



The role of Christian ethics in environmental stewardship: An ecocritical analysis of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures*

Olumide Joshua Oki^a

^aDepartment of Performing Arts and Film Studies, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* reimagines biblical narratives through a vibrant theatrical lens, portraying the natural world as sacred and divinely significant. While known for its cultural and religious reinterpretations, the play's engagement with spiritual ecocriticism, particularly its framing of environmental stewardship through Christian ethics, remains largely overlooked. This study addresses that gap by applying spiritual ecocriticism to analyze how Connelly presents nature as an active participant in the moral narratives of creation and redemption. Grounded in the African-American religious context of the 1920s, the research combines close textual analysis with eco-theological insights to uncover how the play challenges exploitative views of the environment. It reveals that *The Green Pastures*, beyond retelling biblical lore, subtly advocates for respect, care, and sustainability in human-nature relationships. By intertwining Christian moral imperatives with ecological consciousness, Connelly's work emerges as a compelling cultural artifact that speaks to modern environmental concerns and enriches contemporary ecological discourse.

KEYWORDS

ecocriticism, environmental stewardship, Christian ethics, *The Green Pastures*, eco-theology, performing art

CORRESPONDENCE

Olumide Joshua Oki (okiolumide@yahoo.com)

INTRODUCTION

Marc Connelly's 1929 play *The Green Pastures* stands as a culturally significant yet often overlooked work that reimagines Old Testament narratives through a distinctive African American lens. Originally based on Roark Bradford's *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun*, the play premiered on Broadway in 1930 and received widespread acclaim, including winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama the same year (Hill, 2003). It was notable for being the first Broadway production to feature an all-Black cast—a groundbreaking move at the time. The play's success extended beyond the United States, with international productions and a 1936 film adaptation that also received positive reception, particularly among white critics of the era. Despite its popularity, the work has been critiqued for its reliance on stereotypical portrayals and use of dialect, reflecting the racial dynamics of its time.

This particular work was chosen for analysis not only because of its historical and theatrical importance but also due to its unique engagement with biblical narratives through an African American cultural lens. Unlike many other religious or biblical dramatizations,

The Green Pastures integrates themes of divine authority, human agency, and environmental imagery in a way that invites reinterpretation through ecotheological and ecocritical frameworks. This intersection of theology, race, and environmental thought makes it a rich text for exploring Christian ecological ethics in a performative context.

Originally celebrated for its innovative staging and thematic daring, the play has historically been analyzed for its complex representations of race and religion in American theater. However, beyond these conventional critiques lies a subtler engagement with themes of creation, human responsibility, and environmental stewardship. Through its imaginative portrayal of divine-human relationships, *The Green Pastures* invites a rereading through an ecocritical framework that situates its religious narratives within the context of contemporary environmental discourse.

Christian ethics have long emphasized humanity's duty to care for creation, a mandate deeply rooted in biblical injunctions. In particular, the biblical text of Genesis 1:28 instructs, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (New International Version). Historically, this verse has been interpreted as granting humans unrestricted authority over nature, often used to justify exploitative practices and unsustainable resource management. However, recent scholarship in Christian environmental ethics calls for a reexamination of this mandate, proposing that "dominion" should be understood as a call to responsible stewardship rather than unchecked exploitation (Pasquale, 2019; Ikenna, 2015). Within this reframed interpretation, Genesis 1:28 serves as an invitation for humanity to act as caretakers of creation, ensuring that natural resources are managed in a manner that respects both the intrinsic value of the environment and the ethical imperatives of sustainable living. This stewardship model emphasizes the need for balance and accountability in human–nature interactions—principles that have become increasingly salient amid global ecological challenges.

The resurgence of interest in environmental stewardship within Christian ethics has been catalyzed by global environmental crises and reinforced by significant contemporary works. Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015) represents a seminal moment in this regard, urging believers to view environmental protection as an intrinsic element of their faith. Recent studies (Le Roux, 2016) further document a paradigm shift in which modern Christian leaders and educators advocate for a reorientation of faith that includes a robust commitment to environmental care. Moreover, Pasquale (2019) argues that contemporary Catholic social thought now integrates ecological concerns with traditional ethical mandates, providing a solid theoretical foundation for reinterpreting historical texts like *The Green Pastures* through an ecological lens.

