What the Gorilla Saw: Environmental Studies and the Novel Ishmael

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The novel *Ishmael*, a late twentieth-century text, demonstrates how fiction can provide philosophical, political, and moral commentary on humanity’s interaction with the environment. Daniel Quinn’s 1992 novel offers an example of discourse on environmental ethics and its utility as a way of engaging college students in the study of environmental issues. *Ishmael* reflected and proposed to address some of the fears of environmental degradation and was the recipient of the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, which was a one-time award providing a $500,000 prize (McDowell).^1^ *Ishmael* was generally favorably reviewed in major print media, including *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* (Clute; Miles 9). I have used this novel in a college capstone course, which utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to researching and writing about contemporary legal issues, including environmental issues. Quinn’s novel will be analyzed from the perspective of its utility as an environmental studies text in an interdisciplinary research course. *Ishmael* is an interdisciplinary approach in fictive form to the problem of food security^2^ and reflects the state of knowledge in environmental studies of the 1990s. *Ishmael* is valuable because of its interdisciplinary nature, use of the Socratic method, and, most importantly, its radical thesis and mode of didacticism. This essay will assess each of these characteristics and summarize the value of *Ishmael* as a text for college-level courses in environmental studies.
Anthropomorphism has been used throughout scientific history, including the post-Enlightenment period, to explain animal behavior. For example, anthropomorphism was widely used by natural scientists in the nineteenth century to explain animal psychology (Mitchell 4). In the nineteenth century, American naturalists like John Audubon and John Muir wrote of animals in anthropomorphic terms. They utilized animals' seemingly intentional behaviors and analogized such behaviors to intentional human behavior, thereby acclimating readers to the device of using animals for social commentary (Bryson 119). This tradition continues to this day. For example, entomologist E. O. Wilson has recently used the novel form for expressly didactic purposes. In Wilson’s novel about ants, *Anthill: A Novel*, he denotes parallels humans and ants regarding genetic dispositions. Animals—in Wilson’s case ants—are more than a literary device; they are didactic archetypes made for humans to emulate. Wilson employs the strategy of instructing readers on the social structures of ants and the depletion of natural resources by human agency through the fictional story of Raff, a young Alabama naturalist who becomes a lawyer in the hopes of protecting wetlands of his home state. Within the novel is a short story about the societies of ants. Wilson, an emeritus professor of entomology at Harvard, draws upon his professional knowledge of ants to illustrate the natural world of southern Alabama and “make the natural world—that contested lot of old-growth forest that’s the center of the novel—of equal importance, almost equal importance as the human protagonist” (Treisman). Such strategic modeling is at the heart of Daniel Quinn’s 1992 novel *Ishmael.*

*Ishmael* is a didactic novel, which utilizes a fantastical plot to instruct readers on environmental change, population pressures, and the possibilities for altering or reforming humans’ relations with the natural world. The novel begins with an unnamed Everyman character reading an advertisement ostensibly placed by a would-be teacher, which states: “Teacher seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world” (Quinn 4). The unnamed male protagonist responds to the ad only to find that the putative teacher is a gorilla with telepathic speech abilities. The gorilla is the title character, Ishmael. The importance of naming the gorilla Ishmael is unclear. Ishmael relates that although he was born in the African wild, he was eventually captured and sent to an American zoo. While in the zoo, Ishmael is visited by an American man whose family died in the Holocaust. Ishmael’s name at the zoo is Goliath, but the American purchases him from the zoo and renames him Ishmael. The Ishmael of the Book of Genesis is the son of Abraham and Hagar, the maid of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. After Ishmael was born, an angel of the Lord visited Hagar and told
her Ishmael’s “hand [will be] against every man, and every man’s hand against him, living his life in defiance of all his kinsmen” (New Jerusalem Bible, Gen. 16:12). Abraham, at the behest of his wife Sarah, later expelled Ishmael and his mother, disinheriting the boy, and sending him to wander in the desert with his mother. While in the desert, the Lord saved Ishmael and told his mother he would “make him into a great nation” (Gen. 21:8–20). Quinn’s use of the name may signify that the gorilla, like the biblical Ishmael, is a castoff, alienated from society. Yet, he is a character from whom much good can come.

