

# THE ANIMAL TEACHER IN DANIEL QUINN'S *ISHMAEL*

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## **KEYWORDS**

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## **PALABRAS CLAVES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article aims at offering an analysis of the animal protagonist of *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and the Spirit* (1992) by American author Daniel Quinn as well as his environmental lesson. This book tells the story of the relationship between a human and an animal teacher, the telepathic gorilla Ishmael. Throughout their conversations some of the reasons behind the environmental crisis are discussed and the need for a shift in the Western paradigm is defended. Special attention is given throughout this article to the gorilla's acquisition of personhood, his Socratic method, his thorough lesson on animal and human captivity, and the timeless quality of a fable that continues resonating with many of the global attempts towards a more sustainable world.

## **RESUMEN**

Este artículo pretende ofrecer un análisis del animal protagonista en *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and the Spirit* (1992) del autor norteamericano Daniel Quinn, así como de su lección ambiental. Este libro cuenta la historia de la relación entre un humano y su maestro, el gorila telepático Ishmael. A través de sus conversaciones se discuten algunas de las razones de la crisis ambiental y se defiende la necesidad de un cambio en el paradigma occidental. En este artículo se le presta especial atención a la adquisición por parte del gorila del estatus de persona, a su método socrático, a su lección sobre la cautividad animal y humana, y a la cualidad atemporal de una fábula que continúa evocando los numerosos intentos globales por conseguir un mundo más sostenible.

## INTRODUCTION

The book *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and the Spirit* (1992) by American writer Daniel Quinn tells the story of an unusual encounter between a human and a gorilla named Ishmael, who becomes his teacher. Throughout their conversations the reasons behind some of the environmental threats of the end of the twentieth century (overpopulation, food scarcity, species extinction...) are discussed and the need for a shift in the Western paradigm is defended.

The gorilla's message not only granted Daniel Quinn the prestigious Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, an award given to literary works offering solutions and inspiration for the coming future, but also created a legion of followers or *ishmaelists* who launched their own online communities to contribute to the enactment of Ishmael's vision:<sup>1</sup> a substitution of civilization by the practice of the principles of sustainable communities. This vision is revealed by Quinn in *Providence: The Story of a Fifty-Year Vision Quest* (1994) and it is referred to as the "New Tribal Revolution" in *Ishmael's* sequel *My Ishmael* (1997) (218). Furthermore, *Ishmael* has also been highly praised by the educational community both in high-school and college levels. This is well documented in *The Ishmael Companion* (1995), in which several teachers comment on the ways in which *Ishmael* has proved to be an engaging teaching tool. Such attention has also derived in more than five hundred scholarly articles where *Ishmael* is cited.

The narrator of the story is a man who responds to an ad he finds in a newspaper. This ad reads: "TEACHER seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person" (*Ishmael* 4). Intrigued by the idealism behind the ad, he decides to meet with such a teacher and discovers that he is a male gorilla who can communicate telepathically with humans. As an expert in captivity, Ishmael promises his human student to teach him a lesson on how to liberate humans, more specifically Westerners, from the captivity imposed on them by Mother Culture. Historian J. Donald Hughes analyzes this novel as a philosophical dialogue in the manner of Plato where the gorilla takes the place of Socrates (705). Having in mind the literary tradition of the moral animal, this paper will focus

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ishmael.org](http://www.ishmael.org)

on the role of the gorilla as animal teacher as well as on his environmental lesson.

### **THE LITERARY TRADITION OF THE MORAL ANIMAL**

The literary tradition of the moral animal can be traced back to the classical world in works such as Aesop's *Fables* or Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. Western literature abounds with such examples where animals operate as stand-ins for humans. Such recourse to a voice outside the human domain facilitates the expression of criticism against the flaws of human society. It is especially frequent in animal fables and children's tales where often adopts the form of an autobiography where animals reflect on their experiences of human culture. In America this tradition is present in distinct forms according to the many cultural influences affecting it: Native American, European, African, Hispanic, or Asian. Regarding the choice of an ape as philosophical creature, the ape, as shown by Marion C. Copeland and John Sorenson, has been used widely in both Western and Eastern culture as term of comparison with humans. They perform the function of mirror against which humans define themselves since, as noticed by Giorgio Agamben when speaking of the anthropogenesis and the taxonomical classification put forward by Linnaeus, *Homo Sapiens* "is an optical machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape....he must recognize himself in a no-man in order to be human" (26-27).