Despite its prominence as both a theatrical and religious text, *The Green Pastures* has rarely been examined through the lens of ecocriticism. An ecocritical approach not only reveals the layered reconfigurations of biblical narratives within the play but also uncovers its implicit commentary on the ethical relationship between humanity and the natural world. By reworking traditional biblical motifs, Connelly's dramatization challenges established interpretations of divine authority and human agency, suggesting that the biblical mandate

to care for creation is as relevant today as it was in antiquity. This research contends that such a reading demonstrates how the play prefigures modern concerns regarding the exploitation of natural resources, offering a nuanced perspective on environmental degradation and sustainability.

Additionally, it is important to note that *The Green Pastures* employs a writing style that includes archaic language and dialect reflective of both biblical tones and early 20th-century representations of African American vernacular. This stylistic choice reinforces the spiritual themes of the play while also situating the narrative within a culturally specific mode of expression. However, it also requires modern readers to engage critically with the text's historical and linguistic context.

This paper argues that *The Green Pastures*, while primarily a dramatization of biblical narratives, implicitly advocates for environmental stewardship aligned with contemporary Christian ecological ethics. Through detailed textual analysis supported by recent eco-theological scholarship (Hale et al., 2023; Ikenna, 2015), the study illustrates how the play's portrayal of creation and divine care invites audiences to reconsider humanity's role as caretakers of the Earth. In bridging historical theatrical practice with current environmental discourse, this research illuminates a neglected yet profound dimension of Christian ethical thought in the performing arts and contributes valuable insights to ongoing debates on sustainability and ecological ethics.

This article is primarily intended for scholars and students in the fields of theater studies, religious studies, and environmental humanities. It will also interest ecotheologians, Christian ethicists, and educators exploring the intersection of performance, theology, and ecology. By bringing together insights from ecocriticism and Christian ethics, the paper offers a multidisciplinary perspective that can enrich discussions in both academic and faith-based contexts.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to reexamine Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* through an integrated ecocritical and eco-theological lens, with the aim of uncovering its implicit advocacy for environmental stewardship within the framework of Christian ethics. By deconstructing the play's reimagined biblical narratives and its dynamic representation of nature, the study seeks to demonstrate how the work transcends its historical and cultural context to offer enduring insights into responsible creation care. This investigation also aims to bridge the gap between traditional interpretations of biblical dominion and contemporary calls for sustainable living, thereby providing a fresh perspective on how religious art can inform modern environmental discourse.

Research questions

1. How does Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* reflect ecocritical themes through its reimagined biblical narratives and representations of nature?
2. In what ways does the play engage with eco-theological concepts of stewardship, particularly in contrast to traditional interpretations of biblical dominion?
3. How can an integrated ecocritical and eco-theological reading of *The Green Pastures* contribute to contemporary discussions on environmental ethics and sustainable living?
4. To what extent does *The Green Pastures* transcend its historical and cultural context to offer a theological vision of responsible creation care?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing close textual analysis and interdisciplinary interpretive strategies to explore *The Green Pastures*. The methodology integrates ecocritical tools such as symbolic analysis, historical contextualization, and intertextual comparison with eco-theological perspectives that reframe biblical mandates of dominion as ethical calls for stewardship. Data is gathered from primary texts, including Connelly's play, and is supported by a comprehensive review of recent scholarly literature in both ecocriticism and eco-theology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The burgeoning field of ecocriticism has redefined the ways in which literary texts are interrogated in relation to environmental concerns. Scholars in this field argue that literature does more than merely reflect nature—it actively shapes our understanding of human–environment relationships (Zapf, 2016). Ecocriticism has evolved from early theoretical explorations into a robust interdisciplinary inquiry that engages with ecological realities and environmental justice. Contemporary ecocritical studies investigate how narrative structures, metaphors, and thematic choices in literature contribute to environmental discourse, emphasizing the need to reimagine human dominion over nature as an ethical responsibility rather than a license for exploitation (Head, 2022; Zapf, 2016).

Within this framework, the intersection of Christian ethics and eco-theology presents a significant area of inquiry. Modern scholarship has increasingly sought to reconcile traditional theological doctrines with contemporary environmental challenges. Sebege (2016) demonstrates that eco-theology reinterprets biblical imperatives—such as those found in Genesis 1:28—not as endorsements of unchecked exploitation but as calls to responsible stewardship. However, this interpretation has also drawn critique. Notably, Lynn White's *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (1967) argues that Judeo-Christian theology, particularly the notion of human dominion over nature, has contributed to the ecological

degradation of the planet. Engaging with White's position introduces a necessary counterpoint, adding nuance to the argument that Christianity solely promotes ecological harmony. By situating this study within that debate, it becomes possible to present a more balanced view of how *The Green Pastures* may serve either to challenge or reinforce theological constructs of environmental dominance.