The plot of *Ishmael* is sparse, consisting of dialogues between the two characters. Over a course of months, the unnamed protagonist and his simian teacher meet to discuss environmental and political problems faced by the world and Ishmael proposes solutions. Ishmael’s chief concern is world population and its potential effects on the food supply—what is today often popularly referred to as “food security.” Ishmael relates to his pupil a Manichaean conceptualization of the global social world, which sees the human population divided between what Ishmael terms “Takers,” those who use food and other natural resources to the detriment of the planet and all humans, and “Leavers,” those who have a respect for the tenuous balance between population and food supply and thereby live in harmony with nature. Ishmael tells his own history of the world. The Leavers originated in the prehistorical pre-Agricultural Revolution period and were displaced by sedentary agriculture. Ishmael—and by implication the author, Quinn—sees sedentary agriculturalists as destructive and hunter-gathers as innately good (Quinn 41–42, 178). Ishmael tells his interlocutor the story of the fall of humanity as a parallel to the Christian Fall. The original sin of humanity from Ishmael’s perspective was the adoption of sedentary agriculture, which led to a contemporary norm of an “overproduction” of food and a culture that elevates humankind to the apogee of life on Earth (177). Ishmael hypothesizes that the world’s overburdened food network can only be saved through a shift of cultural paradigms. Humans must disabuse themselves of the idea that the world is made for their exploitation. Also, humans must reduce their population growth and decrease food production levels below levels of current consumption (220–27).

The character of Ishmael, a telepathic gorilla, is not truly an anthropomorphized character. Quinn does not present Ishmael as a nonhuman animal; rather Ishmael is a humanized animal. As such, he is more of a symbol than an animal character. His life is not used as an “attempt to shape human language to express the specific life world of another species” (Clark 195). Instead, he is a representative of the natural world who serves to articulate a response to humankind’s presence in the world. As one commentator has noted, the use of a
telepathic gorilla to make these arguments from an obvious “outsider’s” perspective is done for the purpose of critiquing “modern Westernized culture” and its treatment of the environment, including animals (Scholtmeijer 388). Also, Ishmael’s understanding of the threats and potential solutions to increased population and food security is a transnational conceptualization. Ultimately, Ishmael concludes that the human race must abandon the Western view of nature as merely a resource for humankind and return to the ways of hunter-gatherers in order to live in harmony with the world, preserving not only humanity, but also the other forms of life on Earth (Quinn 202, 214, 220). Quinn’s use of Ishmael is an appeal to what Lawrence Buell has termed the “environmental imagination,” where the “limits of habitually foreshortened environmental perception” (18) on the part of the student are challenged by Ishmael’s questions and opinions. Throughout the text, Ishmael is presented as a sedulous and conscientious character, whose concern is not only for the environment but for humanity, too.

Ishmael’s approach is implicitly interdisciplinary, utilizing the insights, theories, and concepts of different disciplinary traditions and fields of study in order to resolve the putative problems of food security and population. Ishmael does not merely articulate how different disciplines see these problems; rather he draws upon the insights of the various disciplines and integrates them to produce a novel solution. For example, Ishmael integrates insights from anthropology, earth sciences, history, and psychology in order to reach the conclusion that humankind has created a myth that it “reenacts” continuously and reifies through repeated behaviors, many of which are subconscious. (The irony of an animal utilizing human sciences is readily apparent.) This subconscious reenactment draws upon the insights of history, cultural anthropology, and psychology not only to substantiate his assessment but also to undergird his proposition of a radical reorientation of humankind’s disposition toward the world. As Michael A. Bryson has noted, the proliferation of scientific disciplines and subdisciplines over the last century has certainly increased human knowledge regarding the environment and the threats to it. Yet, this multiplication of disciplines also has increased the value of an author’s ability to popularize or clearly explain for a general readership how we can understand environmental problems and utilize seemingly obscure scientific insights to create solutions to environmental problems (Bryson 134–35). Ishmael’s interdisciplinary approach is an example, in a fictional form, of drawing upon diverse disciplines—from both the natural and social sciences—in order to achieve such a greater understanding. Yet, what the fictional form allows that popular scientific writing does not is the opportunity for the reader to empathize with fictional
characters as they confront and react to the very real phenomena of the natural world.