Ishmael begins his teaching by telling his pupil the story of his life. He was taken from his home in Africa and turned into a captive first in a zoo, later in a menagerie, until he was located in a belvedere thanks to Walter Solokow, his savior. Mr. Solokow, a Jewish man who lost his family in the Nazi Holocaust, saw in the gorilla the suffering of his people and decided to rescue him. Ishmael uses storytelling as his basic technique for making his student understand that the problem with humankind derives from a flawed understanding of what their role in life is. He divides humanity in two kinds of people, the Leavers and the Takers, according to their different narratives of the world. The Leavers, who are identified with indigenous peoples, respect nature's cycles and see themselves as part of a system of interdependency with all living creatures. The

Takers are controlled by consumerism and see themselves as the owners of Earth's resources with the right to use them without control. According to Ishmael, only by changing the way in which the Takers see themselves, turning them from masters into Earth's stewards, can the ecological crisis be stopped.

Quinn updates the genre of the fable in *Ishmael* not only by incorporating an environmental lesson in it, a feature of twentieth-century animal fiction to which Philip Armstrong has already paid attention, but also by featuring not a talking but a telepathic gorilla. This mind to mind form of communication shared by both the human and the nonhuman animal has its advantages because it does not privilege verbal language, the realm of humans. However, *Ishmael* is stereotypical in the sense that it uses an animal to convey a moral lesson, although one that implies beneficial consequences for the nonhuman world. Indeed, at all times the gorilla proves to be wiser than his human student who struggles to understand the wrongs of humans and what is needed in order to save life on Earth.

Ishmael is capable of rational thinking and can be defined as a philosophical animal in the manner of Franz Kafka's ape protagonist Rotpeter who, having lived among humans, decides to share with his readers what he has learned about them. Quinn uses him as a recourse to explain his moral vision which implies a critique of Western human civilization and a defense of more sustainable ways of living. He is more clever than his human student, but were it not for his telepathic powers, he behaves like a gorilla. Actually, the first impression his student receives of him is olfactory: "the place reeked of the circus—no, not the circus, the menagerie: unmistakable but not unpleasant" (*Ishmael* 7). And he is later impressed by the enormity of his size: "He was terrifyingly enormous, a boulder, a sarsen of Stonehenge. His sheer mass was alarming in itself [...]" (*Ishmael* 8).

Daniel Quinn explains in his website that he wanted to raise awareness of the fact that humans, as inhabitants on planet Earth, are not alone. In order to do so, he thought he needed to choose an animal that conveyed an impression of strength, power and authority in line with his role as teacher. He concluded a gorilla evoked these symbolic associations better than any other species. Likewise, a gorilla works also as a useful reminder of human animality given the similarities between the two. And finally, the entire book revolves around the idea of captivity and a captive gorilla served this purpose well.

Two types of captivity are described in *Ishmael*. On the one hand, there is animal captivity represented by Ishmael who was captured in Africa and made into a living attraction. On the other, there is a more subtle form of captivity, humans being captive of a culture. This is illustrated by two stories: the story of the captivity of the German people under the Nazi regime and that of the captivity of a sector of humankind, the Takers, at the hands of Mother Culture. According to Ishmael, “[a] culture is a people enacting a story” (*Ishmael* 41). Both the Takers and the Leavers enact a different story according to their Mother Culture. The Takers can be identified with the so-called civilized peoples of the world and Mother Culture is their system of beliefs that Ishmael deconstructs and criticizes as being too individualistic and materialistic. In the case of the Takers, Mother Culture promotes the development of the capitalist system ruling in many parts of the globe, while in the case of the Leavers, Mother Culture advances a sustainable form of living.

Animal captivity is mainly described in the first of the thirteen parts in which the book is divided. This is the section of the novel that more directly denounces the cruelty involved in keeping wild animals in enclosures with little or no stimuli to substitute for what their lives would have been in the wild. However, its main role is to work not as denunciation, but as term of comparison for the other two kinds of captivity described in the novel. Besides, the book's development depends on the physical limits Ishmael's captivity imposes on the gorilla's relationship with his pupil. Ishmael only enjoys a certain amount of liberty while under the protection of Mr. Solokow and his daughter Rachel. Thanks to that, he is capable of working as a private teacher, but, after his rescuer's death and once the funds to support him are cut down, he is sold to a carnival and later to a circus where he finally dies without his pupil being able to do anything to protect him. His experiences of captivity are what make Ishmael an expert on this subject around which the narration revolves.