This perspective is further reinforced by the influence of works like Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* (2015), which reorients the ethical focus of Christianity toward care for our common home. Christie et al. (2019) and other scholars contend that, when reexamined through the lens of eco-theology, Christian ethics offer a compelling framework for addressing global ecological crises by integrating spiritual, moral, and ecological imperatives.

Previous analyses of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* have predominantly focused on its cultural, racial, and theatrical dimensions. Gale (2016) provides a comprehensive examination of the play's innovative presentation of biblical narratives, highlighting its role in challenging prevailing racial stereotypes in American theater. Other studies have concentrated on the play's historical context and its impact on the representation of African American spirituality in performance art. Despite these valuable contributions, few scholars have extended their analyses to consider the environmental implications embedded in the play's reimagined biblical motifs. Gale's (2016) work, while insightful regarding cultural and racial interpretations, does not address the potential for an ecocritical reading that situates the play within the broader context of environmental stewardship.

Additionally, there is limited discussion on how Connelly's broader body of work or the literary currents of his era intersect with environmental concerns. While *The Green Pastures* is his most widely studied play, an exploration of his lesser-known writings may reveal stylistic or thematic consistencies, including an implicit concern for the moral and ethical dimensions of human life that can be extended to environmental readings. Furthermore, the 1920s and 1930s marked a vibrant period in African American cultural production, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance. Although Connelly was a white playwright, *The Green Pastures'* depiction of African American religious life places it in proximity to this movement. The era's revival of African heritage, folk traditions, and biblical storytelling created a cultural atmosphere that emphasized a connection to land, nature, and community. Studies of contemporaneous writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, whose work frequently celebrated the natural world, can provide a meaningful comparative lens. This broader literary context helps situate Connelly's play within prevailing literary and cultural movements, rather than viewing it as an isolated anomaly.

A significant gap emerges in the literature concerning the environmental dimensions of *The Green Pastures*. Although the play is lauded for its radical reinterpretation of biblical narratives and its cultural significance, its implicit commentary on humanity's responsibility toward nature remains underexplored. May (2021) argues that many classic American plays harbor neglected ecological subtexts that can illuminate contemporary debates on sustainability and resource management. This oversight is particularly striking given that *The Green Pastures* reconfigures biblical narratives in a manner that suggests a paradigm shift—

from dominion over nature to stewardship of creation. Such a reading aligns with current ecotheological scholarship that reinterprets traditional texts as calls for a balanced and sustainable interaction with the natural world (Conradie, 2020).

Furthermore, while recent works have successfully integrated Christian ethics with environmental discourse, there remains a dearth of research that explicitly examines how historical texts like *The Green Pastures* contribute to modern environmental thought. The existing scholarship largely overlooks the play's potential to serve as a cultural bridge between early twentieth-century theological debates and contemporary ecological concerns. By addressing both intra-Christian ethical debates (e.g., between stewardship and dominion) and the play's place within a broader interwar literary revival, the environmental reading of the play gains historical, theological, and literary depth. This gap underscores the need for a comprehensive ecocritical analysis that not only reconsiders the play's biblical and theatrical elements but also situates them within the evolving discourse on environmental stewardship.

Therefore, while ecocriticism has significantly advanced our understanding of literary texts in relation to environmental issues, and eco-theology has reshaped contemporary Christian ethics, the convergence of these fields in the analysis of *The Green Pastures* remains insufficiently addressed. This literature review reveals the critical need to reexamine Connelly's work as a text that prefigures modern environmental concerns through its reimagined biblical narratives. Addressing this lacuna will enhance our understanding of how historical cultural artifacts can inform and inspire contemporary discussions on sustainability and ethical resource management.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by an integrated theoretical framework that combines a specific branch of ecocriticism—spiritual ecocriticism—with eco-theological perspectives to explore the environmental dimensions of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures*. Spiritual ecocriticism, a subfield within the broader ecocritical discourse, focuses on the intersection of ecological awareness and spiritual or religious traditions. This perspective is particularly useful for examining texts where ecological ethics are embedded in religious narratives, as is the case in *The Green Pastures*.

