In Search of Meaning: An Existential and Ecocritical Reading of Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional*

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of Kerala

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the award of the Degree of

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in

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled in **In Search of Meaning: An Existential and Ecocritical Reading of Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional*** is a record of the studies carried out by **NAJA J**, at the Department of English, T.K.M College of Arts and Science, Kollam under the guidance of **Mrs Deepa Ramachandran** and submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature.

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I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **In Search of Meaning: An Existential and Ecocritical Reading of Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional*** submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature is the original record of studies and research carried out by me during 2024-2026 under the guidance of **Mrs Deepa Ramachandran**, Assistant Professor of English, T.K.M College of Arts and Science, Kollam and it has not formed the basis for the award of any degree, title or recognition.

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CONTENTS

		Page No.
Preface		i-ii
Chapter One	Introduction	1-9
Chapter Two	From Existence to Ecology: Theoretical Perspectives	10-25
Chapter Three	Silence and Solitude: Exploring Existential Angst in Stone Yard Devotional	26-44
Chapter Four	Conclusion	45-54
Works Cited		55-56

Preface

As the twenty-first century unfolds under the escalating pressures of climate change, environmental degradation, and pervasive uncertainty, contemporary literature has increasingly evolved to represent not only the material consequences of ecological crises but also their profound psychological and existential dimensions. Within this broader intellectual and cultural context, Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* emerges as a compelling literary work that intricately explores the relationship between inner consciousness and planetary vulnerability. Through its narrative, the novel provides a fertile ground for examining the convergence of existential inquiry and ecological consciousness. The increasing prominence of environmental concerns in contemporary literature reflects a significant shift away from exclusively anthropocentric narratives toward literary expressions that recognize the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence and the natural world. Consequently, *Stone Yard Devotional* serves as an insightful text through which the intertwined realities of ecological crisis and existential meaning can be critically examined.

The project titled "In Search of Meaning: An Existential and Ecocritical Reading of Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional*" is organized into four interconnected chapters, the first chapter establishes the foundation of the study by introducing the research background, objectives, scope, and significance, while situating the novel within the broader context of contemporary environmental and existential discourse. The second chapter develops the theoretical framework by examining the key concepts and principles of existentialism and ecocriticism, providing the critical lens through which the

text is interpreted. Building upon this foundation, the third chapter presents a detailed textual analysis of *Stone Yard Devotional*, demonstrating how the novel intricately negotiates questions of human existence, freedom, responsibility, ecological consciousness, and the profound interconnectedness between the individual and the natural world. Finally, the fourth chapter synthesizes the findings of the study, drawing together its principal arguments and offering critical reflections on the novel's enduring literary, philosophical, and ecological significance.

Chapter One

Introduction

Modern literature has progressively focused on the interconnected challenges of human life and environmental decline. With the world facing rapid climate change, ecological failures, and pervasive environmental distress, literary works are starting to depict not just the combined effects of these issues but also their psychological and philosophical after effects on humanity. In this light, novels have evolved beyond just stories of individual experiences; they have transformed into spaces where existential doubts and ecological consciousness intersect.

Contemporary fiction has increasingly emerged as a vital space for engaging with the realities of climate change, not merely as an environmental issue but as a profound human and existential concern. In an age marked by ecological uncertainty, novelists use narrative to explore the emotional, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of living in a threatened world. Through imaginative storytelling, fiction enables readers to face complex questions about responsibility, survival, and the moral implications of human actions on the planet. It becomes a reflective medium where environmental issues are transformed into personal experiences, allowing for deeper empathy and critical awareness. Moreover, contemporary fiction often interrogates ideas of meaning, agency, and interconnectedness, positioning itself as a powerful site for ethical inquiry and philosophical reflection in the face of global environmental change.

In this field, Charlotte Wood is a prominent figure. She is a contemporary Australian author, essayist, and journalist celebrated for her psychologically rich and socially relevant fiction. She is considered one of the

most important figures in modern Australian literature. Charlotte Wood is celebrated for her unique and insightful writing approach. Born in 1965 as Charlotte Ann Wood in Cooma, New South Wales, she primarily composes fiction in English. Wood has garnered significant acclaim for her distinctive voice and her skill in delving into intricate social and psychological issues within her stories. Among her most distinguished works is *The Natural Way of Things* (2015), which has considerably contributed to her standing as a prominent contemporary figure in Australian literature. She loved reading as a kid and often read a lot, which hinted she'd become a writer later. Her upbringing in a regional area shaped her perspective, focusing on nature, isolation, and daily life, which became important in her writing.

She holds a BA from Charles Sturt University and a Master of Creative Arts from University of Technology, Sydney. Charlotte Wood is the author of seven novels which include *Pieces of a Girl* (1999), *The Submerged Cathedral* (2004), *The Children* (2007), *Animal People* (2011), *The Natural Way of Things* (2015), *The Weekend* (2019), and *Stone Yard Devotional* (2023). In addition to fiction, she has produced several other works: *The Luminous Solution* (2021), which explores creativity; *The Writer's Room* (2016), a collection of interviews with Australian authors; and *Love & Hunger* (2012), a series of personal essays focusing on food and memory. She also edited *Brothers & Sisters* (2009), an anthology focused on writing about sibling relationships.

In 2014, Wood was appointed Chair of Arts Practice for Literature at the Australia Council for the Arts for a three-year term. In 2016, she received the Writerin-Residence Fellowship at the University of Sydney's Charles Perkins Centre, where she worked alongside health professionals to bring literary

perspectives to issues related to ageing. More recently, in 2024, *Stone Yard Devotional* was shortlisted for the 'Booker prize'. In 2019, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia and was listed among the Australian Financial Review's 100 Women of Influence. Her articles and essays have also been published in prominent outlets such as The New York Times, The Guardian, Literary Hub, and The Sydney Morning Herald.

Her writing has received strong critical acclaim and has appeared frequently on major literary prize lists. In 2016, *The Natural Way of Things* won the 'Stella Prize' as well as the 'Indie Book Awards' Novel of the Year and overall Book of the Year, while also being shortlisted for other honours such as the 'Miles Franklin Award' and the 'Barbara Jefferis Award'. *Animal People* was shortlisted for the 'New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards' in 2013 and longlisted for the 'Miles Franklin Award' in 2012. Beyond her fiction career, she has a professional background in journalism and has taught writing at various educational levels.

The novels of Charlotte Wood collectively explore complex psychological, social, and existential concerns through diverse narrative settings and themes such as strained family relationships, inner psychological struggles, and ethical tension, all of which she considers vital to the progress of a narrative. Beginning with *Pieces of a Girl* (1999), which examines a young woman's emotional vulnerability and search for identity, Wood moves to *The Submerged Cathedral* (2004), where she reflects on memory, grief, and the lingering effects of the past. In *The Children* (2007), she investigates family tensions and the lasting impact of childhood experiences on adult identity, while *Animal People* (2011) offer a dark, satirical critique of moral decay and ethical ambiguity within

privileged social circles. In *The Weekend* (2019), Wood turns to the intimate dynamics of ageing and friendship, portraying the emotional complexities and unresolved tensions among three elderly women.

Wood's approach to writing tends to be instinctive rather than carefully pre-structured, as she has explained that she starts writing first and gradually uncovers the direction and form of the story as it develops. One of the defining characteristics of Wood's fiction is her sustained engagement with ethical questions. Her novels frequently examine how individuals respond to crisis, whether social, emotional, or environmental and how moral choices shape identity. Themes such as guilt, forgiveness, vulnerability, and resilience appear across her body of work. Another central concern is the exploration of female experience. Wood's novels often foreground women navigating systems of power, social expectations, and personal transformation. Rather than presenting simplistic narratives of empowerment, she depicts complexity, ambiguity, and emotional realism.

Charlotte Wood's prose is widely admired for its clarity, restraint, and emotional precision. She often employs a minimalist style, allowing subtle details and interior monologue to convey psychological depth. Her narratives typically prioritize character development and thematic exploration over fast-paced plot, creating a contemplative reading experience. Critics frequently note her ability to balance intimacy with universality: while her stories focus on individual lives, they resonate with broader social and philosophical concerns. She also demonstrates a keen sensitivity to setting, using landscapes, whether harsh wilderness or quiet domestic spaces as reflections of her characters' inner states.

Over the course of her career, Charlotte Wood has received widespread critical acclaim and numerous literary awards, cementing her status as a leading figure in contemporary literature. Reviewers consistently praise her for her intellectual depth, emotional insight, and willingness to confront difficult subjects. Her works are often discussed within the context of feminist writing, psychological realism, and contemporary ethical fiction. Scholars highlight her contribution to conversations about gender, power, and the human capacity for empathy, as well as her exploration of the relationship between personal experience and broader societal issues.

In addition to her novels, Wood has contributed essays and commentary on writing and literary culture, further demonstrating her engagement with the craft and its cultural significance. Her influence extends beyond her own fiction, shaping discussions about the role of literature in addressing moral and social questions.