Ishmael uses storytelling and question-making as his main teaching methods. These are typical of a Socratic teacher however, in a manner that differs from the Socratic method, as Ian J. Drake has well noted, the gorilla seems to have the answers to all his questions and clearly wants his pupil to arrive at specific conclusions (574). This is a mode of teaching that does not allow for the emphasis on creativity characteristic of modern teaching pedagogies, but suits well the kind of scholastic teaching technique to which Quinn was

possibly exposed to while preparing to become a Trappist monk (Dawei 46).

Ishmael uses the story of his life as starting point of his lesson. He tells his pupil how he was caught as an infant in the forests of equatorial West Africa in the 1930s. He was then sold to a zoo in some small northeastern city where he lived and grew for several years. This is a period in which his “interior life,” as he calls it, is prompted by his questioning of the lives of animals in captivity. He finds this unfair to the animals and against their nature. He explains how their incomprehension leads them into a state of lethargy close to death:

In such places (he went on at last), where animals are simply penned up, they are always more thoughtful than their cousins in the wild. This is because even the dimmest of them cannot help but sense that something is very wrong with this style of living. When I say that they are more thoughtful, I don't mean to imply that they acquire powers of ratiocination. But the tiger you see madly pacing its cage is nevertheless preoccupied with something that a human would certainly recognize as a thought. And this thought is a question: *Why?* “Why, why, why, why, why, why?” the tiger asks itself hour after hour, day after day, year after year, as it treads its endless path behind the bars of its cage. (*Ishmael* 11; emphasis in original)

Ishmael also begins to ponder the same question the tiger asks but, instead of falling into depression like this animal who symbolizes the rest of caged beasts, Ishmael is saved by his intellectual superiority. He describes himself as “[b]eing neurologically far in advance of the tiger” (*Ishmael* 11). The gorilla's powers of ratiocination turns him into a kind of philosopher. It is also here in his questioning of the cause of his captivity that Ishmael initiates a progression into personhood. This is made possible by his being discovered by his savior Walter Solokow. The Jewish merchant becomes Ishmael's creator by, firstly, singling him out with his gaze and, secondly, renaming him as Ishmael. This process is interesting for a number of reasons. It is characterized by its biblical undertones, it shows the power the act of looking acquires in the creation of the *other*, and it also demonstrates the power of naming, of the word, to redefine him.

## **BECOMING PERSON**

Ishmael becomes aware for the first time of his individuality while being in the menagerie. It is here where he gains a sense of self for the first time thanks to the acquisition of a name, Goliath, the one the human visitors read on the sign placed on his wagon:

The wagon to the right of mine was occupied by a female chimpanzee with an infant, and I had already observed that visitors spoke to her in the same way they spoke to me. Now I noticed that visitors employed a different recurrent sound to attract her attention. At her wagon, visitors called out, "Zsa-Zsa! Zsa-Zsa! Zsa-Zsa!" At my wagon, they called out, "Goliath! Goliath! Goliath!"

By small steps such as these, I soon understood that these sounds in some mysterious way attached directly to the two of us *as individuals*. You, who have had a name from birth and who probably think that even a pet dog is aware of having a name (which is untrue), cannot imagine what a revolution in perception the acquisition of a name produced in me. It would be no exaggeration to say that I was truly born in that moment—born as a person. (*Ishmael* 14; emphasis in original)

Naming brings about an epiphany for Ishmael who suddenly realizes that he is being singled out as a person. Interestingly, Quinn does not acknowledge here the fact that naming can also be seen as an act of oppression in the hands of patriarchy and logocentrism, a topic to which Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "She Unnames Them" attests when describing how Eve, overriding Adam and God's wishes, decides to liberate animals from their names. However, in *Ishmael* naming is meaningful for three reasons. Firstly, a relationship can be established between the act of naming and *Genesis*, to which there are constant references throughout the book. Secondly, since gorillas are often the object of scientific observation, it might prove fruitful to consider the role naming has had in the sciences as an act of animal empowerment. And thirdly, some consideration should be given to the meaning that Ishmael's acquisition of personhood through being named has in the book and how this facilitates his believability as character.