Ecocriticism, in general, is an interdisciplinary approach that investigates the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It challenges Anthropocentrism by emphasizing the interconnectedness between human and non-human worlds (Zapf, 2016). However, this study narrows its scope to spiritual ecocriticism, rather than exploring other subfields such as toxicity studies, ecofeminism, or posthumanism. The focus remains on how religious narratives—especially biblical stories—shape human attitudes toward nature and promote (or inhibit) ethical ecological conduct.

In practice, ecocritical methodologies employ techniques such as close reading, historical contextualization, and symbolic analysis to uncover ecological meanings within texts. The term “ecological discourse” in this study refers to the language, themes, and symbolic frameworks that promote or critique human relationships with the natural world.

In *The Green Pastures*, this discourse is conveyed through its dramatization of creation, divine intervention, and human responsibility within a biblically inspired narrative structure.

Complementing the literary approach is eco-theology, which provides a critical lens through which traditional religious doctrines are reinterpreted in light of environmental challenges. Central to eco-theology is the reevaluation of the biblical command in Genesis 1:28—not as a license for domination, but as a call for stewardship and creation care (Conradie, 2020). However, this interpretation is not uncontested. White (1967) famously argued that Christianity, particularly in its Western forms, has historically promoted the exploitation of nature through its anthropocentric reading of Genesis. Engaging with White's critique, this study explores whether *The Green Pastures* reinforces or subverts this dominionist perspective.

"Christian ethics," in this study, refers specifically to moral frameworks derived from Christian theology that emphasize the responsibility of humans to act as caretakers of God's creation. This ethical orientation includes concepts such as stewardship, humility before creation, and accountability to divine law. These principles are evident in Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* (2015), which serves as a modern articulation of ecological responsibility within the Christian tradition.

The "historical and cultural contexts" referenced in this study pertain to both the socio-religious climate of early 20th-century America and the cultural forces of the Harlem Renaissance. These contexts shaped African American artistic expression, spiritual performance traditions, and reinterpretations of biblical narratives. While *The Green Pastures* is rooted in biblical imagery, its engagement with Old Testament themes—such as the Creation story, the story of Noah, and the Exodus—are creatively adapted. In the original biblical versions, these stories often emphasize divine power and covenant, whereas in Connelly's version, they are imbued with folkloric African American cultural idioms that reframe God's interaction with creation and humanity.

The integration of literary analysis with ethical and environmental theory is essential for a holistic examination of Connelly's play. By synthesizing ecocritical and eco-theological insights, this study goes beyond a generic theoretical application to offer a context-specific exploration of how religious environmental ethics are dramatized in early African American performance literature. This integrated framework facilitates a dual-layered analysis: first, by uncovering the play's use of symbolic nature references and spiritual metaphors; and second, by linking these elements to theological imperatives of environmental stewardship (May, 2021; Sebegu, 2016).

ANALYSIS OF THE GREEN PASTURES

Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* offers a unique reinterpretation of biblical narratives by blending Christian ethics with African American cultural elements, particularly emphasizing themes of divine creation, environmental stewardship, and human responsibility. Through its episodic structure, imaginative storytelling, and vibrant dialogues, the play invites audiences to engage with a reimagined divine narrative where God is portrayed as nurturing

and intimately involved with creation. This analysis covers the play's structure, deconstruction of biblical narratives, representation of nature, and articulation of Christian ethical imperatives, incorporating dialogues to underscore key points.

Summary and context of the play's narrative and structure

Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* is structured as a series of interconnected vignettes that dramatize key events from the Old Testament. These scenes are interpreted through the cultural lens of rural African American life, blending biblical narratives with familiar social settings. The play transitions seamlessly between celestial realms, where Heaven is depicted as a lively social space, and various earthly locations where divine-human interactions unfold. The episodic structure enables Connelly to present multiple themes simultaneously while engaging audiences with vivid storytelling and memorable characters.

The play opens with a lively Sunday school lesson led by Mr. Deshee, a preacher guiding a group of children through the stories of Genesis. The scene immediately introduces the audience to the accessible, conversational tone that permeates the play:

Deshee: "Now, how you think you gonter like de Bible?"