Wood's writing is often characterized by its empathy and inquisitiveness in moral investigations, deliberately avoiding simplistic solutions to intricate ethical questions. Her stories generally do not provide definitive conclusions; instead, they encourage readers to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity. In addition to thematic elements, Wood highlights the significance of the unconscious and dream-like states in the creative process, proposing that creativity arises from uncertainty. She has also described the artistic condition as existing between certainties, illustrating the tension and discomfort that frequently influence her characters' journeys. Stylistically, her work is known for its psychological richness and meticulous focus on physical sensations, which she employs to create narrative tension. Her emphasis on bodily experiences and

daily gestures reinforces the notion that thoughts and feelings are rooted in the physical body. Ultimately, Charlotte Wood's fiction represents an ongoing inquiry into gender, morality, and ecological awareness in contemporary society. Her novels prompt readers to face uncomfortable realities regarding power, responsibility, and the fragility of human connections. By blending deep psychological insights with a broader societal critique, she has positioned herself as a powerful voice in modern literature.

In this regard, Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* presents a reflective story that subtly captures the intersection of personal strife and ecological awareness. *Stone Yard Devotional* is a 2023 novel written by Charlotte Wood. It was published by Allen & Unwin in Australia and by Sceptre in the United Kingdom. Set against the stark backdrop of an isolated religious community, the novel examines how the vulnerability of the environment reflects the protagonist's spiritual and emotional doubts. The novel follows an unnamed middle-aged woman who retreats to a remote Benedictine monastery in rural Australia after the collapse of her marriage, disappointment in her environmental career, and the unresolved grief of losing both her parents. Overwhelmed by the climate crisis and a deep sense of despair, she abandons her former life and retreats to a convent located on the rural Monaro Plains in New South Wales. Despite being an atheist, she becomes immersed in the rhythms of monastic life, using its silence and routine as a space to confront grief, guilt, and existential uncertainty. As she settles into its peaceful routine of prayer, work, and reflection, memories of her childhood, her parents, and her years as an environmental activist resurface, forcing her to confront the emotional burdens she has long carried. Eventually, by becoming a permanent resident of the

abbey, she finds purpose through gardening, cooking, and caring for the monastery.

The bare landscape, frequent mentions of natural rhythms, and a constant sense of fragility create an atmosphere where environmental and existential crises coexist. Instead of overtly depicting climate disaster, Wood embeds ecological discomfort within daily rituals and moments of silence, implying that environmental deterioration is not just a physical issue but also a profound psychological experience that influences people's understanding of faith, belonging, and purpose. The work blends psychological introspection, ecological anxiety, and spiritual reflection. It was widely acclaimed and shortlisted for the 2024 'Booker Prize', marking it as one of the major literary works of recent years.

Although the novel is primarily reflective and inward-looking, its storyline is shaped by three significant disturbances. First, a severe mouse infestation connected to environmental instability serves as a symbol of ecological collapse. Second, the discovery and return of the remains of a murdered nun rekindle buried memories and raise troubling moral questions. Third, the unexpected appearance of someone from the narrator's past compels her to face lingering guilt and unresolved emotional ties. Together, these incidents drive the narrator toward deeper reflection on her life, her sense of responsibility, and the potential for forgiveness. The novel deals with themes of despair and remorse.

Religion functions as a thematic concern in the novel allowing the protagonist to re-examine her past and her relationship with her mother and community. At the same time, story focuses on climate anxiety and

environmental grief, portraying a character who feels disturbed by ecological destruction. This engagement with climate crisis reflects Wood's interest in existential questions about responsibility and hope in the modern world. The protagonist's background in conservation and the environmental crisis create a sense of global despair that parallels her personal struggles, linking ecological breakdown with psychological distress.

From a stylistic perspective, Wood's prose is marked by restraint and precision, emphasizing interiority over external action. The narrative's slow pace and reflective tone encourage readers to engage deeply with the protagonist's consciousness, transforming everyday moments into sites of profound insight. Such minimalism aligns the novel with a tradition of literary works that privilege psychological realism and contemplative depth, demonstrating how quiet narratives can address large philosophical questions without relying on dramatic spectacle.

The growing prominence of environmental concerns in literature signals a shift from purely human-centered storytelling toward narratives that acknowledge the interconnectedness of human existence and the natural world. Climate crisis has become more than a political or scientific issue; it has transformed into a cultural and philosophical condition that reshapes how individuals understand time, responsibility, and meaning. Literature, as a space for reflection and imagination, plays a crucial role in articulating this condition.

In this wider cultural and intellectual landscape, Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* stands out as an important work that subtly yet profoundly delves into the connection between inner experiences and planetary fragility. The novel's reflective tone, minimalistic settings, and emphasis on spiritual

reflection provide a rich opportunity to explore how existential themes intersect with ecological consciousness in modern literature. In this regard, *Stone Yard Devotional* can be read as a meditation on what it means to live in an era where environmental fragility permeates everyday consciousness, influencing emotions, relationships, and ethical choices.

Existentialism is a useful way to understand this change. It usually deals with ideas like freedom, loneliness, being true to oneself, and the search for meaning in a world that does not give clear answers. When we connect these ideas to the climate crisis, they become even more important. The changing and unstable natural world reflects existential ideas about uncertainty and the temporary nature of life. At the same time, knowing that the environment is in danger increases feelings of worry, responsibility, and moral confusion. Looking at the novel through this perspective shows how thinking about oneself and thinking about the environment are closely connected and influence each other.

At the same time, climate change raises moral questions that go beyond individual life. Existentialism focuses on personal responsibility, but here it also leads to an awareness that everyone shares responsibility for environmental damage. In *Stone Yard Devotional*, this wider sense of responsibility appears in quiet moments of reflection where characters think deeply about their role in a delicate world. The novel does not show environmental crisis in a dramatic or sensational way. Instead, it highlights the small and subtle ways ecological awareness affects how people remember, think, and reflect spiritually. This calm, understated style reveals that the climate crisis is not only an external reality but also a deeply personal experience.

Chapter Two

From Existence to Ecology: Theoretical Perspectives

Literature has long functioned as a space where deeper questions about life and the world are thoughtfully explored. It brings together reflections on human experiences, emotions, and the search for meaning, while also engaging with the larger realities that surround us. Through its narratives, literature not only captures the inner conflicts of individuals but also reflects the complex relationship between human life and the environment, offering readers multiple layers of understanding. To approach these complexities in a meaningful way, it is important to rely on certain critical perspectives that guide interpretation. Among these, existentialism and ecocriticism offer significant insights into understanding human existence and the natural world.

Existentialism is a philosophical approach that focuses on the importance of individual human life, personal choices, and the experience of existing in the world. It is not a single fixed theory but a group of related ideas developed by different thinkers who were all concerned with understanding what it means to be human. Instead of dealing mainly with abstract ideas or universal truths, existentialism starts from real human experiences—how people live, feel, think, and make decisions. It pays special attention to questions about identity, purpose, and the meaning of life, especially in a world that often seems uncertain or without clear direction. This philosophy became especially important in the 19th and 20th centuries and has influenced many fields such as literature, religion, psychology, and cultural studies.

One of the most important ideas in existentialism is that existence comes before essence, a concept strongly explained by Jean-Paul Sartre. This idea

means that human beings are not born with a fixed purpose or nature. Unlike objects that are created for a specific use, humans simply exist first and then gradually define themselves through their actions, decisions, and experiences. In other words, a person's identity is not given in advance but is created over time. This idea puts a great amount of responsibility on individuals because it means that each person must shape their own life and meaning, without depending completely on society, religion, or any external system to define them.

Freedom is a key concept in existentialism. According to existentialist thinkers, human beings have the freedom to make their own choices at every moment. However, this freedom is not always something positive or easy to handle. It can create feelings of pressure, fear, and uncertainty because every choice we make comes with responsibility. We cannot fully blame others, fate, or circumstances for what we do. This also suggests that our choices do not only affect ourselves but can influence how we see humanity as a whole.

Another important idea is existential anxiety, also called angst. This refers to a deep feeling of worry or uneasiness that comes from realizing our freedom, our responsibility, and the fact that life has no guaranteed meaning. Existentialists believe that this anxiety is a natural part of being human and that facing it honestly is necessary for living a meaningful life. If we try to ignore or escape this feeling, we may end up living in a false or shallow way. The idea of the absurd, often linked with Albert Camus, further explains this condition. The absurd is the clash between our desire to find meaning in life and the reality that the universe does not provide clear answers. Camus argued that even though life may seem meaningless, we should continue to live, act, and create our own purpose.

Existentialism also talks about authenticity, which means living honestly and accepting who we truly are. An authentic person understands their freedom and takes responsibility for their actions instead of hiding from it. On the other hand, people avoid responsibility by lying to themselves. For example, someone might follow social rules or expectations without questioning them, pretending they have no choice. According to Sartre, this is a way of escaping freedom and denying one's true nature as a free individual.

