

# Environmental Ethics in Tim Winton's *Shallows*

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## Abstract

Tim Winton's debut novel, *Shallows* (1984), winner of the Miles Franklin Award, stands as a seminal work in Australian ecological literature, offering a profound critique of environmental exploitation and human greed. Set in the fictional Western Australian town of Angelus—loosely based on the last operating whaling town of Albany—the novel explores the ethical implications of the brutal whaling industry, set against the backdrop of an emerging conservationist consciousness in the late 1970s. This abstract examines how *Shallows* challenges anthropocentric views, advocating for an ecocentric approach that recognizes the intrinsic value of non-human nature.

The novel portrays Angelus as a community entirely defined by its historic, 150-year tradition of killing whales, where the “shallows” represent both the treacherous physical spaces where whales are driven to shore and the limited, shallow mindset of its inhabitants who commodify nature. Winton portrays the whaling industry as the culmination of materialist greed that ignores ecological health in favor of economic production. The graphic, evocative descriptions of whale butchery serve to disrupt the reader's complacency, highlighting the violation of a majestic species for commercial, often wasteful, purposes.

A central tension in the novel is the conflict between the traditional whalers, who view the ocean solely as a resource, and a small group of environmental activists, the “Greenies”, who represent a shift in environmental ethics. Queenie Cookson, a pivotal character, embodies this shift; she struggles with her own ancestry as a descendant of whalers, choosing to defend the whales against her community and her husband, Cleve Cookson. Queenie's journey highlights a burgeoning ecological consciousness, a “voice of nature” that challenges the “crimes of ancestors” and seeks a post-colonial, post-speciesist reconciliation with the land and sea.

## Introduction

*Shallows* (1984) is Tim Winton's second novel, set in 1978 in the fictional Western Australian whaling town of Angelus, based on Albany. The story centers on Queenie Cookson, a young woman from a long line of whalers who feels tied to the town's past yet morally repelled by its killing of whales.

Angelus has survived for over a century on whaling: the annual return of whales defines the town's rhythms and economy, and the carcasses provide its life-force. When city-based environmental activists (the "Greenies") arrive to protest and shut down the industry, a battle erupts on the beaches, and Queenie is drawn to the campaign, hoping to atone for her whaling ancestors. Her decision to join the outsiders fractures her relationships with family and townspeople, exposing deep divisions between loyalty to tradition and the pressure to change.

As the story unfolds, Winton shifts between Queenie's inner life and the wider community, showing how the whaling conflict exposes guilt, grief, and the weight of colonial and industrial history.

The novel is a powerful meditation on environmental destruction, community identity, and spiritual searching, using the dying whaling town as a symbol of a way of life caught between past violence and uncertain change. Stylistically, *Shallows* is stark and atmospheric, with Winton's intense prose amplifying the sense of emotional and moral turbulence as Queenie—and the town—confront what it means to be "left in the shallows" (SS 33).

The main themes in Tim Winton's *Shallows* cluster around environmental ethics, community and identity, and spiritual searching. A central theme is the moral cost of whaling and humanity's exploitation of

nature. The novel shows how the killing of whales is both an economic lifeline for the town and a source of deep guilt, forcing characters to confront the contradiction between tradition and compassion.

*Shallows* explores how a small, isolated town's identity is bound up with its violent "pastoral" past. When outsiders campaigned to stop whaling, the community fractures, exposing tensions between loyalty to family and the pull of a new moral awareness. Loneliness and inner struggle are shown by several characters, especially Queenie, experience profound loneliness and spiritual unease as they question their place in a world that seems both harsh and arbitrary. The novel traces their psychological strain as they wrestle with duty, guilt, and a desire for something beyond the town's narrow life.

The "shallows" themselves symbolize a dangerous borderline space—where whales die and people are emotionally

and morally "in over their heads". This image reinforces the broader theme that the characters are caught between old ways and new possibilities, never quite able to escape the pull of the past.

*Shallows* is one of Tim Winton's clearest statements of environmental ethics, arguing that humans have a moral duty to treat nature—especially whales and oceans—with reverence rather than exploitation. The novel treats the whaling town of Angelus as a case study in anthropocentric greed, and then pushes toward a more ecocentric view that sees whales and ecosystems as having intrinsic value, not just utility.

From exploitation to responsibility transcends the whaling station in *Shallows* symbolizes a worldview in which nature exists only to serve human needs and community survival. Winton shows how this mindset leads to violence, ecological damage, and spiritual emptiness, implying that continuing such practices is ethically

indefensible once people recognize the whales' suffering and the fragility of the ocean system.

Through characters like Queenie, the novel moves toward an ecocentric ethics: humans are just one part of a web of life, and their choices should protect the whole, not just themselves. Winton also links environmental ethics to spiritual questions, suggesting that treating whales humanely and honoring the sea is a form of moral and even religious maturity, in contrast to the "bloody shallows" of unchecked exploitation.

In short, *Shallows* frames environmental ethics as a question of moral consideration, justice toward non-humans, and cultural change—from a worldview of domination to one of humility and ecological responsibility.

*Shallows* and *Cloudstreet* both show Tim Winton's deep preoccupation with place and environment, but they handle ecological themes in very different ways. In *Shallows*

the environment is central, urgent, and overtly political; in *Cloudstreet* it is more subtle, woven into family life and spiritual connection to land and water.

