary idealisms which merely resubjectify women to male experience by allowing them only the crippling ability to react rather than act” (93).

The narrative trajectory of *Grass* intricately revolves around the character of Marjorie Westriding, an adept horse rider and breeder, who, alongside her husband Rigo and their children, undertakes a seemingly diplomatic mission to the planet Grass. The principal impetus propelling their journey is the imperative quest for a remedy to a widespread plague that is decimating human populations across a multitude of planets, exclusive of their intended destination. However, the mission serves as merely a prelude to a more profound exploration of the characters' unconscious desires, unravelling unexpected dimensions in their quest for knowledge and resolution. Coming from a religion-driven patriarchal society, "Marjorie's energies are devoted to improve her society from within, including breaking the laws herself, even though she realises that without implementing large-scale social reforms, her efforts are useless" (Price 43).

Tepper populated the planetary expanse of *Grass* with humans structured into familial or clan delineations, each governed by designated leaders acknowledged as *bons*. With members of their families, they engage in hunts that serve as a rich narrative tapestry through which the author intricately explores several interwoven themes, transcending their initial portrayal as mere recreational activities. Rigo and Marjorie, treated as diplomats, are welcomed to observe these peculiar hunts. At its superficial level, the hunts are manifested as a conventional sporting pursuit reminiscent of historical fox hunts on Earth, especially in Britain. Tepper purposefully goes beyond the apparently straightforward essence of this recreational pursuit by introducing an otherworldly element: riding and hunting the mysterious *Hippae*, creatures that are of paramount importance to the narrative in question. The hunts constitute an integral component of rituals and traditions rather than isolated events, and they function as a conduit for Tepper's critique of societal structures in the plotline. Participation in these hunts plays a pivotal role in the social recognition and prestige of the *bons* and their entire families. This element functions as a medium through which Tepper critiques the social dynamics, particularly the strict hierarchical nature of the aristocratic society on the planet. The narrative commences with an exploration into a mysterious plague afflicting the human population, prompting the mission to prepare the planet for potential mass colonization. Against the backdrop of this ecological inquiry, the social dynamics on *Grass* are scrutinized, revealing a civilization governed by fervent religious ideologies. Marjorie's narrative lens exposes the intricacies of local rituals and practices, as well as the delicate interplay between the newcomers' diplomatic endeavours and the layers of concealed knowledge integral to the functioning of life on the planet. The narrative thus serves as a literary exploration of ecofeminist themes within the context of interplanetary diplomacy, offering nuanced insights into the coalescence of ecological concerns.

Additionally, Tepper's inquiry into the hunts extends to a comprehensive examination of the symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. The hunts serve as poignant indicators of humanity's imprint on the alien ecosystem of *Grass*, compelling readers to reflect upon the ethical intricacies inherent in these interspecies interactions.

Moreover, involvement in the hunts emerges as a pivotal factor in the specific development of characters. Faced with moral quandaries, they experience challenges that intricately scrutinize their beliefs and motivations. The hunts, functioning as a dramatic backdrop, serve as a stage for a deep exploration of individual psyches, thereby imparting profound depth to the characters and augmenting the sophistication of their personal narratives. The hunts are perilous endeavours characterized by the imperative of unwavering loyalty, and they instill fear among the human participants. In a hypnotic state, people mount the enigmatic alien creatures known as *Hippae*, accompanied by representatives of another species referred to as *Hounds*, engaging in the pursuit of *Foxen*. *Hounds* bear little resemblance to their counterparts on Earth:

The hounds were the size of Terran horses, muscled like lions, with broad, triangular heads and lips curled back to display jagged ridges of bone or tooth. Herbivores, Rigo thought at first. And yet there were fangs at the front of those jaws. Omnivores? They had reticulated hides, a network of lighter color surrounding shapeless patches of darker skin. Either they had no hair or very short hair. (Tepper 104)