Existentialism, beyond its basic focus on freedom and individual meaning, also places strong emphasis on the situated nature of human existence, meaning that every individual lives within specific conditions such as history, society, culture, and personal circumstances. Human beings are never completely free in an abstract sense; rather, their freedom operates within these limits. This creates a balance between freedom and constraint, where individuals must make choices not in isolation but within the realities of their environment. This perspective deepens the understanding of human existence by showing that while people are responsible for their actions, they are also shaped by the world around them..

The philosophy also explores the idea of being, especially through the work of Martin Heidegger. This idea suggests that human beings cannot be understood separately from their surroundings. They are always engaged with the world through relationships, activities, and experiences. Human identity is not something internal and isolated but is formed through interaction with the external world. This rejects the view that humans can be studied like objects and instead emphasizes the complexity of lived experience. He also emphasized the importance of understanding death. This awareness of death can help people

realize the value of their time and encourage them to live more honestly and meaningfully. Heidegger's approach focuses more on understanding existence itself rather than just freedom and choice.

Existentialism also highlights the importance of limit situations, a concept associated with thinkers like Karl Jaspers. These are unavoidable experiences such as suffering, conflict, failure, and death that confront individuals with the deeper realities of life. In such moments, people become more aware of their existence and the seriousness of their choices. These situations break ordinary routines and force individuals to reflect on their lives, often leading to greater self-awareness and authenticity.

Another important idea is that human life is defined by possibilities. At every moment, individuals are faced with different options, and existence becomes a continuous process of choosing among these possibilities. However, choosing one path always involves rejecting others, which introduces a sense of loss and uncertainty. This makes human life dynamic and constantly evolving rather than fixed or predetermined. The individual is therefore seen as a being who is always in the making, shaped through ongoing decisions and commitments.

The beginnings of existentialist thinking can be found in the works of earlier philosophers like Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Kierkegaard focused on the importance of individual experience, especially in matters of faith and personal belief. He argued that truth is not just something objective but something that must be personally experienced. Nietzsche, on the other hand, challenged traditional religious beliefs by saying that "God is dead," meaning that old systems of belief no longer hold strong authority. He believed

that people must create their own values and meaning in life, which later became a major idea in existentialism.

Existentialism developed in different forms, including both religious and non-religious versions. Religious existentialists like Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel believed that faith can still provide meaning, even in an uncertain world. In contrast, atheistic existentialists such as Sartre and Camus believed that there is no God, and therefore humans must create meaning entirely on their own. Even though these views are different, both agree that individual experience, freedom, and personal responsibility are central to human life.

Existentialism has also had a strong influence on literature and art. Many writers have used stories, novels, and plays to express existentialist ideas, showing characters who struggle with freedom, loneliness, and the search for meaning. Writers like Sartre, Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir explored these ideas through their literary works. De Beauvoir, in particular, applied existentialist thinking to issues of women's rights and social inequality, arguing that women have often been denied the freedom to define themselves and must fight to achieve independence and identity.

Another important theme in existentialism is alienation, which is the feeling of being alone or disconnected from others or from the world. This feeling is common in modern life, where traditional beliefs and communities are no longer as strong as before. Existentialists believe that people must face this loneliness and try to build their own sense of meaning and connection. This can be difficult, but it is necessary for living a genuine and fulfilling life. Existentialism developed strongly in response to historical crises, particularly

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during periods such as World War II, when traditional beliefs about progress, order, and certainty were shaken. These events revealed the instability and unpredictability of human existence, leading philosophers to focus more on uncertainty, suffering, and the limits of human control. As a result, existentialism presents a realistic view of life that acknowledges both its difficulties and the individual's role in creating meaning despite them.

In conclusion, existentialism offers a deep and sometimes challenging way of understanding human life. It rejects the idea that meaning is already given and instead says that each person must create their own purpose. By focusing on freedom, responsibility, and honesty, existentialism encourages people to face the realities of life and make conscious choices. Even though it accepts that life can be uncertain and difficult, it also highlights the power of individuals to shape their own lives and find meaning through their actions.

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that examines the relationship between human beings and the natural environment as represented in literature and culture. It emerged prominently in the late twentieth century in response to growing environmental concerns such as climate change, pollution, and ecological degradation. This approach studies how literary texts portray nature and how these portrayals influence human attitudes toward the environment. Rather than treating nature as a mere background, ecocriticism considers it an active and meaningful presence that shapes narratives, characters, and themes. It also questions whether literature encourages respect for the natural world or reinforces human-centered, exploitative perspectives.

The foundations of ecocriticism were laid by several key thinkers who connected literature with environmental concerns. One of the earliest

contributors was Joseph W. Meeker, who introduced the idea of literary ecology in his 1972 work *The Comedy of Survival*. Later, William H. Rueckert formally coined the term ecocriticism in 1978, defining it as the application of ecological concepts to literary studies. These early efforts helped establish the basic framework of the field by encouraging critics to examine how literature represents nature and human interaction with the environment.

The discipline was further developed and popularized by pioneers such as Cheryll Glotfelty, who played a crucial role in institutionalizing ecocriticism through *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), and Lawrence Buell, whose works expanded its theoretical depth and global relevance. Scholars like Michael P. Branch also contributed by establishing academic platforms such as environmental literary associations. Together, these pioneers transformed ecocriticism into a recognized field of study, shaping its growth as an interdisciplinary approach that links literature, ecology, and environmental ethics.

At its core, ecocriticism emphasizes the deep interconnectedness between human culture and the physical environment. It argues that literature is not separate from nature but is deeply embedded in ecological contexts. By adopting an earth-centered perspective, ecocriticism shifts the focus of literary studies toward environmental concerns, placing nature alongside other critical issues such as class, gender, and race. It also draws on insights from various disciplines, including ecology, environmental science, philosophy, and history, making it an interdisciplinary field that connects literary analysis with real-world ecological issues.

Another significant aspect of ecocriticism is its concern with

environmental ethics and justice. It highlights how environmental problems often disproportionately affect marginalized communities and uses literature as a means to bring attention to these inequalities. Ecocritics analyze how texts represent landscapes, animals, and ecological systems, as well as how they depict environmental crises such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change. They also explore the concept of place examining how specific environments shape identity, culture, and human experience, while also revealing the emotional and ethical bonds between people and their surroundings.

Furthermore, ecocriticism involves asking critical questions about literary texts, such as how nature is represented, what role the environment plays in the narrative, and how language and metaphors influence human perceptions of the natural world. It studies not only the physical presence of nature in literature but also the ideological meanings attached to it. Despite its contributions, ecocriticism has faced criticism for sometimes remaining human-centered and for initially focusing more on Western literature than on global perspectives. Nevertheless, it continues to evolve as a dynamic and relevant field that encourages readers to rethink their relationship with the environment and to recognize the role of literature in fostering ecological awareness and responsibility.

Ecocriticism also brings into focus the powerful role of literature in responding to the ongoing environmental crisis and in shaping ecological awareness among readers. It treats literary works not merely as artistic expressions but as spaces where environmental values are questioned, reinforced, or reimagined. In this sense, ecocriticism moves beyond

interpretation and enters the realm of ethical engagement, urging readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world. It often critiques the consequences of rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and consumer culture, revealing how these forces have disrupted ecological balance and distanced human beings from nature. At the same time, it highlights how literature can imagine alternative ways of living, ones that are more harmonious, sustainable, and attentive to the needs of the environment. Through such reflections, ecocriticism positions literature as an active participant in environmental discourse, capable of influencing thought and inspiring change.

Another important development within ecocriticism is its expansion into multiple perspectives that connect environmental issues with broader social realities. Rather than treating ecological concerns as isolated problems, this approach shows how they are deeply intertwined with questions of power, inequality, and cultural identity. Some strands of ecocriticism explore the romanticization of rural life and question whether such portrayals genuinely reflect ecological harmony or simply idealize it. Others examine the parallels between the exploitation of nature and the marginalization of certain groups, suggesting that systems of domination often operate in similar ways across both human and non-human spheres. There are also perspectives that emphasize the unequal distribution of environmental damage across different regions of the world, drawing attention to how vulnerable communities are often the most affected by ecological degradation. By incorporating these varied viewpoints, ecocriticism becomes a richer and more inclusive field that connects environmental thought with social and cultural critique.

Furthermore, ecocriticism deepens our understanding of how nature

functions within literary texts by recognizing it as a dynamic and influential presence rather than a silent backdrop. Natural elements such as landscapes, seasons, animals, and weather patterns often interact with characters in meaningful ways, shaping their emotions, decisions, and experiences. In many works, the environment itself appears to possess a kind of agency, influencing the course of events and reflecting the inner states of characters. This perspective encourages readers to see the natural world not as something separate from human life, but as an interconnected system in which all forms of existence are linked. By paying attention to such interactions, ecocriticism reveals how literature can capture the complexity of ecological relationships and the consequences of disrupting them.

