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Back to Nature and Ireland: Morgan Llywelyn's *The Elementals*

Kübra Baysal

Kübra Baysal holds a PhD, MA and BA in English literature and works as a lecturer at Ankara Yildirim Beyazıt University, School of Foreign Languages. As a graduate of Hacettepe University (2008), she gained her MA from Atatürk University in 2013. She earned her PhD from Hacettepe University in January 2019. Her main fields of interest are climate fiction, apocalypse fiction, Doris Lessing, feminism, environmental studies, the Victorian novel and contemporary novel. She has written book chapters, articles and translation works in international books and journals.

Abstract:

Written by the Irish author Morgan Llywelyn in 1993, The Elementals focuses on the four powerful elements of nature that are essential to life: namely Water, Fire, Earth and Air. Consisting of four parts divided in accordance to these elements, the novel connects four stories which raise universal ecological awareness and present the danger of a future collapse in nature. Depicting the adventures of Irish-origin characters and the striking realization of their deep connection to nature at the end of each part, the novel awakens the reader to their inner relation to other humans, animals, plants, rocks and all parts of nature. Of Irish origins herself, through her novel Llywelyn displays the agency of nonhuman bodies in relation to human bodies, or in other words, Irish-origin human bodies, and the innate connection of all humans to the natural elements. Hence, this study aims to analyse The Elementals from the perspective of the new materialism theory underlining the interaction of all beings in the universe through the constant recalling of Ireland as a significant part of the natural culture.

Introduction

Irish-born American writer Morgan Llywelyn (1937-) is famous for her historical fantasy novel series and individual novels that always have a touch of Ireland and the Celtic myths and legends through her characters, the setting itself or the general theme, which is mostly related to nature and animals. One of her well-credited novels, *The Horse Goddess* (1982), recounts an adventurous love affair during the fall of Troy and the impact of a druid on the couple's journey ("The Horse Goddess", 2020). Another one of her novels is *Finn Mac Cool* (1994), which is about the legendary Celtic hero of Ireland. In this spirit, *The Elementals* (1993) is a striking novel for its time in terms of dealing with the elements of nature from a green perspective,

raising critical questions about the nature of the relationship between humankind and the environment. It revolves around the eventful odyssey of four Irish-origin characters in four parts and builds a connection amongst them although the incidents take place in four different timelines and locations. At this point, the emphasis on Irishness and spirituality in regards to the elements of nature can be clarified through the ancient Celtic way of living as inseparable from the natural world:

The ancient Celts in Ireland honoured the force of nature; they were animists meaning they had a world view that non-human entities – such as animals, plants, and inanimate objects-possess a spiritual essence. They also believed that humans could establish a rapport with these beings. The pagan Celts viewed the presence of the supernatural as central to, and interwoven with, the material world. Every mountain, river, spring, marsh, tree, and rocky outcrop was inspirited. (Mulvihill, 2020)

In this context, Celtic spirituality and innate connection to nature is indeed the main argument of the new materialist philosophy that became popular after the “Material Turn”¹ in the early 2010s (Lettow, 2010, p. 1), which is relevant to this study.

Beginning with the element of water, *The Elementals* depicts the adventurous story of survival on a newly discovered island as experienced by a group of people including three men and 55 females. The leading female character in the “Water” part, Kesair, is Irish and is presented as the ancestor and mother of all humankind as well as the primary representative of natural power, as discovered through the protagonists’ point of views in other parts. The second part is about the element of fire and the condition of the human beings reflected through Meriones in the land of Crete before and after the volcanic eruption. When Meriones finds his connection to nature, he sees Kesair’s reminiscence in the water after centuries. The third part describes the discovery of the female protagonist, Annie Murphy, whose mother was Irish and used to believe in natural forces, about her inner relation to the earth. Finally, the fourth part narrates the grave problem of survival in a world full of disease because of the destruction of the ozone layer in the atmosphere. The male protagonist, George Burningfeather, who is half-Irish, half-Native American, feels the power of the element of air, by which he saves the world along with the help of other survivors who are mostly mixed-race like him.

Water

Water, as an element of nature, has the power to affect while simultaneously being affected. From the perspective of new materialism, traditional (humanist) concepts of ontology and

epistemology need to be reconsidered. In a world where each element is in constant intra-action² with other beings, the notion of human superiority is easily blurred (Miah, 2008, p. 77). In other words, “the whole edifice of modern ontology regarding notions of change, causality, agency, time, and space” are to be debated (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 9). Within this context, starting with the story of the Atlantis civilization, Llywelyn draws attention to the element of water and how nature poses a danger and yet, communicates with people at the same time through its agential³ quality. Calling forth an Irish female character representing the nature itself, this part forms a background for the following parts as all three elements are related to water, which is crucial for life. Furthermore, Kesair appears to be the ancestor of the main characters in other parts.

