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## Beyond Taxonomy: The Psychology of Classification and Control in Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*

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### Abstract

This article examines the psychological dimensions of classification and control in Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998). While previous scholarship has primarily focused on taxonomy, ecological symbolism, patriarchy, and national identity, less attention has been paid to the psychological mechanisms through which classification functions as a means of domination. Drawing on literary psychology, eco-criticism, and postcolonial approaches, the article argues that the protagonist Holland's obsessive taxonomic project represents an attempt to transform uncertainty into order and to exercise control over both nature and his daughter Ellen. The study demonstrates that Bail critiques rational systems of classification by exposing their psychological foundations in anxiety, possessiveness, and the desire for mastery. At the same time, the novel presents storytelling as an alternative mode of knowledge that resists rigid taxonomies and opens space for imagination, emotional connection, and human freedom.

**Keywords:** taxonomy, classification, control, psychology, storytelling, Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus*

### Introduction

Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Australian literature. Published in 1998, the novel combines elements of romance, ecological fiction, fairy tale, and philosophical reflection. The narrative centers on Holland, a widowed landowner who transforms his property into an enormous collection of eucalyptus species. After the death of his wife, Holland announces that the man capable of identifying every eucalyptus tree on his estate will win the hand of his daughter Ellen. This unusual challenge becomes the central narrative device through which Bail explores questions of knowledge, authority, and human relationships (Bail, 1998). Critical discussions of *Eucalyptus* have emphasized taxonomy, environmental symbolism, nationalism, and patriarchal structures. Martin (2004) argues that the novel places taxonomy at the center of debates concerning Australian identity and the cultural significance of the eucalyptus tree. Rooks (2007) interprets Holland's behavior as an expression of patriarchal domination and examines the novel's critique of hierarchical gender relations. More recent scholarship has explored ecological interrelatedness and the limitations of human-centered forms of knowledge (Maufort, 2023). However, relatively little attention has been devoted to the psychological motivations underlying Holland's taxonomic obsession and his desire to control both nature and human relationships. This article addresses that gap by investigating how

classification functions as a psychological mechanism of control in *Eucalyptus*. It argues that taxonomy in the novel is not merely a scientific activity but a symbolic expression of the human desire to impose order on an unpredictable world. Through Holland's character, Bail reveals how systems of classification can become instruments of domination while simultaneously exposing their inherent limitations.

Human beings have long relied on classification systems to organize experience. Scientific taxonomies create categories that make the world intelligible and manageable. In *Eucalyptus*, however, classification extends beyond scientific practice and becomes a psychological necessity. Holland's collection of hundreds of eucalyptus species represents more than botanical enthusiasm; it reflects an intense desire to create certainty within an uncertain world. Martin (2004) observes that taxonomy functions as one of the novel's central organizing principles. The naming and categorization of trees establish a structure through which Holland seeks to understand and dominate his environment. Yet Bail presents this taxonomic impulse as excessive. Holland's determination to identify and classify every tree reveals a mindset that equates knowledge with possession. From a psychological perspective, classification often emerges as a response to ambiguity. By placing objects into clearly defined categories, individuals reduce anxiety and establish a sense of control. Holland's obsession reflects precisely such a tendency. Following the loss of his wife, he increasingly turns toward order, precision, and classification as mechanisms for coping with emotional uncertainty. The estate becomes a carefully regulated space where every tree has a name and every element appears controllable. As Maufort (2023) suggests, the novel repeatedly questions the assumption that naming necessarily leads to mastery. Although Holland seeks to impose order upon the landscape, the eucalyptus trees resist complete containment. Their diversity, complexity, and symbolic richness exceed the limits of taxonomic categories. Bail thus presents classification as both necessary and insufficient: it organizes knowledge while simultaneously revealing the impossibility of total understanding.