In addition, ecocriticism places strong emphasis on themes such as sustainability, responsibility, and the long-term impact of human actions on the planet. It invites readers to think critically about how everyday practices and larger social systems contribute to environmental change, and how these changes are represented in literature. Through its focus on ecological balance and ethical responsibility, ecocriticism encourages a shift in perspective from viewing nature as a resource to be used, to recognizing it as a vital and interconnected system that demands care and respect. In doing so, it not only enriches literary analysis but also fosters a deeper sense of environmental consciousness, making literature a meaningful space for reflecting on the challenges and possibilities of living in an ecologically fragile world.

The intersection of Existentialism and Ecocriticism in literary works opens up a deeply complex and thought-provoking space where human existence is examined not only in relation to freedom, absurdity, and alienation,

but also in connection with the natural environment and ecological consciousness. Existentialist philosophy, as developed by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, emphasizes the individual's confrontation with a seemingly meaningless universe, the burden of freedom, and the responsibility to create meaning through choices. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, as articulated by scholars like Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, focuses on the relationship between literature and the physical environment, foregrounding ecological ethics, environmental degradation, and the interconnectedness of all life forms. When these two frameworks intersect in literary texts, they produce a powerful analytical lens that not only interrogates the existential condition of humanity but also situates that condition within the broader ecological crisis and the human impact on nature.

In many modern and contemporary literary works, existential alienation is not experienced in isolation but is deeply tied to environmental estrangement, where the individual feels disconnected not only from society and self but also from the natural world. This dual alienation is evident in texts that depict landscapes as indifferent, hostile, or degraded, mirroring the existential sense of absurdity. For instance, in works influenced by existentialist thought, nature is often portrayed as silent and unresponsive, reinforcing the idea that the universe lacks inherent meaning; however, ecocritical readings complicate this view by suggesting that such silence may be the result of human exploitation and environmental damage. Thus, the existential crisis becomes entangled with ecological crisis, suggesting that the absurdity and meaninglessness perceived by humans may partly stem from their estrangement from the natural environment. This perspective challenges the anthropocentric bias of traditional

existentialism by emphasizing that human existence cannot be fully understood without considering its ecological context.

Furthermore, the intersection of existentialism and ecocriticism often manifests in the theme of responsibility, a key concern in both frameworks. Existentialism insists that individuals are responsible for their choices and must confront the consequences of their actions without relying on predetermined values or divine authority. Ecocriticism extends this notion of responsibility to include ethical obligations toward the environment, urging a reconsideration of human actions that contribute to ecological destruction. In this combined framework, literary works frequently depict characters who must grapple not only with their personal freedom and moral dilemmas but also with their role in environmental degradation. This expanded sense of responsibility transforms existential angst into ecological awareness, suggesting that the search for meaning must include a commitment to environmental sustainability and coexistence with non-human life forms.

Another significant point of convergence lies in the critique of modernity and industrialization. Existentialist literature often portrays modern life as alienating and dehumanizing, characterized by mechanization, loss of individuality, and a sense of disconnection. Similarly, ecocriticism critiques the environmental consequences of industrialization, including pollution, deforestation, and climate change. When these critiques intersect, literary works reveal how the same processes that alienate individuals also harm the environment, creating a shared condition of crisis. For example, urban settings in literature are frequently depicted as spaces of existential despair and ecological decay, where the absence of nature reflects both the loss of meaning

and the degradation of the environment. This parallelly underscores the idea that human well-being is intrinsically linked to ecological health, and that the crises of existence and environment are interconnected rather than separate.

The concept of authenticity, central to existentialist thought, also acquires new dimensions when viewed through an ecocritical lens. In existentialism, authenticity involves acknowledging one's freedom, rejecting societal conventions, and living in accordance with self-chosen values. However, ecocriticism challenges the notion of authenticity as purely individualistic by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms and the need for ecological harmony. Literary works that explore this intersection often depict characters who seek authenticity not only through self-realization but also through reconnection with nature. This reconnection may involve a rejection of consumerist lifestyles, a return to simpler ways of living, or an acknowledgment of the intrinsic value of non-human entities. In this sense, authenticity becomes an ecological as well as an existential pursuit, highlighting the importance of living in balance with the natural world.

Moreover, the intersection of existentialism and ecocriticism invites a rethinking of the concept of the absurd, a central idea in existentialist philosophy. In the works of Albert Camus, the absurd arises from the conflict between human desire for meaning and the indifferent universe. However, ecocritical perspectives suggest that the perceived indifference of nature may be a reflection of human disconnection rather than an inherent quality of the natural world. By recognizing the agency and vitality of non-human entities, ecocriticism challenges the existential notion of an entirely indifferent universe and proposes a more relational understanding of existence. Literary texts that engage with this

idea often depict moments of ecological awareness or epiphany, where characters come to recognize their embeddedness in the natural world and find a sense of meaning through this connection. Such moments suggest that meaning is not entirely absent but can be discovered through a reorientation of human perspectives toward the environment.

In addition, the intersection of these two frameworks often highlights the ethical implications of human dominance over nature. Existentialism's emphasis on freedom and choice can be reinterpreted in an ecocritical context to question the ways in which human freedom has been exercised at the expense of the environment. Literary works that explore this theme frequently depict the consequences of environmental exploitation, portraying ecological disasters as manifestations of human irresponsibility and hubris. These narratives serve as cautionary tales, illustrating the need for a more ethical and sustainable approach to human existence. By integrating existential and ecological concerns, such works encourage readers to reflect on their own relationship with the environment and to consider the ethical dimensions of their actions.

Existentialism emphasizes the absurd human beings searching for meaning in a meaningless universe. Ecocriticism expands this by showing that nature itself may be indifferent to human concerns, reinforcing existential anxiety. Literary works often depict environmental crises as forces that highlight human vulnerability and lack of control. For instance, existential ecocritical readings show how nature operates beyond human morality, destabilizing anthropocentric beliefs and exposing epistemological limits of human understanding. Existentialism asserts that humans are free and therefore responsible for their actions. Ecocriticism extends this responsibility to the

environment. Literature at this intersection often portrays ethical dilemmas related to environmental destruction, where human freedom leads not only to personal consequences but also to ecological damage. Thus, freedom becomes a burden: humans must now confront their role in the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene, where human activity shapes the planet itself. Existentialist literature frequently explores alienation individuals feeling disconnected from society and existence. Ecocriticism reframes this alienation as also being a separation from nature, a result of modern industrial and capitalist systems. Literary works often depict characters who experience existential despair alongside ecological degradation, suggesting that loss of connection with nature intensifies existential crisis.

Finally, the intersection of existentialism and ecocriticism contributes to a broader redefinition of what it means to be human in the modern world. Rather than viewing humans as isolated individuals struggling against an indifferent universe, this combined perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human life and the importance of ecological awareness in shaping human identity. Literary works that embody this intersection often present a vision of existence that is both deeply reflective and environmentally conscious, suggesting that the search for meaning must extend beyond the self to include the natural world. In doing so, they offer a more holistic understanding of existence, one that acknowledges the complexity of human experience while also recognizing the urgent need for ecological responsibility.

The theoretical framework outlined above, focusing on the intersection of existentialism and ecocriticism will serve as the critical lens for the analysis in the following chapter. By bringing together concerns of human existence,

freedom, alienation, and responsibility with ecological awareness and environmental interconnectedness, this study will examine how the selected literary work reflects both existential anxieties and ecological realities. In the next chapter, these combined perspectives will be applied to the text in order to explore how the narrative negotiates the relationship between the individual and the natural world, and how it reveals the deeper implications of living in an era marked by environmental crisis and existential uncertainty.

Chapter Three

Silence and Solitude: Exploring Existential Angst in *Stone Yard Devotional*

"Surely, if God exists, He could not approve of all this rubbish" (Wood 7).

Charlotte Wood's *The Stone Yard Devotional* presents a profound exploration of human existence within a world marked by ecological uncertainty and spiritual unease. The novel brings together existential concerns about meaning, guilt, responsibility, and alienation with ecological reflections on environmental fragility, climate anxiety, and humanity's relationship with the natural world. Rather than treating these themes separately, Wood intertwines them throughout the narrative, creating a literary space where existential reflection and ecological consciousness become inseparable. The protagonist's retreat to a secluded convent becomes more than a personal escape from contemporary life. It functions as a symbolic journey through which questions of existence and environmental awareness are examined simultaneously.

The unnamed narrator arrives at the convent carrying emotional burdens that have accumulated over many years. Her background as an endangered species conservationist immediately establishes a connection between her personal identity and environmental concerns. Unlike traditional narratives in which ecological issues remain secondary to human drama, *The Stone Yard Devotional* places environmental consciousness at the centre of the protagonist's psychological experience. Her awareness of species extinction, climate instability, and environmental destruction contributes significantly to

her feelings of despair and disillusionment. The ecological crisis is not presented merely as a scientific reality but as an existential condition that shapes how she understands herself and her place in the world.