Myrtle: "I think it's jest wonderful, Mr. Deshee. I cain't understand any of it"

(Connelly, 1929, p. 4)

This interaction captures the blend of humor, curiosity, and reverence that characterizes much of the dialogue. It also establishes the play's focus on making biblical stories relatable to its audience. The preacher's description of pre-creation Heaven, where angels "jest flew aroun' and had a good time" and enjoyed "fish fries wid b'iled custard," illustrates the play's imaginative reimaging of the divine as joyful and communal.

As it unfolds, scenes in Heaven often depict God as a paternal figure who delights in overseeing both celestial activities and human affairs. The depiction of Heaven as a space reminiscent of a Southern fish fry, complete with music, chatter, and camaraderie, reinforces the play's blending of sacred and secular elements. During one such gathering, God commands:

God: "Let de fish fry proceed!"

(Connelly, 1929, p. 21)

The visualization and depiction of Heaven as a familiar social setting underscore Connelly's effort to make divine narratives accessible and meaningful to his audience. The choice of an episodic structure allows Connelly to explore themes such as creation, sin, redemption, and stewardship without adhering to a rigid linear plot. This flexibility mirrors African American oral storytelling traditions, where narratives often flow organically, emphasizing shared experiences and moral lessons rather than chronological events.

In addition to its imagination of divine realms, *The Green Pastures* highlights the close relationship between humanity and nature. As the fish fry scene transitions to the creation of Earth, God humorously acknowledges the need for balance:

God: "Let dere be mountains and valleys an' let dere be oceans an' lakes... let dere be rivers and bayous to dreen it off in, too."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 26)

This blend of whimsical dialogue and practical insight characterizes much of the play's structure, enabling audiences to engage with complex themes in an approachable manner. Through its episodic narrative and vibrant character interactions, *The Green Pastures* invites viewers to reconsider traditional interpretations of biblical stories, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the sacred, the human, and the natural worlds.

Deconstruction of biblical narratives within the play

One of the play's most remarkable achievements is its reimagining and humanization of biblical characters, transforming them into relatable, flawed individuals whose experiences mirror everyday human struggles. Marc Connelly achieves this through the use of culturally grounded dialogue and storytelling, which demystifies the sacred texts and makes their lessons accessible to a diverse audience.

The Creation scene exemplifies this reinterpretation. Rather than depicting Adam's formation in a distant, grandiose manner, Connelly presents the interaction between God and Adam in a light-hearted yet instructional tone. When God introduces the concept of family to Adam, the exchange captures both humor and divine purpose:

God: "Jest lie down dere, Adam. Make out like you was goin' to slumber."

Adam: "Yes, Lawd"

(Connelly, 1929, p. 32)

This portrayal highlights God as both a creator and a nurturer who seeks to guide his creations with gentle care.

The story of Cain and Abel further illustrates Connelly's approach to deconstructing traditional biblical narratives. Following Abel's death, Cain defends his actions in a tone marked by defensiveness and frustration:

Cain: "Lawd, I was min'in' my own business and he come monkeyin' aroun' wit' me. I was wukkin' in de fiel' an' he was sittin' in de shade of de tree."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 37)

Cain's justification not only underscores the complexities of sibling conflict but also reflects human tendencies to rationalize wrongdoing. God's response introduces moral accountability without immediate condemnation:

God: "All right, but I'm yere to tell you dat's called a crime. When de new Judge is done talkin' to you you'll be draggin' a ball and chain de rest of yo' life."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 37)

In Noah's encounter with God, Connelly adds layers of doubt and perseverance. Noah defends his seemingly irrational commitment to building the Ark despite public ridicule:

First Man: "Dey say yo' ol' lady is tellin' everybody it's gonter rain fo' fo'ty days and fo'ty nights."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 74)

Noah: "Lot I keer what you think."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 75)

These dialogues embody Connelly's ability to humanize ancient figures, transforming them into characters whose struggles are deeply relatable. By reconstructing these stories through familiar social contexts and vernacular speech, the play invites its audience to see themselves within the biblical narratives and to find meaning in the moral lessons they convey.

Representation of nature and the environment as a dynamic character

In *The Green Pastures*, nature is depicted not as a passive backdrop but as a living, vibrant participant in the divine narrative, reflecting the play's emphasis on interconnectedness between humanity, the divine, and the environment. This portrayal challenges traditional anthropocentric perspectives by elevating the natural world as a co-creator in God's plan.