What is more, Marjorie, a keen rider, doubts her ability to mount such monstrous creatures as *Hippae*. There are no reins; instead, a system is employed to attach riders to the bodies of the *Hounds*:

Below them the monsters pranced silently, twice the size of the hounds, their long necks arching in an almost horselike curve, those necks spined with arm-long scimitars of pointed, knife-edged bone, longest on the head and midway down the neck, shorter at the lower neck and shoulders. The eyes of the mounts were burning orbs of red. Their backs were armored with great calluses of hard and glistening hide. (Tepper 105)

To ride them, one needs not just skill but also a nuanced comprehension of these enigmatic creatures, because “[o]ffending a hound usually results in the hunter having an arm or leg or hand or foot or two bitten off when he dismounts at the end of the Hunt” (Tepper 143). The hunts are witnessed by many humans, and at times, young girls participating in them disappear, failing to return, which is acknowledged with sadness, yet without resistance.

The presentation of alien species serves as a starting point in the discussion of the issue of metamorphosis, a multifaceted literary device that is so popular in the science fiction genre. Examples range from H.G. Wells’s 1895 *The Time Machine*, featuring the species of Morlocks, to Robert Heinlein’s 1959 *Starship Troopers* with its depiction of bugs, and Olaf Stapledon’s 1930 *Last and First Men*. Tepper’s *Grass* illustrates the ultimate outcome of species’ evolution, demonstrating their adaptation to changing environments or experiencing substantial biological changes. In *Grass*, “non-sentient Peepers are the larval stage of a species that metamorphoses into hound, then partially-sentient *Hippae*, then sentient foxen” (Bould and Vint 178). The story unfolds the evolution of species, acknowledging the relationship between diverse alien forms of life on the planet. The *Hippae* remain the subjects of the Hunts, directing humans who serve as

a necessary component, to reach *Foxen*. The repercussions of pursuing these beings go beyond the immediate excitement, compelling readers to reflect on the wider ecological consequences of human actions on the planet. As Bould and Vint claim, “A genetic aberration generations earlier gave the *Hippae* numerical advantage over the *Foxen*, whom they pursue as enemies, not acknowledging their relationship” (178). Those “indigenous variants” of creatures, as they are called in the narrative (Tepper 113), remain a mystery to Rigo and his family. They seem mischievous, and they “kill anybody who spies on them” (Tepper 274), which represents basic instincts. In contrast, the *Foxen*, characterized by their non-violent disposition, epitomize intelligence, calmness and a higher form of existence. As has been claimed: “Although powerful, the foxen are deeply troubled because they did not prevent the *Hippae*’s genocide of the Arbai, gentle alien creatures who once lived on Grass and sought to establish community with them” (Bould and Vint 78).

Moreover, the *Foxen* exhibit visible dissimilarities to their terrestrial counterparts. Formidable creatures of substantial dimensions, they do not bear any resemblance to archetypal fairy-tale characters: “‘Fox,’ Anthony muttered, his voice breaking. ‘Fox. That thing is the size of half a dozen tigers’” (Tepper 108). Merging a feminist perspective with ecocriticism, Tepper made Marjorie able not only to communicate with the *Foxen*, but also to indulge in a sensual, sexual relationship with their leader, the *First*. Those liminal entities, whose animal features fuse with their angelic characteristics, bear a resemblance to *kitsune*, foxes from Japanese mythology. These were shapeshifters and tricksters “that can transform into human beings and various objects” (Weinstock 358). It was not uncommon to use their powers, and fox-users “were said to employ their vulpine minions to inflict possession-induced illnesses in their rivals” (Bathgate 140). Nevertheless, they were frequently asserted to possess an exclusively female nature – or, at the very least, to manifest themselves with an outward appearance resembling that of women.