From an existential perspective, the protagonist embodies many of the characteristics associated with existential anxiety. The philosopher of existence, Martin Heidegger (1976 -1889) argues that authentic existence begins when individuals confront their mortality. Awareness of death reveals the fragility of human life and challenges comforting illusions about permanence and control. Throughout the novel, the narrator repeatedly encounters reminders of mortality that force her to acknowledge the limitations of human existence. "Your bones are here, beneath my feet" (Wood 13).

The narrator's decision to leave her former life and seek refuge within a convent reflects such a crisis. The convent becomes a space where these realities can no longer be avoided. She abandons familiar routines, professional responsibilities, and social expectations in search of a space where she can confront deeper questions about existence. Her movement away from urban life toward an isolated religious community symbolizes a rejection of superficial distractions and an attempt to engage directly with the uncertainties of human existence.

The convent itself functions as a significant existential and ecological space within the novel. Although it appears detached from the modern world, it is not isolated from contemporary concerns. The landscape surrounding the convent reflects the larger environmental challenges facing society. The natural environment is portrayed as fragile, vulnerable, and increasingly unstable. The physical setting becomes an extension of the narrator's psychological condition,

reflecting her feelings of uncertainty, grief, and spiritual disorientation. The environmental concerns represented in *Stone Yard Devotional* extend beyond ecological observation to become manifestations of existential anxiety. The narrator's awareness of disappearing species, damaged landscapes, and the uncertainty of the planet's future evokes what contemporary ecocritics identify as ecological grief or eco-anxiety. This anxiety is not simply a reaction to environmental degradation; it is rooted in a deeper realization of human vulnerability and finitude.

Kierkegaard argues that anxiety emerges when individuals confront the uncertainty of existence and the burden of freedom. Unlike fear, which has a definite object, anxiety arises from the awareness of possibilities and the inability to control outcomes. In this novel, the narrator repeatedly encounters evidence of ecological instability that resists human control. Climate change, species extinction, and environmental decline create a future that remains uncertain and unpredictable. Her anxiety reflects what Kierkegaard describes as the "dizziness of freedom"—the realization that human beings possess agency yet remain incapable of mastering the consequences of their actions.

Despite living among religious women whose lives are structured around faith and devotion, the narrator remains an atheist. She does not possess the certainty that religious belief often provides. Instead, she exists in a state of questioning and ambiguity. Her participation in convent life does not resolve her doubts but allows her to inhabit them more honestly. The narrator's experiences illustrate this struggle. This condition reflects the existential emphasis on authenticity.

The narrator's attentiveness to birdlife reflects an awareness of

interconnectedness that transcends human-centered perspectives. Their vulnerability becomes a reminder of humanity's own vulnerability, illustrating Heidegger's assertion that anxiety reveals the fundamental conditions of existence. Through these observations, ecological loss becomes inseparable from existential awareness.

The ecological crisis represented in the novel intensifies this condition because it reveals humanity's collective responsibility for environmental destruction. The narrator's reflections suggest an awareness that contemporary ecological catastrophe is not an external event but a consequence of human choices. This awareness generates a form of existential guilt that resonates with Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety as a response to human freedom and responsibility. The environmental crisis thus becomes both a material and a spiritual problem, compelling the narrator to confront difficult questions about human existence, ethical accountability, and the future of life on Earth.

The narrator's encounters with ecological loss often produce a sense of helplessness and mourning. Her observations of environmental decline are accompanied by reflections on the apparent inability of contemporary society to respond adequately to ecological threats. Such moments reveal a profound tension between awareness and action, knowledge and hope, producing a condition that closely resembles existential despair. Yet Kierkegaard maintains that confronting despair can become a pathway toward authenticity. Similarly, the narrator's willingness to remain attentive to ecological suffering represents an ethical engagement with reality rather than an escape from it.

Throughout the novel, the narrator resists easy answers to her questions about suffering, guilt, and responsibility. She does not suddenly discover faith

or achieve complete spiritual clarity. Instead, she learns to coexist with uncertainty. This willingness to confront ambiguity reflects an authentic engagement with existence and aligns closely with existential philosophy.

The novel's portrayal of climate anxiety is particularly significant because it demonstrates how environmental concerns operate on a psychological and emotional level. Climate change is not represented through dramatic catastrophes or apocalyptic imagery. Instead, Wood focuses on the subtle ways ecological awareness shapes everyday consciousness. The narrator's understanding of environmental decline affects how she interprets ordinary experiences, remembers the past, and imagines the future. This approach emphasizes that ecological crisis is not merely an external phenomenon but an internal reality that influences thought, emotion, and identity. The novel repeatedly presents images of extinction, environmental decline, and the disappearance of species. These phenomena function as reminders not only of the mortality of individual organisms but also of the fragility of entire ecosystems.

The mouse plague that disrupts the convent serves as one of the most important symbols in the novel. On a literal level, the infestation reflects ecological imbalance. Environmental disruptions have contributed to conditions that allow the mouse population to expand uncontrollably. However, the infestation also possesses existential significance. The overwhelming presence of the mice challenges assumptions about human control over nature. The convent, despite its order and routine, becomes vulnerable to forces beyond human management. This loss of control reflects a central existential insight concerning the limitations of human power. Existential thinkers frequently

emphasize that human beings must confront realities they cannot fully understand or control. The mouse plague functions as a reminder of these limitations. It exposes the fragility of human systems and highlights the unpredictable nature of existence. Simultaneously, it reveals the consequences of ecological disruption, demonstrating how environmental instability directly affects human life.

The infestation also challenges anthropocentric perspectives that place humanity at the centre of existence. In *Stone Yard Devotional*, the mice are not simply portrayed as pests invading human space. Their presence reflects broader ecological processes that exceed human understanding and control. Through this representation, the novel encourages readers to reconsider the relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Alienation in the novel reveals the intersection of existentialism and ecocriticism. Existential literature often portrays individuals who feel disconnected from society, community, and even themselves. The narrator experiences this form of alienation throughout the novel. She feels detached from her previous life, uncertain about her identity, and unable to find comfort in conventional social structures. Her retreat to the convent reflects a desire to escape these feelings of disconnection. However, the novel expands the concept of alienation beyond the individual level. Ecocritical perspectives suggest that modern societies have become increasingly separated from the natural environment. This ecological alienation contributes to psychological distress and environmental destruction. The narrator's work in conservation has made her acutely aware of humanity's disconnection from ecological systems. Her despair arises not only from personal circumstances but also from witnessing

the consequences of this separation.

The novel's emphasis on silence further strengthens this relationship between existential and ecological concerns. Silence occupies a central place within convent life and shapes much of the narrator's experience. From an existential perspective, silence reflects the absence of definitive answers to life's fundamental questions. The universe does not provide clear explanations for suffering, mortality, or meaning. Individuals must confront this silence and determine how to respond. Silence also encourages attention to the nonhuman world. By reducing the constant noise of modern life, the convent creates opportunities for observing natural processes and environmental changes. The narrator becomes increasingly aware of birds, weather patterns, landscapes, and other aspects of the natural environment. These observations do not eliminate existential uncertainty, but they provide a different framework for understanding existence. Human life appears less isolated and more deeply connected to broader ecological systems.

The discovery and return of the murdered nun's remains introduces another dimension of existential reflection. Death occupies a central position in existential philosophy because it reveals the finite nature of human existence. Awareness of mortality forces individuals to confront the reality that life is temporary and uncertain. The return of the nun's remains disrupts the convent's routine and encourages reflection on memory, loss, and the passage of time. At the same time, this event highlights the persistence of the past. Just as ecological damage often reflects the consequences of actions performed years or decades earlier, personal histories continue to shape present experience. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that neither environmental nor emotional wounds

disappear simply because people wish to move beyond them.

Wood's portrayal of nature challenges traditional distinctions between human and nonhuman worlds. The novel consistently emphasizes interconnectedness rather than separation. Human emotions, environmental processes, spiritual questions, and ethical responsibilities become deeply entangled. This interconnected perspective aligns with ecocritical theories that reject anthropocentric assumptions and emphasize the mutual dependence of all forms of life.

Furthermore, the novel demonstrates how ecological awareness can transform existential thought. Traditional existentialism often focuses primarily on individual experience. In *The Stone Yard Devotional*, however, existential concerns are expanded through ecological consciousness. Questions about freedom, responsibility, meaning, and mortality are situated within a broader environmental context. Human existence is understood not as an isolated condition but as part of an interconnected ecological reality.

A significant aspect of *The Stone Yard Devotional* is the narrator's uneasy position within the convent itself. Although she chooses to live among the nuns, she never fully becomes one of them. She participates in prayers, attends communal activities, shares meals, and follows the daily rhythm of the community, yet she remains conscious of her outsider status. This position of being simultaneously inside and outside creates a persistent sense of displacement throughout the novel.

