

Man versus nature:
descriptions and
messages in when
the killing's done



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the contemporary novel *When the Killing's Done*, author T. C. Boyle tells the powerfully relevant story of Alma Boyd Takesue, her antagonist Dave Lajoy, and their attempts to exert dominion over the natural world. Set on the Channel Islands off the coast of California, the novel reveals timely themes regarding the Earth's cycle of life and how mankind has altered it, for better or for worse. Throughout the plot, Alma strives to preserve the Island's native ecosystem, while Dave tries to protect the invasive species, but it is nature's response to these actions that expose Boyle's honest thoughts on the prevalent issues occurring currently environmentally and socially. While plants and animals may not necessarily be controlling mankind, *When the Killing's Done* reiterates the idea that every aspect of Earth is supposed to work in unison, so when humans disrupt it, the universe responds. As shown through symbolic weather and the many characters that experience extreme trauma at sea, man does not have dominion over the environment, thus illuminating T. C. Boyle's theme that the world's natural order cannot be defied, and humans' attempts to alter it will simply result in self sabotage.

Boyle's use of weather is used constantly throughout the novel to depict that Alma's argument is the correct one, even when it seems immoral, while Dave's surface level plan to protect the animals who were introduced to the Island by humans, will further disrupt the ecosystem. When Alma is returning to the Island after successfully restoring the native species, the weather is clearly accommodating to her as Boyle notes, " She's never seen the channel so smooth. There isn't even so much as a bump coming out of Ventura Harbor and at ten in the morning it's as warm as midday" (359). The

weather switches around often in the book – in one chapter the sun will be shining and in the next a storm will strike – and it usually has to do with which character the plot is focusing on at that moment in time. Boyle utilizes the weather to subtly signify that Alma is in the right and Dave is in the wrong, which is why nature is setting up Alma and her crew for success. Dave on the other hand is constantly complaining about bad weather, as Boyle writes, “ the vitamin K was dissolving in the rain and he was utterly helpless to do anything about anything” (118). It is almost as if the universe is doing everything it can to stop Dave from being triumphant, from making the waves choppy so that he cannot sail, to destroying the vitamin K tablets he is giving to the rats. The rain present when Dave is working towards his goals, represents the control nature possesses over man. Dave thinks he can regulate the animals on the Island, but the environment works in unexpected ways and is capable of drastically benefiting or harming humans.

Beverly’s experience when she was lost at sea, alongside the numerous deaths that occurred in the ocean, demonstrate that while people’s surroundings can save them in miraculous ways, they can also easily destroy. When the story of Beverly and her incident at sea is retold, Boyle writes, “ The universe stopped rocking. The sea fell away. And she found herself on a path leading steeply upward to where the fog began to tatter and bleed off until it wasn’t there at all” (30). This entire passage personifies Beverly’s surroundings as they cater to her situation and end up saving her life. The ladder “ seemed to glide across the surface to her” (30), there is suddenly a “ wooden barrel, a hogshead, set there to catch the rain” (30), for her to drink out of. Without Beverley even lifting a finger, she is being

cushioned by her atmosphere, as if there is a guardian angel carrying her safely to land. Here the ocean, the plants, and the island have the power and these forces are choosing to aid her rather than destroy her, even though they have the ability to do both. While Beverly found her way safely to shore with a little help from nature, Till and Greg were not as lucky. During the wreck of Beverly's ship, she thinks, " And Till? Where was Till? He could have been right there, ten feet away, and she wouldn't have known it" (19).

Unfortunately, the sea was not so kind to Till, and while Beverly survived, her husband did not. Till, a fisherman, had been stealing from the sea for years, while giving nothing back to it in return, and after years of him ending the lives of fish, the ocean ended his.

Greg dies in a similar way as Boyle focuses on Kat, writing, " he was drowning, that was it, and Mickey was drowning too. Flailing with all her strength against the chop and the hull that seemed to bob and duck away from her as if it were alive, as if this were a game" (257). In this frantic moment, even Kat admits that the waves are almost " alive," and they are doing everything they can to ensure that Greg and Mickey do not survive. Just as Till had been fishing, Greg was collecting urchins when he lost his life, and though Kat was the one who poisoned him with Carbon Monoxide, the environment eliminated all chances she had to save him. Kat did not notice she had been pumping the wrong gas into their oxygen masks until it was too late, which parallels to the way that humans may not realize the harm pollution is causing, until their home is already irreparable. Till and Greg represent a huge majority of humanity and the way people tend to greedily take from the Earth without ever compensating for it. Boyle uses the two

characters to advise mankind to show gratitude for the planet, otherwise karma will take its course, just like it did to Till and Greg.

Mankind advances rapidly technologically, and sometimes that leads to humans who feel superior, but nature will always have the control- from sunny skies, to natural disasters, from saving lives to destroying them. The irony of it all is that people are the ones ruining the environment and while the lifestyle benefits society currently, the Earth could eventually be wrecked. By including the ways that nature responds to each character, Boyle is emphasizing that protecting and respecting an atmosphere and all species that inhabit it is vital, otherwise the planet will begin to fight back. Through allusive weather and the personification of the environment, *When the Killing's Done* encapsulates the importance of repaying and sustaining the Earth, so that it can survive in unison with humans.