After the melting of the ice, the seas rise and flood the lands. As people are struggling to survive, a female leader emerges and shows them the way. Kesair is the courageous Irish-origin woman leading a group that includes three men. From the beginning of the natural disaster, she remains calm and finds the best way of survival for human beings. It is also through her innate connection to the element of water that she always makes the right decisions about the fate of the group. As their boat is drifting in the ocean aimlessly at night, Kesair tries to sleep to keep her strength. However, it is the very night that she comes to sense the trans-corporeality⁴ of the ocean around her and gets in contact with the body of nonhuman water: “The pressure on her eyelids eased; she opened them. She was aware of a presence, unseen but palpable, beside her... Something else was with Kesair in the night” (p. 18). The next day, Kesair and the group discover an island to settle and women start throwing their rubbish into the sea, showing the ignorant attitude of human beings towards nature. Yet, Kesair feels uneasy about it and “orders them to put it on the fire instead” for she feels responsibility towards water as an extension of nature and protects it (p. 23). As the group creates a routine of life among themselves and the women are made partners of three men, Kesair finds peace whenever she is near water, whether it is sea, river or lake because she likes listening to the voice of the water and asking for answers to the group’s problems. Her partner, Fintan, is quite curious about her fondness of the sea and offers to move inwards on the island and leave the seaside. Her answer is rather obvious: “I can leave the sea,” she told him, adding cryptically, “as long as I stay near water” (p. 43). At this point, the interconnection of human beings and nonhuman beings is emphasized despite the anthropocentric philosophy that human beings dominate nature and are therefore not affected by it. As new materialist thought reflects, “regardless of how great the difference between the human self and the material agency may be, the world comes to be constituted by multiple intra-actions of this “differential becoming” (Iovino and Oppermann,

2012, p. 84). Nature is not only in intra-action with people, but it also protects those who are fond of it. To illustrate, when one of the men in the group, Ladra, chases Kesair to rape her in a cave, she is saved thanks to the shell she has been carrying on her bosom as it cuts through Ladra's hand and poisons him. It is a "small spiral shell" Kesair has collected from the sea, her best companion (p. 49). At this point, the intra-action of the small shell with Kesair and Ladra leaves a different kind of influence on both based on their actions, spiritual purity and intentions. At the end of the "Water" part, Fintan and Kesair talk about nature and especially water. Nevertheless, Fintan cannot comprehend his partner's strange relation to it. Then, Kesair explains the nature of their connection: "I don't talk *to* water. What could I possibly say of any importance to a force much greater than myself? I merely listen. I am quiet, and I listen" (p. 75, *emphasis original*). She has already turned out to be a part of nature and water as she hears millions of voices in it, the reminiscence of past civilizations and the force of life as well. Thus, the term intra-action quite corresponds to Kesair's connection to water, its agential quality and influence on her:

The world *is* intra-activity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. That is, it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter-in both senses of the word. (Barad, 2003, p. 817)

In the end, Kesair succeeds in making a difference to human beings, beginning with her local group on the island. Her partner, Fintan, eventually grows more conscious and perceptive towards nature and signals a hopeful nature both for human beings and nature in the future when he confesses to Kesair: "I hear the sea" (p. 76).

Fire

Following the element of water, the "Fire" part underlines the significance of the continual power of fire with the declaration at the beginning: "Fire is. Fire was. Fire will be" (p. 77). It depicts the Minoan land as a country surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea, mountains and islands, in other words, embedded within nature and natural forces.

The protagonist of the part, the court musician Meriones, has personal sympathy for fire and the sun and expresses his sympathy towards them openly. "Meriones enjoyed staring at the bright tongues of flame, children of the sun. His grandmother, who remembered the Islands of Mist as being always cold, had taught him an appreciation of fire" (p. 91). Similarly, he is drawn to nature and understands the language of the people abducted from the Islands of Mist. These

people, including Ebisha and her grandfather, are in close relation to nature and as Ebisha tells him, they can control it through their innate fondness for it. The old man is a priest and said to predict the earthquake. Later, Ebisha also talks about the old man's intra-active capability and the agency of the natural elements through his particular relation to the element of fire, which brings attention to the relation between humans and the nonhuman. Referring to new materialism along with ecocriticism, the supreme importance of nature for humans and their necessary connectedness in the natural flow of life is a crucial point to call forth in the analysis of this part. At this point, referring to the words of an ecofeminist author, Andrea Campbell, would be relevant. Quoting Native American poet Paula Gunn Allen, a similarity between the way of living in Native America and that of the Islands of Mist in the novel can clearly be drawn:

To them and in the Native American worldview "the earth *is* being, as all creatures are also being: aware, palpable, intelligent, alive". Nature is neither exalted nor degraded. Nature is neither romanticized nor demonized. Instead nature is given agency and recognized as a partner in a contact or pact with humanity. (2008, p. 9)

As Meriones observes the extravagant and vicious attitude of the Minoan people to nature and human beings who are interconnected with nature, he develops sensitivity to fire as a part of nature. At the end of the "Fire" part, he predicts the cause of the natural disaster, the volcanic eruption that destroys the Minoan land, and makes intuitive remarks about the collapse of his society: "Meriones carried his thoughts a step further. 'Tereus stole Ebisha and the others from the Islands of Mist. They were free people but he made them slaves. There has been too much stealing. We've made the gods angry that's why this disaster has befallen us'" (p. 160). He realizes the way the anthropocentric system of slavery functions in his community and regards it as the cause of the impending natural disaster. As most, if not all, destructive human practices originate from European humanism that builds a rift between self/other, men/women, white/people of colour, or culture/nature (Braidotti, 2013, p. 15), which results in racism, slavery, sexism and natural destruction, Meriones is right in his insightful prediction. Once the natural powers are unleashed in Thera, the Mediterranean Sea, as the continuation of the Aegean Sea and Ionian Sea, roars, mountains shake, and the earth vibrates. Geysers gush out and "with one final gigantic blast, the world exploded" (p. 142). The part where the giant wall of water swallows the deck along with the ships is quite significant for it shows how inconsequential and vulnerable human inventions and technology are in the face of natural disaster.

Finally, Meriones eventually comes to communicate with fire as someone who has always felt attached to it. He is also familiar to Ebisha's grandfather as the old man was deeply united with the element of fire: "Suddenly he *knew*, beyond thought, beyond question, what elemental power had been unleashed when Thera exploded. In the flames he saw, for one heart-stopping instant, the face of the old priest who was Ebisha's grandsire" (p. 162). Likewise, the four elements of nature and anything related to nature create an eco-centred perspective for the study of the "Fire" part. While Ebisha tells Meriones about their way of life and the old priest's natural side, she mentions the elementals: "'Priest use ... what is. Earth, fire, water, stone. They know how to use. They ... shape. Make happen by shaping. My grandsire'"—she nodded toward the old man—"he makes happen"' (p. 104). Especially in the description of the element of fire, the traces of past civilizations and faces are stated, including that of Kesair, and her way of life: "'Water is one of the immortals. Among my people are some to whom the water speaks. They can find it hidden far beneath the earth. They hear the voice of unknown springs and show others where to dig their wells. The water calls to them, and they listen' (p. 152). Hence, the "Fire" part ends with a reminder of the close relation of people to the elements of nature and other people recalling the new materialist theory once more.

Earth

The third part of the novel, the "Earth", or the "Rock", recites the story of the protagonist, Annie Murphy, who accidentally comes into contact with the earth and realizes at one point that she cannot possibly undermine her innate connection to nature and the natural elements. As her life cycle irrevocably changes, her condition proves human beings are indeed a permanent part of intra-active phenomena along with the elements of nature as well as culture. The messages she gets from the earth alter her perception of the world irrevocably. Within this perspective, all matter is significant in the universe, with which every human and nonhuman body is constantly in contact. Whether animate or inanimate, all matter is living and has an agential quality.

Annie comes from an Irish family and has distinct qualities that make her attractive to the men in New Hampshire of the 19th century: "She had peculiar eyes for a descendant of Irish immigrants, almost almond in shape, dark, exotic" (p. 166). She is married to Liam, a farmer, and has two children. Her life is quite normal until she takes courage to see the boulder on Pine Hill for herself, which most locals avoid. She mocks the rock and disregards its abilities. Then, she slaps the rock and to her surprise, the rock hits her back at that moment: "... A wave of force hit her like an invisible wind, and she found herself hurled through the air to fall heavily into a clump of sumac some yards from the boulder" (p. 179). The incident proves the living

quality and agency of the rock as it slaps Annie back as a reaction, which clearly erases the boundaries between human and nonhuman entities. In other words:

[t]he idea of the interplay of physical substances (whether natural or human-made) and biological bodies shed light on the unpredictability of causal lines, and on the impossibility of delineating a clear-cut boundary between life-forms and other material entities: even what is not recognizable as “alive” acts and has effects. (Iovino, 2012, p. 139)