This condition reflects an important existential experience. The narrator is unable to find complete belonging either in her previous life or in the religious environment she now inhabits. Her existence is marked by uncertainty and

incompleteness. She occupies a space between belief and disbelief, attachment and detachment, participation and observation. However, this uncertainty is not merely personal. The ecological concerns that shape her consciousness produce a similar sense of estrangement. Her knowledge of environmental decline prevents her from embracing comforting narratives about progress or stability. Just as she cannot fully belong within the convent's spiritual framework, she cannot fully trust the future of the natural world. The result is a form of existential and ecological homelessness in which both personal identity and environmental security remain unstable.

Another important narrative thread involves the convent's history and the stories attached to it. Throughout the novel, the narrator becomes increasingly aware that the convent is not simply a physical location but a place layered with memory, suffering, and human experience. The return of the murdered nun's remains forces the community to revisit events that many would prefer to leave buried.

The reappearance of this forgotten history demonstrates how the past continually intrudes upon the present. Existentially, the event emphasizes that individuals cannot simply abandon responsibility for previous actions. Human beings remain connected to their histories even when they attempt to escape them. Similarly, ecological crises reveal how environmental consequences persist across generations. Actions performed decades earlier continue to influence contemporary ecological realities. The novel therefore establishes a subtle parallel between historical memory and environmental memory. Neither can be erased. Both demand recognition and ethical engagement.

The narrator's memories of her mother represent another important

narrative element. Throughout the novel, recollections of family relationships surface repeatedly, revealing unresolved tensions and emotional wounds. These memories complicate the narrator's understanding of herself and contribute to her sense of guilt and vulnerability.

"After my parents died – not together, though close enough in time to fuse inside my primitive self, inside my dreams and my body, into a single catastrophe – for many years I felt as though I were breathing and moving through some kind of glue" (Wood 23).

From an existential perspective, these reflections highlight the role of relationships in shaping identity. Human beings do not exist in isolation. Their sense of self develops through interactions with others, including those who are absent or deceased. The narrator's continued engagement with memories of her mother demonstrates how identity remains influenced by past relationships.

Ecocritically, these memories contribute to the novel's broader emphasis on interconnectedness. Just as individuals remain connected to people from their past, they remain connected to environments that shape their experiences. The novel repeatedly challenges notions of independence and self-sufficiency. Instead, it presents existence as a network of relationships extending across both human and nonhuman worlds.

The convent's emphasis on communal living further develops this idea. Modern society often celebrates individual achievement and autonomy. By contrast, convent life is structured around cooperation, shared responsibility, and collective routines. The narrator encounters a social environment that differs significantly from the competitive and fragmented world she left behind. This communal structure possesses ecological significance because it reflects forms

of interdependence that are often obscured in contemporary culture. Ecocriticism frequently emphasizes that survival depends upon relationships rather than isolated individualism. Ecosystems function through interconnected networks in which different forms of life rely upon one another. The convent community mirrors this principle on a social level. Through its collective practices, the narrative suggests alternative ways of understanding human existence.

The line, "In the wider world Sister Jenny had been forgotten" (Wood 47) raises existential questions about memory, recognition, and human significance. It also critiques society's tendency to forget those who act selflessly for others. This seemingly simple sentence carries profound existential and ethical significance. At a literal level, the line refers to Sister Jenny, a nun who dedicated her life to protecting abused women in Bangkok and who disappeared under tragic circumstances. Despite her courage and sacrifice, public memory of her gradually faded. Outside the convent and the small group of people who loved her, society moved on. Her story, once discussed and mourned, eventually disappeared from public consciousness.

From an existentialist perspective, the line reflects one of humanity's deepest anxieties: the fear of being forgotten. Existential philosophers argue that human beings seek meaning and significance in a world that offers no guarantees of permanence. Sister Jenny devoted her life to a noble cause, yet the world did not preserve her memory. The sentence suggests the painful reality that even acts of extraordinary courage may not secure lasting recognition. The line also reflects the existential theme of absurdity. According to Albert Camus, there is often a gap between human expectations and reality. People expect

justice, remembrance, and acknowledgement for moral actions. However, reality does not always fulfill these expectations. Sister Jenny's disappearance and subsequent obscurity reveal this contradiction. She risked her life to protect vulnerable women, yet instead of becoming a celebrated figure, she was largely erased from collective memory. The injustice of this situation highlights the absurd nature of existence, where virtue does not necessarily lead to recognition or reward.

The sentence becomes even more powerful when considered in relation to the later discovery of Jenny's remains. Although society had forgotten her, nature had not completely erased her existence. Floodwaters uprooted a tree, exposing the bones hidden within its roots. Symbolically, the natural world becomes the force that restores memory. What human institutions neglected was eventually revealed through ecological processes. This moment creates a striking intersection between existentialism and ecocriticism. Existentially, it challenges the assumption that a forgotten life is meaningless. Ecologically, it demonstrates how nature can preserve and reveal histories that human societies attempt to bury or ignore. Environmental destruction reveals that neither human beings nor the natural world are immune to loss. This recognition intensifies existential anxiety because it exposes the limits of human control and the inevitability of change.

Death often appears as the ultimate limitation, a reminder that life is finite and uncertain. The line, "Anything that had lived could make itself useful, become nourishment in death" (Wood 199) encapsulates the novel's central concerns with mortality, ecological interconnectedness, and the search for meaning. Spoken in the context of the narrator's mother's composting practices,

the line initially refers to a simple ecological principle: everything that lives eventually dies and returns to the earth. Food scraps, bones, cloth, and organic matter decompose and become nourishment for new forms of life. However, beneath this practical observation lies a profound meditation on existence itself. It emphasizes the cyclical nature of life. Ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric belief that humans exist separately from nature and instead stresses the interconnectedness of all living beings. It suggests that death is not an end but a transformation within a larger ecological system. Every living thing becomes part of an ongoing cycle of decay, renewal, and regeneration. The mother's belief that "anything that had lived" can become nourishment reflects a deep respect for the earth and its natural processes. Nothing is entirely lost because nature continuously recycles life into new forms. This idea aligns with ecocritical thought, which views humans as participants in ecological systems rather than masters of them.

As the novel progresses towards its conclusion, the narrator undergoes a subtle yet significant transformation. Unlike conventional narratives of spiritual awakening, *The Stone Yard Devotional* does not offer a dramatic resolution or a complete recovery from existential despair. Instead, Wood presents a gradual shift in perception. The narrator does not suddenly discover faith, nor does she overcome her anxieties about climate change, mortality, and guilt. What changes is her relationship to these realities. She learns to inhabit uncertainty rather than resist it. This movement from resistance to acceptance represents one of the most important existential developments in the novel.

Throughout the narrative, the narrator repeatedly encounters situations that challenge her desire for certainty. The mystery surrounding Sister Jenny's

death, the environmental instability represented by the mouse plague, the painful memories of her family, and her inability to embrace religious belief all confront her with ambiguity. Existential philosophy argues that authentic existence begins when individuals acknowledge uncertainty instead of seeking refuge in false assurances. The narrator's experience reflects this principle. By the end of the novel, she no longer searches for definitive answers to every question. Instead, she accepts that meaning may emerge through attentiveness, responsibility, and engagement with the world despite uncertainty.

This existential acceptance is closely linked to ecological awareness. The natural world portrayed in the novel is neither stable nor predictable. Droughts, floods, infestations, and environmental changes continually remind the narrator that nature operates according to processes beyond human control. Yet rather than viewing this unpredictability as a source of despair alone, she gradually comes to recognize it as part of existence itself. Ecological systems are dynamic and constantly changing. Human life is similarly characterized by change, vulnerability, and impermanence. Through this realization, the narrator develops a deeper sense of belonging within the natural world.

The theme of composting, introduced through memories of the narrator's mother, becomes particularly significant in this context. The mother's reverence for the earth represents a form of ecological wisdom that profoundly influences the narrator. Although the narrator does not articulate this philosophy in explicitly religious terms, she increasingly comes to appreciate its implications. The earth is not merely a resource or background setting. It is the foundation of life itself, a living system within which all existence unfolds. By remembering her mother's practices and values, the narrator begins to

understand that meaning may be discovered through connection rather than control.

> My mother never did go back to the yoga class. What did I know then? Nothing. What I know now is that my mother had been on the cusp of some new understanding of herself that day, something she both wanted and Feared, and it was I who held her back from that discovery. Once more I Wish I was able to be a wiser daughter to her when she was alive. (Wood 131)

This understanding becomes particularly evident in the treatment of Sister Jenny's remains. For many years, Jenny existed only as a memory within a small community. The wider world had forgotten her. Yet nature itself preserved traces of her existence. Floodwaters and uprooted trees eventually revealed what had been hidden for decades. The recovery of Jenny's remains symbolizes the persistence of memory within ecological systems. Human institutions may fail to preserve histories, but the natural world continues to bear witness.