As Jacques Derrida explains in his interpretation of the act of naming in *Genesis*, it is in its second version where man alone, before the creation of woman, proceeds to name the animals "under the gaze" of God (385). In the reference quoted above, the gorilla Ishmael has been capriciously named Goliath by the people working at the menagerie. Curiously, Goliath was the name of the giant that

wanted to finish with the people of David, the Jewish people. This is why, as explained in the novel, the Nazis chose to identify themselves with the image of a ferocious gorilla during World War Two. However, Mr. Solokow, Ishmael's savior, rejects such association when he discovers the gorilla at the menagerie and proclaims "You are *not* Goliath" (*Ishmael* 16; emphasis in original). Mr. Solokow, like the gorilla, knows what is like to be a victim at the hands of human callousness. He lost his family in the Holocaust and now wants to soothe his pain by rescuing this gorilla. Solokow is also who decides on the gorilla's new name. He chooses the name "Ishmael,"<sup>2</sup> a telling decision since Ishmael was one of the sons of Abraham and a great leader to his people. This change of names provokes a second and more definitive change in the animal for he becomes, as he declares, "whole as a person" for the first time (*Ishmael* 18). This is so because he identifies with the identity associated with the name Ishmael much better than with that of the terrible Goliath of the Nazi propaganda poster.

These episodes serve to emphasize how naming is always an act of creation in the Western imagination, although it works differently on the carrier depending on the references that guide its performer. Those who do not care for the animal behind bars, who use him as a commodity, apply to him the name that can result in a higher profit. They do not connect with the animal, but simply have a utilitarian vision of him. It is true that ultimately they make the gorilla aware of his individuality by calling on him by the name Goliath, but they do not manage to understand his true identity. However, Mr. Solokow represents another side of humanity, that which commiserates with the captive animal. He is a former victim and is capable of a sympathy for the animal that turns him into the discoverer of the gorilla's identity as a person.

Furthermore, considering the effects that naming has had in the sciences may bring some light into the analysis of the animal character. Naming can empower the animal and change how it is seen by the researcher. During the first half of the twentieth century, most scientists defended that numbering their subjects of study, instead of naming them, secured the objectivity of their research

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<sup>2</sup> Besides its biblical associations, Quinn's choice of the name Ishmael might also be understood as an homage to a masterpiece of American literature, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which opens with the words "Call me Ishmael" and revolves also around another imposing animal, a whale.



since the researcher found it harder to humanize the animal. Notably, in primatology, the transition from numbering to naming triggered a radical change. As recalled by Marc Bekoff, Jane Goodall was the first scientist to insist on naming the chimpanzees she was studying (289). She even had the publication of a paper rejected for referring to animals by their given names and for using the pronouns “he” or “she” instead of “it” to refer to them. Goodall insisted on individualizing the animals and bonding with them and this brought about an ontological change to primatology. The animal was no longer the anonymous subject of a study, it was not a number, it became an individual. Thus naming can be regarded as a liberatory force because it sets out the animal’s biography and also releases it from the otherization of not being named. In this sense, as Lynda Birke explains in her study of the consequences of nonnaming for rats and mice used in laboratory experimentation, nonnaming causes a double otherization of the lab animal who is already otherized from the rest of the animals—it is not pet, not wild, not vermin. This second otherization implies that the lab animal is refused the possibility of belonging to the category of the namable animals, those like pets who normally share the privilege of a moral status among humans (Birke 207).

At the beginning of Quinn’s book, the gorilla is named twice and both times the act of naming is described as a liberation. The first time this liberation consists in becoming an individual, more specifically a person, the second time it means being liberated from oblivion and from a name that did not match the true identity of the gorilla: that is when he is finally made whole as a person. This realization of personhood facilitates the believability of the animal character as agent. According to Daniel Dennet, the condition of “personhood derives first from three mutually interdependent characteristics: being rational, being intentional and being perceived as rational and intentional” (178). Dennet’s argument exemplifies the similarity approach upon which mainstream animal ethics is proposed. This involves granting moral status on the basis of what is similar between human and nonhuman animals. David Scholsberg criticizes this position and defends recognition not “on extending what is purely human to [...] nature” but on “[recognizing] what is natural and not necessarily unique to humans” (136; emphasis in original). In *Ishmael*, Quinn seems to be too much caught in the standards of moral recognition that are at the core of positions such as those defended by Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer in *The Great*

*Ape Project*: the animal's rationality and self-awareness play a key role in the development of the novel. In line with this, in *Ishmael* the gorilla's acquisition of personhood follows quite closely this threefold pattern and is mainly sustained in the act of looking, touching, and speaking—although telepathically.