The rock on Pine Hill is infamous for having witnessed the murder of the stone worshippers, or nature-friendly people, by white people: “It was not merely a focus of superstition. A real and bloody history was attached to it” (p. 182). Unable to ignore her instincts, Annie decides to visit the rock again and sees Daniel Foster there, the local weatherman, who makes forecasts for the townspeople. She touches the rock once more and the life she has known changes irreversibly. Her body is incorporated into the rock, and she becomes “Annie/boulder” and feels whatever it has witnessed and felt through the centuries: the extent of human violence, wars and natural degradation. The rock holds onto her so deeply that it “... wanted to keep her, incorporate her heat and light into its cold self” (p. 203). Annie and the boulder are now one and permeable. At this point, “[n]ature and the body are no longer static or in opposition to culture, but are instead represented as dynamic and conscious” (Campbell, 2008, p. 12). Annie eventually dispatches herself from the rock and tries to go back to her normal life. Yet, Daniel Foster is unable to make predictions about the weather anymore because Annie has stolen the gift from the rock. Thus, Annie becomes the new weather person in the town for a long while and helps her husband prosper at farming, which recalls ancient Celtic spirituality and the connection to the element of air: “[m]eteorological patterns and phenomena, particularly wind, rain and thunder, were acknowledged as inspirited and propitiated” (Mulvihill, 2020). However, this gift is taken from her as well, and she is obliged to pay a visit to the rock for a third time. It is then that she touches the rock and feels a giant force flowing through her. She returns home but her family are scared of her as her appearance has changed and her hair has turned grey with the heavy burden of the rock, the flow of knowledge over the centuries. When she looks at herself in the mirror, she sees faces from the past: Kesair, Meriones, herself and several more:

She saw, for one clear moment, a large tawny woman holding a seashell against a misty green background... She saw a slim bronzed man with an abnormally small waist and almond-shaped, tilted eyes... The people she was glimpsing as they were swept along by the river of time were her people. (p. 230)

Thus, Annie Murphy discovers her intra-connection with natural forces just like her ancestors did and comes to realize the agential power of nature. The “Earth” part similarly ends by building a relation with the protagonists of the previous two parts.

Air

The last part of *The Elementals*, “Air” depicts an apocalyptic world which has been misused, degraded and devastated by human beings. Reflecting the Anthropocene, the human age, this part clearly pictures the negative impact of humankind on the Earth through the nightmarish scenes from an anthropogenic world. Based on a futuristic setting, the story focuses upon George Clement Burningfeather, who encounters people that are in connection with nature and joins forces with them to survive in a collapsing world.

George is mixed-race as his mother is Irish with African origins. As an “Amerindian” person, George feels different in society and becomes an astrologist (236). Yet, it turns out he is the one to save the world due to his racial origins. The ozone layer is fractured and people are perishing with skin diseases. Looking for shelter to get protection from the destructive sun rays, George is lured into a reservation comprised of half-native people like himself. Like other people in the tribe, he is called to the tribe spiritually for saving the planet by an Amerindian-origin old man, Cloud-Being-Born, who is “a hundred and seven” years old (p. 247). It is quite interesting that “pure-blood” (white) nations have been destroyed by disease whereas half-native people have survived the grave situation, probably due to their innate connection to natural forces and their dark skin colour. George remarks to the ones in the tribe explaining the situation that “... aboriginal people like the American Indians and the Maoris in New Zealand appeared to have the highest survival rate overall, but we don’t know why. Could be genetic, could be pure accident...” (p. 243). Then again, George estimates that the cutting down of the trees, pollution and chemicals were a human-made contribution to the natural disasters. In the case of degrading nature, human beings tried to shape nature into a harmonious, harmless and compliant being for themselves in the beginning. However, once natural disaster occurred their first reaction was to escape from destructive nature like most people did. Until it threatens human life itself, humans do not realize or prefer to remain “complacent” (Doan, 2014, p. 642) to the critical state of the nature. With this, Caitriona Sandilands’s discussion of the situation seems relevant:

[t]he narrative is also a domestic morality tale of an unpredictable and threatening mutant nature in crisis that must be prohibited from entering the sacred home until

it is appropriately purified. The earth, remember, must be saved for *human* children; nobody cares about the rest until it becomes a human health problem. (1999, p. xiii)

Once the climate problem turns into a health crisis, humankind takes the matter seriously and starts actually doing something about it as George and his group do.