The burial of Sister Jenny at Stone Yard represents one of the novel's most powerful moments. The decision to bury her there is not merely an administrative or ceremonial act. It is an affirmation of belonging. Jenny, whose life was marked by compassion and sacrifice, is finally returned to a place of rest within the landscape itself. The burial creates a profound connection between memory, mortality, and ecology. The earth becomes both witness and caretaker, receiving the dead while sustaining the living.

Existentially, the burial acknowledges the reality of death without attempting to deny or transcend it. Ecocritically, it emphasizes humanity's

participation in natural cycles. The ceremony does not erase grief, but it provides a form of reconciliation grounded in acceptance rather than certainty. The characters recognize that death is inevitable, yet they also recognize the enduring connections that unite human beings with one another and with the natural world.

Existential philosophy often emphasizes individual freedom and responsibility. In the novel,, responsibility is expressed through care for both human and nonhuman life. The convent community survives not because its members possess answers to every question but because they continue to care for one another despite uncertainty. Care appears repeatedly through acts of gardening, cooking, cleaning, listening, remembering, and protecting others. These actions may seem ordinary, yet they constitute the ethical foundation of the narrative. The relationship between silence and care is also significant. Throughout the novel, silence creates opportunities for reflection and observation. It allows the narrator to listen more carefully to both herself and her surroundings. In a contemporary world often characterized by noise, distraction, and consumption, silence becomes a radical practice of attention. Existentially, it enables self examination. Ecocritically, it fosters awareness of the nonhuman world. Through silence, the narrator develops a deeper appreciation for forms of existence that do not demand constant recognition or control.

The novel's treatment of faith further reinforces its existential and ecological dimensions. Although set within a convent, *Stone Yard Devotional* does not present faith as a straightforward solution to human suffering. The narrator remains uncertain about religious belief throughout the narrative.

"Do you have to believe in God to join a religious order? Nobody has

ever asked me, specifically, about belief. And, anyway, I haven't ever joined. Not really" (Wood 131).

Yet her uncertainty does not prevent her from experiencing moments of connection, wonder, and meaning. Wood suggests that such experiences need not depend upon doctrinal certainty. Instead, they may emerge through encounters with nature, memory, community, and acts of care.

The convergence of existentialism and ecocriticism is most evident in the novel's understanding of vulnerability. Human beings are vulnerable because they are mortal, uncertain, and dependent upon others. Ecosystems are vulnerable because they are subject to disruption, exploitation, and environmental change. Rather than treating these vulnerabilities separately, Wood presents them as interconnected. The fragility of human existence mirrors the fragility of the natural world. Consequently, ethical responsibility extends beyond individual concerns to include ecological relationships.

By linking personal anxiety with environmental awareness, *Stone Yard Devotional* offers a distinctive vision of contemporary existence. The novel recognizes the realities of climate change, extinction, grief, and mortality without surrendering to despair. Instead, it proposes attentiveness, humility, and care as meaningful responses to uncertainty. The narrator's journey demonstrates that authenticity does not require certainty and that belonging does not require mastery. Human beings remain finite and vulnerable, yet they are also capable of connection, compassion, and responsibility.

Stone Yard Devotional presents a profound exploration of the relationship between human existence and the natural world through the combined perspectives of existentialism and ecocriticism. The novel

demonstrates that existential concerns such as alienation, mortality, guilt, memory, and the search for meaning cannot be separated from ecological realities. Through the narrator's experiences at the convent, Wood reveals how environmental awareness intensifies existential reflection while also offering new possibilities for understanding existence.

The narrative consistently challenges anthropocentric assumptions by emphasizing humanity's embeddedness within ecological systems. The mouse plague, the drought affected landscape, the recovery of Sister Jenny's remains, the mother's composting philosophy, and the narrator's observations of the natural world all illustrate the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life. These elements show that human beings are not isolated individuals but participants in larger ecological processes that shape identity, memory, and responsibility.

> My mother said that anything that had once been alive should go back into the soil. Food scraps went into the compost, of course, including meat and bones, despite the general advice against this. Paper, torn into strips to allow air and microbes to move freely through. She would cut old pure cotton or silk or woollen clothes into small shreds and compost them too. Fish bones and flesh. Linen tea towels. She reluctantly left out larger pieces of wood, but longed for a woodchipper. She left cane furniture to rot and then buried it. (Wood 199)

At the same time, the novel embraces the existential recognition that life is characterized by uncertainty. Neither religion nor environmental consciousness provides definitive answers to suffering, mortality, or climate anxiety. Instead, the novel advocates an ethic of attentiveness, care, and

acceptance. Meaning emerges not through certainty but through engagement with others, responsibility toward the natural world, and a willingness to confront vulnerability honestly.

Ultimately, The Stone Yard Devotional reimagines the relationship between self and environment by presenting ecological awareness as inseparable from existential inquiry. Wood suggests that authentic existence requires recognizing both the fragility of human life and the interconnectedness of all living beings. In doing so, the novel offers a compelling vision of how individuals might live meaningfully within a world marked by environmental uncertainty, reminding readers that belonging, responsibility, and renewal are possible even in the face of impermanence.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

In the present study an attempt to examine the intersection of existentialism and ecocriticism in Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* has been made. The previous two chapters focused on existential questions of freedom, alienation, mortality, responsibility, the search for meaning, and also concentrated on the relationship between literature and the natural environment, emphasizing ecological interconnectedness and environmental ethics. By bringing these two critical perspectives together, this study tried to investigate an individual's spiritual or psychological journey, and also to situate that journey within the larger context of ecological instability and environmental crisis. The novel reveals that contemporary human existence cannot be understood apart from the natural world because personal identity, ethical responsibility, and ecological consciousness continuously shape one another.

The first chapter dealt with a detailed introduction about the project and the author and the second chapter established the theoretical framework by discussing the major principles of existentialism and ecocriticism, and explaining how these seemingly distinct critical approaches converge in contemporary literary studies. Existentialist thinkers such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and Kierkegaard emphasize the individual's confrontation with freedom, absurdity, anxiety, mortality, and the necessity of creating meaning in an uncertain world. Ecocriticism, represented by scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, extends literary inquiry beyond human centered concerns by foregrounding the relationship between literature and the physical environment. The theoretical discussion demonstrates that

both frameworks share an ethical concern with responsibility. Existentialism focuses upon personal responsibility for one's choices, whereas ecocriticism broadens that responsibility to include the natural world and the ecological consequences of human actions. This convergence provides the foundation for examining *Stone Yard Devotional* as a literary text that explores both existential uncertainty and ecological consciousness simultaneously.

The analysis of the novel has shown that Charlotte Wood deliberately avoids presenting existentialism and ecocriticism as separate philosophical concerns. Instead, the narrative repeatedly reveals that human existence unfolds within ecological realities that shape every aspect of individual experience. The unnamed narrator's retreat to the convent is initially motivated by emotional exhaustion, personal guilt, and an overwhelming awareness of environmental degradation. Her withdrawal from ordinary social life reflects an existential search for meaning, yet this search never occurs independently of the natural world. The convent, situated within the vast Monaro landscape, becomes the physical and symbolic space where questions concerning human existence intersect with ecological awareness. Consequently, the novel suggests that the search for meaning in the contemporary world necessarily includes confronting environmental realities.

One of the most significant findings of this study is that the narrator's existential anxiety is intensified by her ecological consciousness. Unlike many traditional existential protagonists whose crises emerge primarily from philosophical or psychological concerns, Wood's narrator experiences anxiety because she possesses intimate knowledge of environmental destruction through her work in wildlife conservation. She has witnessed extinction, habitat

loss, and ecological degradation. As a result, her awareness of mortality extends beyond individual human existence to encompass the vulnerability of entire ecosystems. This expansion of existential anxiety reflects the changing realities of the Anthropocene, where climate change and ecological collapse have become defining features of human experience. The novel therefore redefines existential alienation by demonstrating that contemporary individuals experience isolation not only from themselves and society but also from the damaged environments they inhabit.

The study has further identified that ecological disturbances within the novel function more as descriptive background details for the setting. Environmental events such as the prolonged drought, changing weather patterns, and particularly the devastating mouse plague actively shape the philosophical meaning of the narrative. The mouse infestation repeatedly disrupts the apparent stability of convent life, illustrating the limits of human control over ecological systems. From an existential perspective, these disruptions expose the fragility of human attempts to impose order upon an unpredictable world. From an ecocritical perspective, they reveal the consequences of ecological imbalance resulting from environmental change. The plague therefore becomes both a symbol of existential uncertainty and a reminder of humanity's embeddedness within larger ecological processes. The novel challenges anthropocentric assumptions by showing that human existence is never independent of the natural systems that sustain it.