When Quinn published his novel in the early 1990s, he was fortunate to ride the cusp of a resurgent national and worldwide environmental movement. What have been “first” and “second waves” of American environmental activism occurred in the Progressive Era and the late 1960s, respectively. During the second wave, a series of powerful federal environmental laws were enacted, including the Clean Air Act (1970), Clean Water Act (1972), and the Endangered Species Act (1973). This legislation produced an organized political response from business and industry interests, which resulted in competition between environmental activists on the political Left and business activists on the Right through the remainder of the century. In 1988, George H. W. Bush was running for election, claiming he would be an “environmental president.” Earth Day, originally held in 1970, was re-inaugurated in 1990, to much media attention and popular fanfare. Additionally, what has been termed the “third wave” of American environmentalism occurred during the early 1990s. Environmental groups switched from demanding “command-and-control” legislation to negotiating with industry interests to achieve pollution reductions and advocating the enactment of market-oriented programs such as the emissions trading permits of the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments. Some environmental activists saw this “third wave” approach as too accommodating of polluters’ interests (Shabecoff 1–9). Subsequent to Ishmael’s publication, the election of Bill Clinton generated a renewed enthusiasm environmental activists for possible federal policies to combat pollution on national and international levels. President Clinton awarded former US Senator Gaylord Nelson the Presidential Medal of Freedom for Nelson’s work in founding Earth Day. Quinn’s radical novel was published during this period of division within the environmental movement and its radical proposal reflected the sense of direness among many activists regarding the future of the movement.

Where does Quinn’s book stand in light of contemporary scholarly opinion regarding population and food security? As noted above, Ishmael was not concerned with environmental degradation per se, but with the burdens the world population appeared to impose upon resources, chiefly staple commodities. This is often referred to as “food security.” Although Ishmael painted a dour picture of the world food security as of its date of publication in 1992, the evidence suggests that the reality of food security was better than portrayed in Quinn’s novel. The United Nations’ Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimated that between 1971 and 1992, the number of undernourished people in the world had declined by 9 percent (Tweeten 475).
number of undernourished people increased since 1992, from 839 million in 1992 to 1.02 billion as of 2009, with the largest percentage increases occurring in the last decade, especially after 2006 and with exacerbation by the world economic crisis that began in late 2008 [Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 8–12]. The close correlation between access and allocation of resources in times of economic crises suggests that population and “overproduction”—the villains of Quinn’s novel—may not be the causes of food insecurity. Although there are scholars who agree with Ishmael and assert that population growth is an important element of food insecurity, many scholars have concluded that food security is primarily a political and economic problem, rather than a population problem (Brown xi; Smil 613–36). Environmental historians have noted that population pressure has “both caused and prevented soil erosion.” In fact, increased populations often provided the “labor to guild and maintain soil conservation schemes” (McNeill 274). Yet, population growth over the course of the twentieth century certainly increased potable water scarcity. As world population increased over the twentieth century, food security was strengthened by virtue of technological innovations, such as industrialized irrigation and dam projects and chemical fertilizers, which increased harvests per acre rather than increasing farmed acres (214). The FAO has urged greater social safety net programs in developing countries and increased investment in agricultural production (FAO 39 et seq.). Other scholars have downplayed population-related concerns, arguing that local food producers in developing nations must be aided by government and foreign aid (Schanbacher). Others have suggested Western nations and the World Bank need to increase and target funds for genetic modification of crops and view food as an element of national security (Falcon and Naylor 1113–37). Also, some scholars have urged reliance upon market mechanisms and a reduction in protectionist tariff policies among developed nations (Tweeten 485–86).