In *Shallows*, the whaling town of Angelus lives and dies by its exploitation of whales, so the novel is squarely about human-driven environmental destruction. Winton presents the sea and whales as victims, and the activists' campaign as a moral awakening, making ecological concern the engine of the plot and the main ethical conflict.

*Cloudstreet* is set in a working-class Perth house and its surrounding river and suburban landscape, which act as a kind of living, almost spiritual presence. The environment is less about "campaigns" and more about how the house, river, and city shape memory, family identity, and a sense of belonging; ecological awareness here is quieter, more mystical, and tied to everyday Australian life.

Thematically, *Shallows* is Winton's most direct, confrontational environmental novel: it dramatizes exploitation, guilt, and the possibility of change through the whaling controversy. *Cloudstreet*, by contrast, integrates environmental sensibility into a broader human story about family, trauma, and redemption, using landscape as a quiet, shaping force rather than a battleground.

*Shallows* is a powerful reflection of Tim Winton's environmental concerns because it treats whaling not just as an industry but as a moral and ecological crisis. The novel shows how the town's dependence on killing whales exposes the destructive side of human "progress" and uncontrolled resource use, framing the sea and its creatures as vulnerable victims of greed rather than mere commodities.

Winton portrays the whales with a sense of majesty and tragedy, making them central to the novel's emotional and ethical weight. Through Queenie's growing

empathy, he suggests that harming such beings is not just practical but spiritual damage—part of a broader disconnection from nature that he critiques across his work.

The town of Angelus symbolizes how communities can become trapped in harmful patterns, mistaking exploitation for tradition or survival. Winton uses the clash between whalers and environmental activists to question colonial and industrial mindsets that see nature as something to be used up, linking local whaling to wider ecological crises and the need for a more ecocentric worldview.

In short, *Shallows* reflects Winton's deep environmental concern by showing how the fate of whales and the fate of humans are intertwined, and by insisting that ecological responsibility is inseparable from moral and spiritual growth.

At the end of Tim Winton's *Shallows*, the whaling town of Angelus is left in a state of exhausted ambiguity rather than clear victory or closure. The protest campaign

against whaling has exposed the community's moral contradictions and deepened personal fractures, especially for Queenie Cookson, who has chosen to side with the environmentalists.

Queenie does not “solve” the town's dilemma; instead, she walks away from Angelus, symbolically leaving behind the inherited violence of the whaling past. The novel closes with a sense that the town may be on the brink of economic and cultural decline, while the deeper questions about guilt, responsibility, and the human relationship with nature remain unresolved.

In short, *Shallows* ends not with a neat resolution but with a haunting image of characters and landscape “left in the shallows”—caught between an obsolete tradition and an uncertain future.

This study investigates the complex environmental ethics presented in Tim Winton's debut novel, *Shallows* (1984), focusing on the ideological conflict between

industrial exploitation and ecological preservation within an Australian context. Set in the fictionalized coastal town of Angelus in Western Australia, the novel offers a potent critique of anthropocentrism—the viewpoint that humans are the center of the universe and superior to nature—through its depiction of a dying whaling industry. The primary aim of this research is to analyze how Winton presents nature, specifically the ocean and its inhabitants, not merely as a passive resource for human consumption but as an active, living entity with intrinsic value.

The scope is constrained to the coastal landscape of Angelus, highlighting the littoral zone (the shore) as a contentious site where human and marine life intersects. The study will examine the historical, economic, and emotional attachments of the characters to the whaling station at Paris Bay, analyzing the “whaling culture” that views marine life as mere commodity against the

nascent environmental awareness represented by characters like Queenie Cookson. The study explores how this historical exploitation, which stretches back to colonial settlement, establishes a pattern of violence against the natural environment.

The study adopts an ecocritical approach to interrogate the following ethical areas as follows:

**Anthropocentrism vs. Ecocentrism:** The study analyzes the conflict between the characters who view the whales through the lens of economic greed (materialism) and those who possess a, respectful, ecocentric, or “green” perspective. It will evaluate how Winton shifts the narrative focus from traditional economic progress to a responsibility toward ecological stewardship.

**The Ethics of Whaling and Conservation:** The study focuses on the “shallows” as a site of moral crisis, where the slaughter of whales is juxtaposed with their intelligence and autonomy. It will examine

how Winton portrays the “Greenies” (environmentalist group) and their attempts to disrupt the slaughter, assessing the efficacy of their environmental ethics in the face of local economic dependency on whaling.

**Nature as Agent and Victim:** The study explores how Winton’s language treats the sea and whales as characters in their own right, endowed with a “voice” and the capacity to evoke awe and guilt.

A significant portion of the analysis is dedicated to character-driven ethical dilemmas. Queenie Cookson’s role as an activist and her desire to make amends for her ancestors’ involvement in whaling acts as a key narrative thread. Furthermore, the study can briefly touch upon the connection between the colonial destruction of the landscape and the marginalization of Indigenous perspectives, as indicated by the town’s history.

In conclusion, the scope of this study encompasses the moral, ecological, and

economic arguments surrounding the whaling industry in *Shallows*. By studying the interactions between the residents of Angelus, the sea, and the whales, this study aims to reveal Winton's advocacy for an ethical, sustainable, and respectful relationship between human culture and the natural environment.

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