Another important contribution of this study lies in its examination of the novel's treatment of memory and history through an ecological lens. The recovery of Sister Jenny's remains represents one of the most powerful

intersections between existentialism and ecocriticism in the text. For decades, Jenny's story had disappeared from public consciousness, illustrating the existential fear that even lives dedicated to compassion and sacrifice may eventually be forgotten. However, it is nature rather than human institutions that ultimately restores her memory. Floodwaters and the uprooted tree reveal what had remained hidden beneath the earth. This event symbolizes the capacity of ecological processes to preserve histories neglected by human society. Nature functions not merely as physical setting but as an active participant in remembering, revealing, and restoring forgotten lives. The novel thereby suggests that human existence remains inseparable from the ecological world even after death.

That Wood consistently rejects anthropocentrism by granting significance to nonhuman life has also been emphasized . Birds, mice, insects, trees, soil, weather, and the changing seasons are not passive elements of scenery. Instead, they possess narrative and philosophical importance equal to that of the human characters. The narrator's growing attentiveness to these aspects of the environment reflects her gradual recognition that meaning does not arise solely from human relationships or individual achievements. Rather, meaning emerges through an awareness of interconnectedness. This ecological perspective challenges conventional existential interpretations that often privilege individual consciousness while overlooking humanity's dependence upon the natural world. By integrating nonhuman life into existential inquiry, Wood expands the philosophical scope of contemporary fiction.

Furthermore, the study shows that the novel redefines the concept of authenticity. Classical existentialism frequently associates authenticity with

individual freedom, self-awareness, and the rejection of external conventions. While these concerns remain present in *Stone Yard Devotional*, Wood extends authenticity beyond the individual self. The narrator's journey demonstrates that authentic existence involves recognizing one's ecological relationships and accepting responsibility for the broader community of life. Her increasing attentiveness to gardening, composting, weather, birds, and the rhythms of the convent illustrates a movement away from self-centered anxiety toward ecological awareness. Authenticity therefore becomes both an existential and an ecological achievement, grounded not in isolation but in interconnectedness.

The narrator's memories of her mother further reinforce this ecological understanding of existence. The mother's practice of composting symbolizes a worldview in which death is understood not as absolute disappearance but as transformation within the continuous cycles of nature. Her belief that everything living eventually becomes nourishment for new life challenges existential despair by offering an ecological understanding of mortality. Rather than seeking permanence or immortality, the novel encourages acceptance of life's cyclical nature. Human beings remain finite, yet their existence continues to participate in the larger ecological processes that sustain the earth. Through this imagery, Wood presents nature as a source of philosophical insight rather than merely an object of description.

Silence occupies a central position within the novel's philosophical vision. Initially associated with religious practice, silence gradually becomes a space in which the narrator confronts both her owSn consciousness and the surrounding environment. In existential terms, silence enables self-reflection and honest confrontation with anxiety, guilt, and mortality. Ecocritically,

silence encourages attentiveness to the voices of the nonhuman world. The narrator begins to notice birds, wind, insects, weather, and landscape with increasing sensitivity. The novel thereby proposes silence as a mode of ecological listening that challenges the noisy distractions of modern industrial society. Through silence, existential reflection and ecological awareness become inseparable.

The relationship between faith and uncertainty represents another significant aspect of the novel explored in this study. Although the narrative unfolds within a convent, Wood deliberately avoids presenting religious belief as a complete solution to existential anxiety. The narrator remains uncertain throughout the novel, and this uncertainty is never entirely resolved. However, the absence of absolute faith does not result in hopelessness. Instead, the novel suggests that meaning may arise through ethical action, attentiveness, compassion, and ecological responsibility rather than through certainty alone. This perspective aligns with existential philosophy, which argues that meaning must be created through lived experience rather than received from external authorities. Simultaneously, it resonates with ecocriticism by locating ethical responsibility within humanity's relationship with the natural world.

The present study has therefore demonstrated that *Stone Yard Devotional* occupies a distinctive position within contemporary Australian literature because of its ability to combine philosophical inquiry with ecological consciousness. Charlotte Wood does not simply narrate the story of an individual seeking refuge from emotional suffering. Rather, she presents a world in which private experiences of grief, guilt, alienation, and uncertainty are inseparable from broader environmental realities. The novel illustrates that

existential crises and ecological crises are not isolated phenomena but interconnected experiences that shape contemporary human existence. By placing the unnamed narrator within the quiet yet ecologically fragile landscape of the convent, Wood reveals that the search for meaning inevitably becomes a search for one's place within the natural world.

The study also confirms that the novel challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that have traditionally shaped both literature and philosophy. Instead of presenting human beings as separate from or superior to nature, Wood repeatedly emphasizes that human life is sustained by complex ecological relationships. The mouse plague, changing weather, birds, gardens, compost, drought, and the landscape itself all contribute to the philosophical development of the narrative. Nature is neither romanticized nor portrayed as an enemy. It is presented as an active presence that continually reminds human beings of their vulnerability, dependence, and responsibility. Such a representation encourages readers to reconsider their own relationship with the environment and to acknowledge that the ecological crisis is fundamentally a human crisis as well.

One of the most significant achievements of the novel lies in its redefinition of existential meaning. Traditional existential philosophy often emphasizes the individual's struggle against an indifferent universe. While *Stone Yard Devotional* retains this awareness of uncertainty, it simultaneously suggests that meaning emerges through relationships rather than isolation. The narrator gradually realizes that existence gains significance through acts of care, remembrance, compassion, and attentiveness. These values extend beyond human relationships to include the natural environment. The ethical responsibility that develops throughout the novel therefore becomes both

existential and ecological. The narrator's acceptance of uncertainty does not result in resignation but in a deeper commitment to living responsibly within an interconnected world.

It has been further established that Wood's treatment of ecological consciousness is remarkable because it avoids simplistic environmental messages. Rather than presenting ecological awareness as political propaganda or moral instruction, the novel allows environmental realities to emerge naturally through the experiences of its characters. The narrator's reflections on wildlife conservation, extinction, climate change, and ecological fragility become part of her broader philosophical journey. Consequently, environmental awareness is portrayed not as an external obligation but as an essential aspect of understanding human existence itself. The novel thereby demonstrates that the environmental crisis cannot be separated from questions concerning ethics, memory, mortality, and identity.

Another important contribution of this research lies in demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary literary criticism. The combined application of existentialism and ecocriticism has revealed dimensions of the novel that might remain unnoticed if either theoretical framework were employed independently. Existentialism explains the narrator's struggle with alienation, freedom, guilt, and mortality, while ecocriticism illuminates the significance of landscape, environmental degradation, ecological interconnectedness, and the ethical relationship between humans and the nonhuman world. Together these approaches reveal that Wood's novel presents a holistic vision of existence in which personal identity, moral responsibility, and environmental awareness continuously influence one another. This interdisciplinary approach therefore

contributes not only to the interpretation of *Stone Yard Devotional* but also to the broader development of contemporary literary criticism.

The findings of this study also contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions concerning literature in the Anthropocene. Contemporary literary works increasingly respond to environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological uncertainty. However, *Stone Yard Devotional* distinguishes itself by approaching these concerns through intimate philosophical reflection rather than dramatic ecological catastrophe. Wood demonstrates that climate anxiety, ecological grief, and environmental awareness are deeply embedded within ordinary human experience. By portraying these realities through the quiet rhythms of convent life, she illustrates that environmental consciousness develops through careful observation, reflection, and ethical engagement rather than through sensationalism. In doing so, the novel offers an alternative literary response to ecological crisis, one grounded in humility, compassion, and attentiveness.

Stone Yard Devotional successfully reimagines the relationship between human existence and the natural world by bringing existentialism and ecocriticism into meaningful dialogue. The novel illustrates that human beings cannot discover authentic meaning while remaining disconnected from the ecological systems that sustain life. Instead, Wood proposes that meaning emerges through accepting vulnerability, acknowledging interdependence, and embracing responsibility toward both human and nonhuman existence. The narrator's journey from emotional isolation to ecological awareness reflects a broader philosophical movement from individual despair toward relational understanding. Although the novel does not eliminate suffering, uncertainty, or

mortality, it demonstrates that these realities need not result in meaninglessness. Rather, they become opportunities for cultivating empathy, responsibility, and deeper ecological consciousness.

In conclusion, Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* stands as a profound meditation on existence in an age of environmental crisis. Through the convergence of existentialism and ecocriticism, the novel challenges readers to reconsider conventional understandings of identity, freedom, and the human relationship with nature. It reveals that the search for meaning extends beyond the individual self and into the wider ecological community of which humanity is an inseparable part. By foregrounding interconnectedness, ethical responsibility, and ecological humility, Wood ultimately presents a vision of existence that is both philosophically compelling and environmentally relevant. The novel reminds us that while human life is marked by uncertainty and impermanence, it is also enriched by the relationships that connect individuals with one another and with the living world. Furthermore, it underscores the urgent need for the human beings to acknowledge the consequences of their actions. Through this powerful synthesis of existential inquiry and ecological awareness, *Stone Yard Devotional* offers a timely and enduring contribution to contemporary literature, encouraging readers to confront the challenges of the modern world, which definitely require moral solutions, with honesty, compassion, and a renewed sense of responsibility toward all forms of life.

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