Ishmael may rightly be characterized as reflecting a streak of pessimism from a particular period in American history. The fears of a “population explosion” were very current in the 1970s and 1980s. Writers like Fairfield Osborn, Garrett Hardin, and Paul Ehrlich claimed increased population could not be sustained by the Earth’s agricultural capacity (Shabecoff 5). Ehrlich’s famous best-selling book The Population Bomb predicted mass starvation due to overpopulation (Ehrlich). One academic commentator, writing in the late 1970s, called Ehrlich one of the “delphic [sic] voices” of the postwar “Age of Ecology” (Worster xiii). Although Quinn does not cite Ehrlich by name, he is obviously influenced by him. For example, in Ishmael, the gorilla teacher quotes anthropologist Peter Farb’s paradoxical contention: “Intensification of
production to feed an increased population leads to a still greater increase in population” (Quinn 109). Quinn was echoing one version of the debate regarding humankind’s interaction with the biosphere and articulating one of the period’s more dire predictions about mankind’s fate. Accordingly, if Ishmael was reflective of a particular moment in the debates about population, environmental change, and food security, then what role can it play in the modern pedagogy of environmental studies?

One potential value of the book for scholars and students is the pedagogical style of the gorilla teacher and the potential for using this style for environmental education. The gorilla interlocutor uses a putatively Socratic method in his conversations with his student. Ishmael poses questions and sits awaiting his pupil’s answers. The standard form of the Socratic method has the teacher asking questions to which he or she may not know the answer. The teacher is prohibited from asserting a creed or maxims, and is fulfilling his or her mission when asking questions that allow the students to propose and create the answers (Nelson). Socratic teachers, taking Socrates’ dialogues as their model, do not lecture; they guide students and let them find the way to answers. Judged by this standard, Ishmael’s approach is not strictly Socratic. The gorilla poses questions, awaits answers, and, when the answers are finally forthcoming, Ishmael has specific opinions that he wants his student to know. He has a distinct worldview that he wants his student to adopt. The story of the Takers versus the Leavers has particular premises and Ishmael’s student is ill equipped to dispute them. Ishmael relies upon his student’s sense of justice, which can periodically devolve into an emotional resentment and anger at the state of the larger world. For example, Ishmael wants his student to grasp the point that humankind currently lives according to an erroneous narrative that places humans at the apogee of life on Earth. Instead of asking an open-ended question, Ishmael proceeds to make his point:

[Ishmael] “But you should be able to discover the premise of your own story. . . . Your entire history, with all its marvels and catastrophes, is a working out of this premise.”

[Student] Truthfully, I can’t even imagine what you’re getting at.

[Ishmael] Think. . . . Look, the world wasn’t made for jellyfish was it?
Everyone in your culture knows that, don't they? Even atheists who know there is no god know the world was made for man.

[Student] Yes, I'd say so.

[Ishmael] Alright, that’s the premise of your story: The world was made for man. (Quinn 61)

Clearly, Ishmael is not a disinterested interlocutor, merely providing pointers down a potential path. He has a very specific lesson he wants to impart with particular conclusions, which he wants his student to adopt. Yet, Ishmael’s (and Quinn’s) point is even more obviously didactic when made by the gorilla. The natural world has something to say to humanity, to teach humanity. What better way to do so than through the mouth of a nonhuman teacher?

Underlying the Socratic method of instruction is the premise that students are able to think critically if given the opportunity. Critical thinking is aptly defined as “the ability to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment.” Such thinking allows for analysis and explanation of analyses based on underlying evidence and contexts (Abrami 1102–03). Such a “skill” (if such a pedestrian term is adequate) or approach not only makes for better students but also arguably for better citizens. As one scholar put it, critical thinkers are “habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider . . . and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit” [Facione qtd in Abrami 1103 (quoting Facione)]. As recently as 2008, one group of researchers reviewed 117 studies of critical thinking instruction and concluded that the development of critical thinking skills in students is correlated to the quality and style of teaching (Abrami 1120). Accordingly, teaching styles greatly affect student’s abilities to develop key critical thinking skills.