Ishmael is a thinking gorilla, a characteristic to which Ted Toadvine has paid special attention at the beginning of his article on this novel (39-40). From the onset of the narration he is described as an observant creature who reaches his own conclusions from his study of the surrounding world. This is so, first in the zoo and second in the menagerie. Actually, it is because of questioning himself about the reasons for his captivity, for the way in which he and other animals are kept as well as the way in which they are observed and spoken to by people that Ishmael starts having an interior life: "It was in puzzling out such small matters as these that my interior life began—quite unnoticed" (*Ishmael* 12). But his personhood is not exclusively sustained by his ability to think. The power of looking, of recognizing oneself in the eyes of the *other* also has remarkable value in the context of the book. In fact, the reader becomes aware of this from the description of the first meeting between the pupil and his teacher that Ishmael's student gives: "I could look at nothing else in the world but his face, more hideous than any other in the animal kingdom because of its similarity to our own, yet in its way more noble than any Greek ideal of perfection" (*Ishmael* 8). And as it can be seen, in this act of looking the human recognises himself in the face of the gorilla. This makes him feel uncomfortable because it reminds him of his own animality which he rejects because it is characterized as evil, savage, without restraint or control.<sup>3</sup> However, little by little, the human, in a manner similar to that of Derrida who felt interrogated by the gaze of his cat, finds meaning in the eyes of the gorilla:

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<sup>3</sup> In his essay *About Looking*, John Berger refers to this moment of awareness of the "familiar" that takes place each time the human returns the look of an animal (5). He also comments how this moment of recognition was altered from the nineteenth century onwards due to the separation from the animal brought along by industrialization (Berger 3). Together with this came the apparition of the zoo, a derivation of the royal menageries, which led to an even higher level of marginalization of the animals imprisoned in them and the isolation of humans from the nonhuman animal unable to return their look (Berger 28).

“For no conscious reason, I lifted my eyes to those of my beastly companion in the next room. As everyone knows, eyes *speak*. A pair of strangers can effortlessly reveal their mutual interest and attraction in a single glance. *His* eyes spoke, and I understood” (*Ishmael* 10; emphasis in original).

A similar process, but of a reverse nature because this time it is the man who provokes recognition, happens when Mr. Solokow finds *Ishmael* in the menagerie:

Perhaps three or four years passed. Then one rainy day, when the lot was deserted, I received a peculiar visitor: a lone man, who looked to be ancient and shriveled to me, but who I later learned was only in his early forties. Even his approach was distinctive. He stood at the entrance to the menagerie, glanced methodically at each wagon in turn, and then headed straight for mine. He paused at the rope slung some five feet away, planted the tip of his walking stick in the mud just ahead of his shoes, and peered intently in my eyes. I have never been disconcerted by a human gaze, so I placidly returned his stare. I sat and he stood for several minutes without moving. I remember feeling an unusual admiration for this man, so stoically enduring the drizzle that was streaming down his face and soaking his clothes. (*Ishmael* 16)

As it can be noticed, the act of gazing at each other in the eyes becomes a point of encounter, of recognition, and this recognition by the *other* of someone's existence as a conscious being is essential for the existence of personhood. In this respect, psychologist Robert W. Mitchell, in his advocacy of the attribution of personhood to great apes, explains that: “On one persuasive view of what is to be a person, that I am a person requires, at some point in the development of personhood, that I recognize that you recognize that I have consciousness” (238).

Touching also becomes a fundamental step in the process of recognition of personhood. Once *Ishmael* is settled down in his new location, thanks to Mr. Solokow who has bought him, *Ishmael* responds to his carer by touching his hand. This frightens his new carer but he finally understands that he is dealing with an empathic creature:

After an hour or so, Mr. Solokow sent him away [the handler], and we gazed at each other in a long silence as we had already done twice before. Finally—reluctantly, as if surmounting

some daunting interior barrier—he began to speak to me, not in the jocular way of the visitors to the menagerie but rather as one speaks to the wind or the waves crashing on the beach, uttering that which must be said but which must not be heard by anyone. As he poured out his sorrows and self-recriminations, he gradually forgot the need for caution. By the time an hour had passed, he was propped up against my cage with a hand wrapped around a bar. He was looking at the ground, lost in thought, and I used this opportunity to express my sympathy, reaching out and gently stroking the knuckles of his hand. He leaped back, startled and horrified, but a search of my eyes reassured him that my gesture was as innocent of menace as it seemed. (*Ishmael* 20-1)