The pre-Creation scene presents Heaven as a picturesque gathering place with elements reminiscent of a rural fish fry. The stage is framed by blue skies, live oak trees, and billowing clouds—a scene both divine and familiar:

"The scene itself is a pre-Creation Heaven with compromises... The tree is leafy and dripping with Spanish moss, and with the clouds makes a frame for the scene."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 10)

As the narrative progresses, God's creative acts further underscore nature's integral role:

God: "Let dere be mountains and valleys an' let dere be oceans an' lakes... let dere be rivers and bayous to dreen it off in, too."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 26)

This imaginative depiction aligns with contemporary ecocritical thought, which advocates recognizing nature as an entity with intrinsic value rather than a resource for human exploitation.

The lively fish fry scene reinforces the dynamic portrayal of nature. Here, celestial beings engage in jovial debates about fishing techniques, revealing the age-old relationship between humans and the environment:

First Cook: "Wurry up, Cajey. Dis yere fat's cryin' fo' mo' feesh."

A Voice: "We comin', fas' we kin. Dey got to be ketched, ain't dey? We cain't say, 'C'm'on little fish. C'm'on an' git fried,' kin we?"

(Connelly, 1929, p. 11)

This playful scene humanizes environmental interactions, portraying nature not just as sustenance but as a source of joy and community bonding.

Throughout the play, nature serves as a moral compass and a symbol of divine renewal. After the flood, God instructs Noah to let the animals reclaim the earth and restart creation:

God: "Open dat starboard door, an' leave 'em all out. Let 'em go down de hill... Take all de seeds 'n de sprouts an' begin plantin' ag'in. I'm startin' all over, Noah."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 91)

The sounds of birds and bustling animal life underscore nature's role in restoration:

"Dat's right, birds, fin' yo new homes."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 91)

By giving voice and agency to the environment, Connelly encourages audiences to see nature as a vital, active character within the divine order. His portrayal challenges viewers to rethink their relationship with the natural world, emphasizing a vision of stewardship rather than domination. Through vibrant scenes and lyrical dialogues, *The Green Pastures* highlights the interconnectedness of creation, urging humanity to respect and nurture the world as a sacred trust.

Examination of how Christian ethical imperatives are articulated and embodied

At the core of *The Green Pastures* lies a reinterpretation of Christian ethical imperatives, particularly the command to exercise dominion over creation. Rather than advocating exploitation, Marc Connelly presents dominion as a sacred duty grounded in care, humility, and stewardship. This vision emerges clearly through God's interactions with biblical characters and His guidance on how to navigate the challenges of creation and human relationships.

A significant dialogue illustrating this principle occurs when God instructs Noah on the preservation of life amidst the impending flood:

God: "You an' yo' fam'ly, yo' sheep an' cattle, an' all de udder things dat ain't human I'm gont'er preserve. But de rest is gotta go. Look yere, Noah. I want you to build me a boat. I want you to call it de 'Ark,' and I want it to look like dis."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 69)

This directive frames Noah's mission as a profound act of stewardship, where the preservation of biodiversity becomes paramount. God's insistence on the inclusion of "two of every kind of animal" underscores a vision of balance and respect for all living beings.

Later, after the floodwaters subside, God emphasizes the theme of renewal and responsibility:

God: "Den you an' de family take all de seeds 'n de sprouts an' begin plantin' ag'in. I'm startin' all over, Noah."

(Connelly, 1929, p. 91)

This scene not only reinforces the sacred duty of caring for the Earth but also highlights the cyclical nature of creation and renewal, a theme resonant with ecological ethics.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* reveals a complex interplay between theological themes and environmental ethics, as interpreted through an ecocritical and eco-theological framework. The play's imaginative portrayal of biblical stories, dynamic representation of nature, and articulation of Christian ethical imperatives provide valuable insights into the relationship between humanity, faith, and creation. Through the synthesis of textual analysis and eco-theological perspectives, this discussion highlights the implications of the play for understanding environmental stewardship, its relevance to contemporary environmental discourse, and areas for further exploration.

The synthesis of textual analysis with eco-theological insights underscores how *The Green Pastures* redefines dominion as stewardship, challenging traditional interpretations of

biblical narratives that prioritize human authority over nature. In one compelling scene, God instructs Noah to prepare for the renewal of creation following the flood:

God: "Take all de seeds 'n de sprouts an' begin plantin' ag'in. I'm startin' all over, Noah."
(Connelly, 1929, p. 91)

This dialogue exemplifies a shift from the notion of divine punishment to a vision of hopeful restoration, where humanity is called to act as a co-creator in the process of environmental regeneration. Connelly's portrayal of God as a nurturing figure who expresses a continued investment in human redemption aligns with eco-theological perspectives that emphasize care for creation as a moral imperative rooted in divine will. This reframing of dominion encourages a model of stewardship that advocates for sustainable practices and respect for the intrinsic value of the natural world.