The adoption of the Socratic method in its true form might be ideal for the critical thinking skills necessary to understand and resolve the problems of environmental education. Ishmael can be instructive regarding how to truly engage students with the Socratic method because it is a model for how not to use the Socratic method. Ishmael presents his lessons in a quasi-Socratic form—a question and answer format—but they lack the key element of the Socratic approach: disinterestedness. Ishmael’s project is very much a guided one. Yet, the effort to guide through the use of the seemingly disinterested method
of Socratic inquiry can be very instructive for students in understanding the potential of the Socratic method.

Additionally, the radicalism of Ishmael’s project has lessons for students of environmental studies. Ishmael views the Takers as bringing all life on Earth to the brink of disaster. His prescription, as noted above, is not merely for humans to idealize and model ourselves after hunter-gatherers, but to literally return to a hunter-gatherer state. Presumably, such an effort will result in reduced population, a ratio of population to food production that is sustainable, and a mode of human living that does not impinge upon the rest of the natural world for human profit. Ishmael, and by extension Quinn, is not alone in proposing this radical reorientation of human modes of living. The New Agrarians, for example, have urged a rejection of industrialism, which, in the words of Wendell Berry, separates “people and places and products from their histories” (Berry 64). Berry, like Quinn, has urged a rejection of the culture of industrialism, with its “thought based on monetary capital and technology,” in favor of agrarianism, with its embrace of a culture centered on humankind’s dependence upon, and somewhat mystical connection to, “the land” (67). Also, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has written about the encouragement to virtue necessitated by household farming. MacIntyre has claimed farming has “fostered virtues of independence, virtues of cooperation in contributing to larger human enterprises and virtues of regard for the relationship of human beings to land that has been entrusted to their care” (237). The solution, according to MacIntyre, is to return to “small-scale” societies, which are “self-sufficient.” Such societies protect their members from the predations of “the state” and “the market”; and the mode of living best suited to such societies is the “family farm,” which is a “small producer” (248–49). Although these visions may be utopian, they are very much like Ishmael’s vision for the world: a return to small-scale production roots.

Like MacIntyre, Quinn’s Ishmael extolls the purported virtues of returning to a mode of living that is largely extinct in modern industrial nation-states. Yet, Ishmael would go much further than a return to small-scale farming communities. He tells his student that he wants to give humankind “a new paradigm of human history. The Leaver life [i.e., hunter-gathering] is not an antiquated thing that is ‘back there’ somewhere” (Quinn 250). Thus, Ishmael (Quinn) admires the hunter-gatherers, but, aside from repeated exhortations to imitate and recreate a literal hunter-gathering societal structure, Ishmael offers no clear alternative to the current industrial nation-state as a means of achieving his goal of having a level of food production that meets current human consumption needs. When his human interlocutor objects that “[w]e can’t
just walk away from our civilization,” Ishmael’s utterly feckless response is to exhort humans to “be inventive” (Quinn 250).

Yet, for teachers, the very radical vision offered by Ishmael (Quinn) allows for a discussion of the plausibility of responses to food insecurity and other environmental problems. Quinn’s choice of dramatic approach allows for a potentially persuasive form of dramatic didacticism. At the least, Ishmael’s strangeness—the telepathic ape and his discourse on environmental problems—stirs debate among students. Students are generally disposed to take these questions seriously, but the unusual form of the novel and Ishmael’s radical answers provoke responses. Is Ishmael’s hunter-gatherer solution plausible? Is it serious? If not, what other, more plausible options are available? Ishmael starts the conversation, proposes its own solutions, and allows environmental educators the opportunity to develop students’ critical thinking skills and search for helpful answers to environmental problems.