After this significant moment of understanding between the gorilla and his savior, there comes the need for normalizing the communication between them. Mr. Solokow tries whatever is at hand to make the gorilla talk but the animal lacks the phonic conditions to do so. Finally, it is the gorilla who finds a way to speak to his guardian, and this is done through telepathy. This marks the beginning of a relationship between the gorilla and his carer where soon the gorilla will outrank his carer in curiosity and knowledge. And it is by virtue of his intellectual evolution that he becomes an expert on captivity and a teacher with the mission to save the world. This evolution allows for the full development of the animal's narrative function in the book. He is depicted as morally superior to humans and as such fulfills his didactic purpose as environmental advocate.

### **ISHMAEL'S ENVIRONMENTAL LESSON**

As was explained in the previous section, animal captivity is used in *Ishmael* as an analogy for the kind of captivity that keeps humans prisoners of a culture. Ishmael learns about this first through the story of Mr. Solokow who lost his family in the Nazi Holocaust. German people fell captive to a culture that defended the primacy of the Aryan culture above other forms of civilization. The Nazi regime made many people defend this ideal of purity with the force of arms provoking the death of millions who did not conform to their standards. The second story, the one around which Ishmael's lesson to his student revolves, is that of humanity being captive at the hands of Mother Culture. This is a story with an ecological message where the negative effects of the expansion of Western

civilization around the world are exposed. In what can be identified as a binary pair which unfortunately strengthens the kind of dualistic thinking at the base of the process of otherization described by many ecofeminist thinkers such as Val Plumwood, Quinn contrasts the so-called civilized peoples—the Takers—with primitive ones—the Leavers. He uses such dualism to his advantage revising and redefining the role of humans on Earth while at the same time stresses the need for human interdependency with the rest of species. Such strategy is useful in the context of the message Quinn wants to convey, but leaves scarce room for seeing reality outside of a black-and-white description that may motivate polarization.

In *Ishmael* the nonhuman animal plays not only the role of animal teacher but also that of spokesperson for the Earth and its creatures. The gorilla acts as a kind of ambassador between the human and the nonhuman world. Such function makes sense in the socio-historical context in which this novel was written. Drake describes it as “reflecting a streak of pessimism from a particular period in American history” where the perils of overpopulation, environmental change and lack of food security led Quinn to write his novel (573). Moreover, *Ishmael* was published in 1992, the same year the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)<sup>4</sup> was held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). One of the results of this conference was the so-called *Agenda 21*, a plan for sustainable development in the twenty-first century that was the result of a process begun in December 1989 (United Nations ). The Earth Summit tackled issues such as the production of substances with toxic components, the need to find alternative sources of energy to replace the use of fossil fuels which were already identified as one of the main factors behind climate change, the use of public transportation systems to reduce vehicle emissions responsible for the pollution of the air, and the scarcity of water.

In *Ishmael* Daniel Quinn writes a manifesto for a more sustainable form of living that he calls New Tribalism. His approach is a form of primitivism which defends a rejection of civilization, as it is known today, and its substitution by forms of inhabiting the Earth where there is respect for the nonhuman *other* as well as a rejection of hierarchical forms of organization among people. In this context of vindication of primitivism, the choice of a gorilla is justified since as Philip Armstrong has shown, the gorilla “has become an icon of the

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<sup>4</sup> This conference is also known as Earth Summit, Rio Summit, or Rio Conference.