Ultimately, in Tepper’s story, the concept of metamorphosis is fully realized as a closed circle, as the *Foxen*, sentient beings, “eat peepers” (Tepper 278). As Marjorie concludes: “The Grassians do not care of other worlds. They wish to find cure to the plague. The peepers metamorphose into hounds, and the hounds into Hippae. A three-stage metamorphosis. I don’t think the Grassians even know,’ she concluded” (Tepper 273). The concept of transformation extends beyond the Darwinian paradigm of species evolution, as articulated in his seminal work “On the Origin of Species,” and the pre-Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection presented by Alfred Russel Wallace. It stands at a crucial point in the discussion over the theme of species in the narrative: “Metamorphosis, Tony! Like butterfly from caterpillar. The eggs must be Hippae eggs. They hatch into peepers. I didn’t see that, but it’s the only thing that makes sense” (Tepper 243). Additionally, it incorporates Edward O. Wilson’s scholarly inquiries into biodiversity, as evident in his assertion: “It is significant that not only do human beings develop a species-characteristic set of social behaviors” (132). Here, humans are participants as much as other species, and the interactions between them influence reality.

As a redefinition of nature, the novel emphasizes the intrinsic value of biodiversity. It explores complex ethical questions concerning environmental ethics, the responsibilities of human beings, and the interdependence of all living entities on the planet Grass. In Tepper's narrative, the species play significant roles in the ecosystem, and their hierarchy is not easy to grasp:

'Malice? In an animal? Asked Father James.

'Why do you say 'animal' asked Brother Mainoa. 'Why do you say that, Father?

'Why... why, because that is what they are.'

'How do you know?' (Tepper 243)

*The Terrans* visiting planet Grass not only familiarize themselves with alien species, but also encounter challenging decisions with ethical implications. The story reflects a broader debate on anthropocentrism and questions the justification of humans' status as the dominant species. This seems to correspond with Wilson's claim that "Anthropocentrism is a disabling vice of the intellect" (Wilson 131). The key concept is thus the non-anthropocentric attitude towards the environment.

Consequently, in times of ecological crisis, Marjorie Westriding serves as a conduit for much-needed cooperation among species. As Price writes: "Sheri S. Tepper's incorporation of feminist values into the settings and landscapes of the worlds she created frees her heroines from the necessity of appearing super-human and extra-ordinarily gifted. This allows their actions to be viewed as allegorical rather than idealistic" (44). Interestingly, there is nothing extraordinary in Marjorie's traits that would anticipate her involvement in the mission. Nevertheless, she embodies the interconnectedness of the species, notably in her inadequately explained 'sensual' contact with the leader of the *Foxen*, known as the *First*.

This way, *Grass* explores the manner in which cultural values and beliefs shape individuals' approaches to environmental ethics, presenting a stark divergence in attitudes toward interspecies relations. On one hand, there is a clear depiction of oppression in the interactions between species and humans (such as the *Hounds* and the *bons*), while on the other hand, a symbiotic interaction is exemplified in Marjorie's conduct. The narrative probes the susceptibility of environmental ethics to the influence of cultural attitudes and beliefs. The diverse societies inhabiting Grass exhibit varying perspectives on their environment, and these distinct belief systems profoundly shape their subsequent actions and decisions in the realm of interspecies relations. Each species' struggle, whether for dominance, control, balance, or adaptation, reflects broader themes of existence and raises important philosophical and ethical considerations. Through the lens of these interspecies relationships, Tepper invites readers to reflect on their own place in the world, the impact of their actions on the environment, and the deeper meanings of survival and coexistence in a complex and interconnected ecosystem.

Following the views of Donna Haraway, a feminist scholar and critic, it seems essential to acknowledge the interdependence of human and non-human elements, a theme of paramount importance to Tepper's worldbuilding, especially in the novel explored

here. Haraway, a prominent figure in posthumanism and cyborg theory, has examined the increasingly indistinct boundaries between humans and non-humans across a range of texts. In her seminal essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” she acknowledges the existence of a cyborg, as a symbol of the posthuman condition, blurring the boundaries between human and machine. She claims that “Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (6). Moreover, according to Haraway, many in feminist circles “affirm the pleasure of connection between human and other living creatures” – a theme that is also evident in *Grass*, an ecofeminist story (10).