When the world reaches to the point of perishing, Cloud-Being-Born decides to make the “Ghost Dance” to summon the spirits of the Indians both living and dead (p. 258). This is how he reached George, Kate and the others like them in the first place. Kate sings a song and the tribe people use their spirits to save the world, dancing and joining their powers together during the ritual. As the days pass, George feels that he belongs to the group because he likes Kate and shows respect to the Indian chief, Cloud-Being-Born. The old man plans to perform the Healing Dance next as he puts it: “Today we need to make medicine to the sky...” (p. 288). He invites George, Kate, Harry and the others to join in the chanting, to which they instantly and instinctively respond since it is their ancestor calling. The shamanistic ritual once again calls forth the ancient Celtic traditions that heavily rely on the magic, chanting, spiritual awareness and shamanic rituals of the druids to connect with nature. In regards to these rituals, “there are no distinctions made between the transcendent and the immanent in their potential for holding divine wonders. These tales clearly suggest a shamanistic worldview, with no separation between the physical and the metaphysical aspects of life” (Fields, 2004, p. 3). Nevertheless, the old man puts so much of his power into chanting that he eventually dies but achieves a healing of the sky with the collaborated efforts of the mixed-race survivors. In continuation with the previous three parts, “Air” concludes by sowing hope for a better future for humankind and nature with the devotion and sacrifice of the Irish-origin native people to save the world.

Conclusion

In brief, Morgan Llywelyn’s *The Elementals* allures human beings to discover the importance of nature in their lives and the mutual influence going on in the flow of life. The elements of nature that are embedded within human lives are crucial for the survival and continuation of life on Earth. Describing Irish people as the representatives and companions of nature in the novel, Llywelyn reflects upon the deep connection between humans and nature from an ancient Celtic perspective that is laden with spirituality, intuition and love for nature. Beginning with the element of water and ending with the air, the novel exhibits how these Irish characters occupy important roles in terms of raising consciousness about nature and protecting it.

Therefore, *The Elementals* is a prosperous novel in terms of presenting natural forces along with the agency of nonhuman entities and their intra-action with the human representatives of nature.

Endnotes:

¹ The material turn has encouraged theoretical and scientific debates about the nature of the relationship of humans to the nonhuman, which brings about mind-altering new perspectives, such as the new materialism and the Anthropocene.

² A famous theoretician of quantum physics and “agential realism”, Karen Barad coins “intra-action” to depict the inner or inward connection and constant interaction of humans with everything else in the universe including the germs and bacteria in their bodies (2003, p. 817). To this purpose, she replaces the word “interaction” for it seems to fall short to describe the bodily relations both inside and outside with countless other human and nonhuman beings in the phenomena of life.

³ Agency is the ability to enact and influence, which is originally attributed as a human quality based on the principles of traditional humanism. With the works of Enlightenment thinkers like Descartes and Kant among others, certain human qualities such as “progress, peace, internationalism, [and] purposive human agency” are set and standardized in the humanist discourse and human agency is the key element for scientific advancement (Halliday, 1999, pp. 106-109). In other words, agency, as accompanied by reason, is the most significant indicator of human superiority over nature and animals in traditional humanist thought.

⁴ Another popular environmental humanities scholar, Stacy Alaimo terms “trans-corporeality” as the state in which “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” and displays “the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” (2010, p. 2).

⁵ Matter is the core of all animate and inanimate beings in the universe at a cellular level or in even smaller forms. According to Jane Bennett, a well-known American philosopher and professor, matter is alive and “vibrant” (2010, p. 13) which might be explicated with its agency, the power to make a change in another being or thing. Different from what traditional humanism dictates, matter is living and intra-active, which means animals, plants, rocks, waste or the bones of dead animals and humans are always in a constant cycle of transformation themselves while simultaneously causing a change in other human, nonhuman, animate or inanimate beings. In Bennett’s words, matter cannot be considered “as passive stuff, as raw, brute or inert” anymore, as there is an urgent need for a mindset change that recognises “the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations, such as the way omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods or the way our trash is not ‘away’ in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak” (2010, p. vii).

⁶ The Anthropocene, or the human age, is the current geological epoch that is thought to follow the Holocene, which started about 11,700 years ago (Schwägerl, 2014, p. 9). Also the name for the theoretical scientific and environmental studies, the Anthropocene displays the dramatic human impact on Earth for centuries, especially after the Industrial Revolution, which manifests itself as climate change, air pollution, depletion of water resources, overpopulation, extinction of animal and plant species among countless other negative outcomes.

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Kübra Baysal

Ankara Yildirim Beyazıt University

School of Foreign Languages

Ayvalı- Gazze Cad., Keçiören

Ankara/ TURKEY

kbaysal@ybu.edu.tr