environmentalist movement” (200). This has to do as well with the evolution of the term therio-primitivism or the identification between indigenous peoples and the nonhuman animal. During the nineteenth century the rejection of the consequences Darwin’s theories had for the ontological consideration of humans within the category “animal” grew into the animalization of uncivilized peoples and their identification with wild animals. In the twentieth century, however, this process was reversed and, as Armstrong contends, such reversal was epitomized by the figure of the gorilla, more specifically, by that of King Kong (200). This king of the jungle goes from being represented as ferocious beast in Merian C. Cooper’s 1933 version of the film to becoming a symbol of protest against the expansion of mercantilism around the world in John Guillerman’s 1976 remake. In this film the gorilla and his habitat are threatened by the expansion of an oil company and his fall from the World Trade Center towers turns him a victim of capitalist interests. Finally, as Barbara Creed shows, in Peter Jackson’s 2005 remake of the film the story of the gorilla becomes the story of the end of nature—emphasis is put on the fact that the gorilla lived in one of the last virgin spots of Earth—and of human-animal relationships represented by the gorilla’s impossible friendship with her female protector Ann played by Naomi Watts (192). Thanks to this analysis, Ishmael can be interpreted as a dignified inheritor of the King Kong tradition. Moreover, in the case of Quinn’s narrative, the gorilla moves also between the roles of Zen master and prophet. This is proved not only by his stoicism but also by the use he makes of koans and stories.

According to *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, a koan can be defined as “A riddle in the form of a paradox used in Zen Buddhism as an aid to meditation and a means of gaining intuitive knowledge.” In this book there are two koans. The first one is placed at the beginning of the novel and works by setting both the emotional and the philosophical tone of the work. The prospective human student, in his search for answers, has responded to an ad posted by a teacher interested in anyone wanting to save the world. When he enters the room where Ishmael resides he finds a koan that leaves him wondering about its meaning. Together with this he also finds a gorilla. He is disturbed by his presence because he sees the animal as an “animate *illustration* for [the] koan” and pities the prisoner of such an artifact:

Nevertheless, this search, with the thought of written communication in mind, brought to my attention something I've overlooked in the room that lay beyond the glass; it was a sign or poster hanging on the wall behind the gorilla. It read:

WITH MAN GONE,  
WILL THERE  
BE HOPE  
FOR GORILLA

This sign stopped me—or rather, this text stopped me. Words are my profession; I seized this and demanded that they explain themselves, that they cease to be ambiguous. Did they imply that hope for gorillas lay in the extinction of the human race or in its survival? It could be read either way.

It was, of course, a koan—meant to be inexplicable. It disgusted me for that reason, and for another reason: because it appeared that this magnificent creature beyond the glass was being held in captivity for no other reason than to serve as a sort of animate *illustration* for this koan. (*Ishmael* 9; emphasis in original)

This first koan works in connection with the second one appearing at the end of the book:

It wasn't till I got *Ishmael's* poster to the framing shop that I discovered there were messages on both sides. I had it framed so that both can be seen. The message on one side is the one *Ishmael* displayed on the wall of his den:

WITH MAN GONE,  
WILL THERE  
BE HOPE  
FOR GORILLA

The message on the other side reads:

WITH GORILLA GONE,  
WILL THERE  
BE HOPE  
FOR MAN?

(*Ishmael* 262-63)

Thanks to this device the narration comes full circle. Quinn, who aims at narrating the story of human captivity at the hands of Mother Culture, emphasizes how the key to saving the planet lies in humans acknowledging their interdependency with all living beings. These koans work well at showing how the survival of the gorilla—a metonym for the animal kingdom and the human groups respecting the natural cycles—and of man are intimately related. One cannot survive without the other because the disappearance of any of these groups means the disappearance of the other in the long run.

However, it seems that the Takers do not react to the ecological crisis and the drama of endangered species and civilizations. This is so because they have become captives of the materialism of Mother Culture and this has disconnected them from the community of beings. They have been given a story that explains who they are and what they are supposed to be doing in the world and they do not care for whatever or whoever is located outside of those parameters. This is what the gorilla is trying to make his pupil understand.

Fortunately, Ishmael is as good as Mother Culture at using stories. He wants his student to deconstruct the story of humanity as told by Mother Culture because there is still hope for humans if they manage to change the story they are enacting. But first he has to make them understand where the main flaws of humankind come from. In order to teach his pupil that one of the main problems of humans is their anthropocentrism, he tells him the jellyfish story. In this tale Ishmael comes to the conclusion that man is no more no less important than any other living creature, even though Mother Culture insists at placing man at the top of creation. Man is as significant in the order of things as a jellyfish. In this way, Ishmael denounces man's pride to his student and makes him aware of the need for man to become part of the community of life if he does not want to be responsible for a disaster. In order to become part of this community, he needs to respect its laws which can be summarized in one, the law of biodiversity. Curiously this law, as explained by Ishmael, does not only have to do with the diversity of beings but also with the diversity of cultures. Nonhuman animals and indigenous people are necessarily connected since they are the victims of the same socioeconomic system. In this sense, in spite of its use of dualisms, *Ishmael* becomes a suitable work to illustrate the ways in which the world is torn between so-called Leavers' and Takers' forms of life. This is the same as saying that the world is



divided between those who respect the laws of nature, which basically come to respecting biodiversity and not placing oneself above the rest of humanity or living beings, and those contrary to this system. Ishmael paves the way to make his pupil understand that the world and the living creatures that populate it are the result of a long process of evolution where none took the place of the other imposing its own conditions, but followed a few basic rules that secured their survival.