Such a vision aligns with the critical perspectives on the subject of biodiversity presented by Donna Haraway in her work *When Species Meet*:

Interactions among taxonomically distinct organisms, in which structures in one organism do not develop normally without properly timed interactions with other associated organisms, are at the heart of a recent theoretical and experimental synthesis in biology called ecological developmental biology. (219)

Haraway underscores the perpetual and dynamic character of interspecies interactions, as well as the intricacies involved in comprehending the world through diverse perspectives. She also advocates for the coexistence of species, stating: “Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 19). This claim is manifested in Tepper’s writing through the interspecies cooperation between Marjorie, supported by a small group of other humans, and the *Foxen*. Marjorie establishes a connection with the *Foxen* through a form of cognitive agreement, mindspeech or a series of visions:

Beneath her His shoulders moved gently. Male. Indisputably male. Prancing, prowling. The gait, male. Head moving, so, so. Male. Claws sliding in their sheaths, fingers touching, delicate as needles. Male. She saw multitudes of shapes, not quite clearly, most of them male. The males were violet and plum and mauve and deep wine red. The females were smaller, more softly blue, though she could not see them, either. Male, he told her. I. ‘First.’ Male. (Tepper 405)

Her connection with the *First* is both sensual and profound, encompassing spiritual and physical dimensions. In an epiphanic moment, Marjorie comprehends the profound connection with the representative of the alien species:

They danced in pairs, male and female, weaving their shadows together, letting their shadows touch. Shadows and minds, touching. The other danced in pairs. Marjorie danced with First, the sleeves of her shirt growing wide, like wings, flowing like a tail, her hair loose in a silky mane. A female. Dancing. She still could not see His vision of Himself, but she could see His vision of her.

You. Marjorie. Female. Gait. Motion. Color. Smell.

*Perilous*, she whispered inside herself. *Dangerous*.

Beneath her the muscles of his shoulders moved like fingers, touching her. *Perilous*. Yes.

Dangerous. Yes. Mysterious. Wonderful. Awful. Mighty. His skin spoke to her as horses' skin had always spoken to her, conveying emotion, conveying intention. (Tepper 406)

Thus, Tepper underscores the significance of comprehending and engaging in harmonious coexistence with the varied life forms constituting our planetary ecosystem. This idea alludes to the concept of “making kin,” as described by Donna Haraway in her *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, where she claims that “There is no question that anthropogenic processes have had planetary effects, in inter/intra-action with other processes and species, for as long as our species can be identified (a few tens of thousand years); and agriculture has been huge (a few thousand years)” (Haraway, *Staying* 99).

The transition away from an anthropocentric worldview is discernible in the works of contemporary philosophers and authors engaged in discourse on posthumanism. This philosophical orientation not only contemplates the ramifications of advancing technologies and artificial intelligence, but also delves into the transformative dynamics shaping the essence of humanity. As Hayles claims, “The posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity, but rather the end of a certain conception of the human, the conception that sees the species as the highest and only measure of value in the universe” (286). She critically examines the implications of posthumanism, elucidating its challenge to entrenched paradigms of humanity and the prevailing notion of human exceptionalism.