Also, Ishmael’s understanding of environmental problems is informed by an implicitly interdisciplinary approach. One of the chief characteristics of interdisciplinary analyses is the ability to create a “new whole” drawn from the insights of different disciplines. Ishmael uses the insights, theories, terms, and concepts of a wide variety of disciplines in order to support his thesis that humankind must return to a level of food production that does not exceed the current world population’s needs. Students in environmental studies courses or interdisciplinary studies courses can profit from this engaging example of interdisciplinary thought. As interdisciplinary theorist Allen Repko has noted, complex problems are especially suited to interdisciplinary analyses because no single disciplinary understanding can fully explain a problem or allow for a workable, useful solution (Repko 151–55). Environmental degradation and food security are complex problems that are amenable to interdisciplinary analyses.

Finally, it should be stipulated that Ishmael and author Daniel Quinn are one and the same. In a note to readers at the end of Ishmael, Quinn says, “Ishmael has always been much more than a book to me. It’s my hope that it will be much more than a book to many of those who read it. . . . Who knows? Perhaps if there are enough of us, we can get something started here. That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?” (263). Also, in one of Quinn’s post-Ishmael nonfiction books, Beyond Civilization: Humanity’s Next Great Adventure, he concedes that in Ishmael, he sought to provide a “new way of understanding” the world’s population and resource problems (Quinn, Beyond Civilization 4). Accordingly, students can benefit from Ishmael’s example of the activist as a fictional character. The strangeness and obvious symbolic use of an ape a representative of the natural world instructing to humankind in an
effort to “save the world” can energize students’ interest. Quinn’s mode of didacticism allows for students to witness creative interdisciplinary thought in the realm of environmental studies.

In conclusion, Daniel Quinn’s *Ishmael* is an example of an effort to use the form of the novel to educate and reorient readers regarding the environment and the possibilities for human-led change. Ishmael’s interdisciplinary approach demonstrates how environmental education can profit from the integration of different scholarly disciplines. *Ishmael* can be profitably used in a college-level course on environmental studies, literature and politics, or a course that seeks to demonstrate how interdisciplinary thought and research are conducted. As John Tallmadge has argued, environmental literature is important for the humanities because it challenges one’s beliefs and ideas about the “proper relations between human beings and nature” and “invites the humanities to consider new methods of inquiry,” highlighting the importance of the text and lived experience of the natural world (4). *Ishmael*’s interdisciplinary approach appeals to Buell’s “environmental imagination” and forces readers to query their suppositions about population, food security, and humankind’s role on the planet.

**Notes**

1. Several Turner Award judges—William Styron, Peter Matthiessen, and Wallace Stegner—noted that although they admired Quinn’s book they did not think it deserved $500,000. William Styron said, “It was the best of the 12 manuscripts we were asked to judge, but we [the judges] didn’t feel it was worth anything remotely like $500,000.” (Ibid.)

2. Food security is a term used by economists, anthropologists, and public health officials regarding the “access” populations have to food. The term does not usually refer to the actual availability of food or its utilization. That is, food may be available, as was the case throughout the twentieth century in most of the world, but a particular population may lack easy and affordable access to food. Food “availability” refers to the production of food. Food “utilization” refers to the quality of foodstuffs, peoples’ consumption practices and habits, societal health conditions, food preparation practices, level of nutrition knowledge, etc. (Tweeten 474–75).

3. *Ishmael* is the first book of a trilogy; however, only *Ishmael* will be considered in this paper. The other titles in the trilogy are *The Story of B: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (New York: Bantam, 1996) and *My Ishmael: A Sequel* (New York: Bantam, 1997).


5. In the early 1990s, around the time of *Ishmael*’s publication, Ehrlich reaffirmed his predictions of global crisis premised upon overpopulation and

6. One enthusiastic supporter of the novel has contended that Socrates saw his interlocutors as adversaries, while Ishmael sees his student as a springboard for a philosophical lesson (Hilgartner 172–73). However, Ishmael certainly sees his interlocutor as an adversary; after all, humans are the problem, as Ishmael understands it. He also sees humans as the source of the answer to the problem. Humans are adversaries that must be converted into allies by changing their minds about humankind’s relationship with the Earth.

**Works Cited**