The play's depiction of environmental stewardship has significant implications for understanding how Christian narratives can inform ecological ethics. By presenting nature as a dynamic character, *The Green Pastures* challenges anthropocentric worldviews and highlights the interconnectedness of all creation. The portrayal of Heaven as a communal space filled with trees, rivers, and vibrant life forms reinforces the idea that nature is an integral part of the divine order:

"The scene itself is a pre-Creation Heaven... with the clouds making a frame for the scene."
(Connelly, 1929, p. 10)

This imagery invites audiences to reconsider the theological significance of creation and to recognize the environment as a sacred trust that requires care and preservation. Connelly's dramatization suggests that environmental stewardship is not merely a practical concern but a spiritual responsibility that reflects one's commitment to God and creation.

The play's impact on contemporary environmental and cultural discourse lies in its ability to bridge historical religious narratives with modern ecological concerns. As the world faces increasing environmental challenges, *The Green Pastures* offers a vision of faith that emphasizes harmony, restoration, and accountability. The portrayal of Noah's ark as a vessel of preservation and renewal resonates with current discussions on biodiversity conservation and climate resilience. God's directive to Noah to protect "two of every kind of animal" serves as a metaphor for the importance of safeguarding ecological diversity.

Moreover, the play's emphasis on communal rituals and moral accountability aligns with contemporary calls for collective action in addressing environmental issues. In one symbolic scene, the celestial fish fry becomes a space for celebrating creation and acknowledging humanity's dependence on natural resources:

First Cook: "Wurry up, Cajey. Dis yere fat's cryin' fo' mo' feesh."
(Connelly, 1929, p. 11)

This playful yet profound moment underscores the importance of community in fostering a relationship of care and respect for the environment.

Despite its many strengths, *The Green Pastures* is not without limitations. The play's historical context and theatrical conventions impose certain constraints that may limit its applicability to contemporary environmental discourse. The depiction of Heaven as a rural Southern setting, while imaginative and culturally resonant, may be viewed as an oversimplification of divine spaces, potentially reinforcing nostalgic stereotypes. Additionally, the stylized language and exaggerated character portrayals, while effective for dramatic purposes, may obscure the play's deeper ethical messages for some modern audiences.

Another limitation lies in the play's portrayal of gender roles and its lack of emphasis on the contributions of female characters to the narrative of creation and stewardship. The focus on male figures such as Noah and Cain reinforces patriarchal interpretations of biblical stories, potentially marginalizing alternative perspectives that highlight the role of women in environmental care and moral leadership. Future interpretations of the play could benefit from a more inclusive approach that recognizes the contributions of all members of the community to the practice of stewardship.

Furthermore, the integration of eco-theological insights with literary analysis in *The Green Pastures* opens up questions about how such interdisciplinary approaches can be applied to other cultural artifacts. While the current analysis demonstrates the value of examining biblical narratives through an ecological lens, there remains a need for further exploration of how diverse religious traditions and artistic expressions can contribute to contemporary environmental ethics. Expanding this framework to include non-Christian perspectives and global theatrical traditions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between faith, art, and ecology.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, this study concludes that Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* serves as a compelling demonstration of the potential of Christian narratives to foster environmental stewardship. The play's reimagined biblical motifs, dynamic portrayal of nature, and innovative narrative structure all converge to challenge traditional interpretations of dominion, reframing them as ethical imperatives for responsible stewardship. This conclusion is supported by an integrated ecocritical and eco-theological analysis, which reveals that Connelly's dramatization not only disrupts exploitative narratives but also advocates for a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

The evidence presented demonstrates that *The Green Pastures* transcends its historical and cultural context, offering enduring insights that are remarkably relevant to today's environmental challenges. Its reconfiguration of biblical themes into a call for nurturing and preserving creation underscores the necessity of reinterpreting traditional doctrines in light of contemporary ecological realities. Thus, the play emerges as a critical cultural artifact that bridges early twentieth-century theatrical innovation with modern ethical imperatives.