Another voice in the discussion is Rosi Braidotti's comment on the Anthropocene:

First, at the social level we witness increasing structural injustices through the unequal distribution of wealth, prosperity and access to technology. Secondly, at the environmental level we are confronted with the devastation of species and a decaying planet, struck by eliminate crisis and new epidemics. And third, at the technological level, the status and condition of the human is being refined by the life sciences and genomics, neural sciences and robotics, nanotechnologies, the new information technologies and the digital interconnections they afford us. (*Posthuman Feminism* 3-4)

She offers a critique of anthropocentrism, highlighting its restricted attention to human-centric concerns. She advocates for a more expansive approach that recognizes the intricate interconnections between human beings and the environment. Such an approach is applicable to Tepper's narrative, where considerable attention is dedicated to the issue of sentience among various entities inhabiting the planet *Grass*, extending beyond representatives of the human species. Marjorie's reality is an intersection of patriarchal schemes with the need for freedom, expressed so vividly in her horse-riding moments. It aligns with the concept of the fluidity of female identity, a notion explored by multiple scholars, including Rosi Braidotti. In her literary works, such as *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Braidotti delves into the dynamic nature of female subjectivity and the intricate interplay of diverse elements influencing identity. As she puts it: “Man, the male, is the main referent for thinking subjectivity, the standard-bearer of the Norm, the Law, the Logos, Woman is dualistically,



i.e., oppositionally positioned as his ‘other’” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 36). Braidotti opposes dualistic modes of thinking, divisions such as human vs. non-human or male vs. female. She writes:

My point is that this approach, which rests on the binary opposition between the given and the constructed, is currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature–culture interaction. In my view the latter is associated to and supported by a monistic philosophy, which rejects dualism, especially the opposition nature–culture and stresses instead the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter. The boundaries between the categories of the natural and the cultural have been displaced and to a large extent blurred by the effects of scientific and technological advances. This book starts from the assumption that social theory needs to take stock of the transformation of concepts, methods and political practices brought about by this change of paradigm. (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 3)

In the narrative of *Grass*, the establishment of trust and empathy between Marjorie and the *Foxen* proves pivotal in the pursuit of a remedy for the obscure malady affecting the planets. This achievement is predicated upon the cooperative interplay between diverse species, and it would not have been achieved otherwise.

What is more, this snippet of Tepper’s oeuvre holds a unique potential as an eco-dystopia (in Callenbach’s understanding), which conveys the message that human activities exert a substantial influence on the environment, extending beyond their actions solely on Earth to include their interactions within the *Grass* ecosystem. Additionally, it debates the coequal rights of the species and provides a broader discussion in environmental ethics about anthropocentrism and the idea that humans are stewards of the environment. The claim is discernible in other scholarly investigations, for instance in the writings of Bruno Latour, who prompts a reassessment of the conceptualization and examination of relationships between humans and non-humans, advocating for a paradigm shift towards a more interconnected perspective. Such an attitude is discernible in many works of this genre. As Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler claim: “In many contemporary eco-dystopias, technological progress means both a movement away from and simultaneously a movement into or towards nature – away from nature-as-wilderness, but towards nature-as-garden, a constructed, mediated, engineered nature that is still essential to our definitions of urban space or technological utopia” (2). Such a shift is perceivable in Tepper’s narrative too, notably exemplified by the revelation that the remedy for the galactic plague, causing widespread devastation across the planetary chain, resided within the vegetation blanketing the planet known as *Grass*. Marjorie’s involvement extended beyond a literal Hunt on the planet, where she observed the predatory nature of the *Hounds*; she was, in essence, an active participant in the quest for the curative solution to the affliction.

Consequently, Tepper’s narrative serves as an example of the interconnectedness of humans, technology, and non-human entities, popularized in the writings of post-human scholars including Manuel De Landa among many others. In accordance with

De Landa's assemblage theory, all social, biological, and technological entities collaborate synergistically to constitute intricate networks commonly referred to as assemblages (networks), which is illustrated in the text discussed here. In *Grass*, the examination of the connection between humans and non-humans extends beyond individual characters and includes the planet as a living and dynamic entity. Tepper masterfully examines how both human and non-human elements contribute to the ecological makeup of *Grass*. These interactions, so essential to the plot, also offer a lens through which the novel examines themes concerning environmental ethics, the coexistence of entities, and the impacts of human activities on the natural world.

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