One of the most significant themes in *Eucalyptus* is the relationship between naming and possession. Throughout the novel, knowledge is repeatedly linked to ownership. Holland's challenge assumes that the man who can identify every tree deserves to marry Ellen. Such logic transforms both botanical knowledge and human relationships into objects of acquisition. Scholars have noted that taxonomic practices historically accompanied colonial expansion, where naming often functioned as a means of claiming territory and authority. Martin (2004) highlights connections between taxonomy and broader cultural narratives of possession, while Grbich interprets classification within the novel as part of larger structures of colonial power. Psychologically, possession provides individuals with a sense of security and identity. Holland's desire to classify every tree reflects an underlying belief that understanding something grants authority over it. This belief extends to Ellen. Rather than recognizing her autonomy, Holland attempts to

regulate her future through a system of rules and classifications. Ellen becomes another element within his carefully ordered world. The novel therefore exposes the psychological illusion underlying possessive forms of knowledge. Although Holland believes that classification grants control, the narrative repeatedly demonstrates the fragility of such assumptions. The more rigidly he seeks to organize the world, the more evident its unpredictability becomes. Bail suggests that the desire for possession originates not in genuine understanding but in fear of uncertainty and loss. The connection between classification and control becomes particularly evident in Holland's relationship with Ellen. Rooks (2007) argues that the novel critiques patriarchal structures by revealing how systems of domination operate through apparently rational forms of authority. Holland's challenge reduces Ellen to a prize that can be won through intellectual achievement. Rather than exercising direct physical coercion, he employs a system of knowledge as an instrument of control. From a psychological standpoint, domination frequently depends on the transformation of individuals into objects. Classification facilitates this process because it reduces complexity to manageable categories. Holland's treatment of Ellen reflects precisely such reduction. He attempts to define her future through rules, classifications, and external criteria rather than acknowledging her individuality. The novel also demonstrates the limitations of patriarchal authority. Despite Holland's elaborate system, Ellen remains emotionally and imaginatively beyond his control. Her growing relationship with the storyteller develops outside the framework established by her father. Through this narrative development, Bail challenges the assumption that human beings can be fully understood or regulated through classificatory systems. Rooks (2007) further notes that the novel parodies patriarchal logic by exaggerating its mechanisms. Holland's obsession appears increasingly irrational despite its scientific appearance. The contrast between rational taxonomy and emotional reality exposes the psychological contradictions underlying authoritarian forms of control. What appears to be objective knowledge ultimately reveals itself as a manifestation of personal anxiety and desire for dominance.

If taxonomy represents one mode of knowledge in *Eucalyptus*, storytelling represents another. Throughout the novel, the mysterious storyteller challenges Holland's system by offering narratives rather than classifications. Instead of identifying trees through scientific terminology, he connects them to stories, emotions, and human experiences. Maufort (2023) argues that these stories create an "ecopoetics of interrelatedness" that emphasizes relationships rather than categories. The storyteller's approach does not seek mastery over nature; instead, it encourages dialogue with it. Knowledge emerges through imagination, empathy, and narrative engagement rather than through rigid classification. Psychologically, storytelling fulfills functions that classification cannot. Whereas taxonomy simplifies complexity, stories embrace ambiguity. They allow multiple meanings to coexist and acknowledge the emotional dimensions of experience. Through storytelling, Ellen develops a form of understanding that transcends the limitations

of her father's taxonomic worldview. The opposition between taxonomy and storytelling therefore reflects a deeper conflict between two psychological orientations. Holland seeks certainty, order, and control. The storyteller embraces uncertainty, imagination, and relational understanding. Bail ultimately privileges the latter approach. Although taxonomy possesses practical value, it cannot fully capture the richness of human experience. Storytelling emerges as a more flexible and humane way of engaging with reality.

### Conclusion

Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* offers a profound exploration of the psychological foundations of classification and control. Through Holland's obsession with taxonomy, the novel reveals how systems of classification often function as responses to anxiety, uncertainty, and the desire for mastery. Naming becomes associated with possession, while knowledge becomes a mechanism of domination. These dynamics are particularly evident in Holland's attempts to control Ellen and regulate her future. At the same time, Bail critiques the limitations of taxonomic thinking. The diversity of the eucalyptus trees, the unpredictability of human relationships, and the power of storytelling all resist complete classification. The novel demonstrates that rational systems cannot fully contain the complexity of life. By contrasting taxonomy with storytelling, Bail proposes an alternative epistemology grounded in imagination, connection, and openness to uncertainty. Ultimately, *Eucalyptus* suggests that genuine understanding arises not from domination but from dialogue. The psychology of classification may offer temporary security, yet it is storytelling that enables deeper forms of knowledge and human freedom.

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