Connelly's work, therefore, not only enriches the discourse on Christian environmental stewardship but also serves as a catalyst for rethinking our collective relationship with nature.

Recommendations for future research

Future research could explore the following areas to further expand the scholarly conversation around *The Green Pastures* and ecological theology:

1. **Comparative Ecotheological Studies:** Examine other dramatizations of biblical narratives across different religious or cultural traditions to assess how they frame environmental ethics. This could include plays from Jewish, Islamic, or Indigenous perspectives.
2. **Gender and Ecological Ethics:** Investigate how gender dynamics in *The Green Pastures* affect its ecological message, and explore how more inclusive or feminist theological interpretations might reshape understandings of stewardship and care.
3. **Audience Reception and Impact:** Analyze how diverse audiences—historical and contemporary—have interpreted the play's ecological themes. Reception studies could reveal shifts in public consciousness around religion and the environment.
4. **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Combine insights from environmental science, performance studies, and theology to evaluate how theatrical representations of nature influence real-world environmental attitudes and behaviors.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT


The author declares no conflicts of interest, including relevant or material financial interests related to the research described in this paper.

REFERENCES

- Christie, I., Gunton, R. M., & Hejnowicz, A. P. (2019). Sustainability and the common good: Catholic Social Teaching and 'Integral Ecology' as contributions to a framework of social values for sustainability transitions. *Sustainability Science*, 14, 1343-1354. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00691-y>
- Connelly, M. (1929). *The green pastures: A fable*. Farrar & Rinehart.
- Conradie, E. M. (2020). The four tasks of Christian ecotheology: Revisiting the current debate. *Scriptura*, 119(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.7833/119-1-1566>
- Gale, C. L. (2016). *A study guide for Marc Connelly's "The Green Pastures"*. Gale, Cengage Learning.
- Hale, B., Light, A., & Lawhon, L. A. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge companion to environmental ethics* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315768090>
- Head, D. (2022). *Nature prose: Writing in ecological crisis*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192870872.001.0001>
- Hill, A. B. (2003). *Marc Connelly: A Critical Biography*. Twayne Publishers.
- Ikenna, O. J. T. (2015). *God and the human environment: Catholic principles of environmental stewardship as a template for action in Nigeria*. iUniverse.

- Laudato si'. (2015). *On care for our common home*. Vatican Press.
- Le Roux, C. S. (2016). Environmental stewardship as a dimension of a Christian stewardship ethic: Views of seminary students, lecturers, and ministers. *KOERS—Bulletin for Christian Scholarship*, 81(2). <https://doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.81.2.2264>
- May, T. J. (2020). *Earth matters on stage: Ecology and environment in American theater*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003028888>
- Pasquale, F. (Ed.). (2019). *Care for the world: Laudato Si' and Catholic social thought in an era of climate crisis*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108227049>
- Sebego, T. Z. (2016). *Developing a contextual approach to ecological mission: A case for the Christian Youth Ministry at Mamelodi Ya Tshwane* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Africa].
- Wampole, C. (2021). An ecocritical metaphorology. *Contemporary French and Francophone studies*, 25(1), 52–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2021.1865056>
- White, L. (1967). The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>
- Zapf, H. (2016). *Literature as cultural ecology: Sustainable texts*. Bloomsbury Academic.

BIODATA

Olumide Joshua Oki ( <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6595-2081>) is an interdisciplinary scholar whose work bridges business, performing arts, and Christian theology. With degrees in economics, business, and performing arts, he researches faith-based theatre, strategic management and administration in the creative sector, sociocultural, eco-feminism, and eco-theological criticism, advancing Christian theatre and transformational leadership in Nigeria.

How to cite this article:

Oki, O. J., (2025). The role of Christian ethics in environmental stewardship: An ecocritical analysis of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures*. *Journal of Language and Cultures*, 44(1), 64-79.

Received: 3 February 2025

Revised: 13 April 2025

Accepted: 24 April 2025

© The Author(s) 2025. *Journal of Language and Culture* published by Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University. This article is open access under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, permitting the use, sharing, adaptation, distribution, and reproduction in any medium or format. Users are required to provide appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, include a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if any changes were made. The images or other third-party materials included in this article fall under the article's Creative Commons license unless otherwise specified in a credit line. If the material is not covered by the article's Creative Commons license or if your intended use goes beyond what is permitted by statutory regulation, you must seek permission directly from the copyright holder.