This discourse on Takers and Leavers permits the book to function as a wake-up call on the perils of the ecological catastrophe provoked by industrialization. In this respect, it highlights the overriding paradox of Western culture. That is, the story of human captivity in the hands of Mother Culture and how this makes us victims of our own selfish pride. At the same time, the book underlines the potential for hope that can be apprehended by looking at the ways in which animals and Leavers live. Quinn, to a certain extent, uses and abuses the traditional dualisms that set apart civilization and primitivism, human and animal, but this strategy serves well his purpose to illustrate the flaws and perils of civilization. Thus the therio-primitivist construction of the book is necessarily understood in connection with the idea that in a state of nature humans are as happy as animals. This results in an interesting conclusion in relationship with human animality since it does reconcile us with our animal nature, but unfortunately does so through the romanticized idea of the noble savage. To this effect, Quinn uses the Bwana story where a member of a tribe converses with a civilized man. In this conversation, the "primitive" man laughs at the civilized man's obsession with control. His tribe does not need such certainties to live a happy life, however the Western man is constantly preoccupied, dominated by an illusion of control over his or her life.

In this process of disenchantment with civilization, Ishmael's student also discovers that he is a captive of Mother Culture. The recourse to this figure by Quinn points in the direction of another dualism, that of culture/nature. In *Ishmael* there is a lack of female characters<sup>5</sup> although it is a female construct, Mother Culture, the

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<sup>5</sup> The only women that appear in the text are completely contrary to each other. One is Mrs. Solokow who represents domesticity and is against her husband's wish of keeping the gorilla. The other is Mr. Solokow's daughter, Rachel, who since a very early age forges a close relationship with Ishmael.

dominating figure that submits humans to a story of conquest and domination. Culture is defined as a mother by Ishmael “because culture is inherently a nurturer—the nurturer of human societies and life-styles” (*Ishmael* 148). However, the contrasting term Mother Nature is never used, although the whole book revolves around the idea of an impending end of nature that will mean the end of all forms of life on Earth, humans and gorillas included. That is indeed the message evoked by the combination of the two koans that the student finds on Ishmael’s poster. The first, “WITH MAN GONE, / WILL THERE / BE HOPE / FOR GORILLA,” compelled the gorilla to do something to save man; that is why Ishmael became a teacher. The second, “WITH GORILLA GONE, / WILL THERE / BE HOPE / FOR MAN,” a kind of epitaph for Ishmael, is the gorilla’s last cry for help as Mother Nature’s representative.

## CONCLUSION

As animal spokesperson Ishmael speaks for nature and all those who live according to her rules. Thus the gorilla embodies the conflicts arising from a culture that is based on ideals of mastery and exploitation which has led to what Plumwood calls “the ecological crisis of reason” (4). This is the result of our current “rationalist culture and the associated human/nature dualism characteristic of the west” that has to be substituted with “a new kind of culture” if we want to continue living on this planet (Plumwood 4). This new kind of culture is exemplified in *Ishmael* by the Leavers who live in accordance with “the laws governing life” (*Ishmael* 101), the laws of nature, and recognize that humans are one among the many species that belong to “the community of life” (*Ishmael* 99). The Takers therefore need to move from a narrative, a story, that describes them in terms of exceptionalism, to one where they see themselves responsible for the rest of creatures. They need to become the “pathfinder[s]” for creation (*Ishmael* 243). Interestingly, today this vision may be distilled into the ethical proposal behind the Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 by the United Nations as part of “The 2030 Agenda for a Sustainable Development.” But, as environmental Bill McKibben defends, besides scientific reports and policy papers, what we need is art to really *know*, “[register] in our guts,” what is happening to our planet (n.pag). Quinn’s *Ishmael* might be a good example of this.

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