

Wordsworth's the Prelude: A Manifesto of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

This paper investigates the contribution of William Wordsworth's poetry to increase the ecological consciousness of man. His work is analyzed in the light of ecocriticism with focus on reservation of natural resources and ecosystem to avert the undulate effects of human life. The ecocritics endeavor to warn people against their engagement in anti-ecological activities stating society as a mirror to the destructions of nature by artifacts. The literature is one of the prolific realms to exhibit this notion. Romanticism is one amongst the most active literary periods attended by the ecocritics. This study explores the ideas of ecocritics; Lawrence Buell (1939-), Harold Fromm (1951-), and Cheryll Glotfelty (1958-), in the poems of Wordsworth to trace out his cautious views about the interdependence of man and Nature. Accordingly, this research takes into consideration the importance of the mutual relationship between man and Nature as the key components of a vast ecosystem and helps the readers grow ecologically and attain serenity in an era suffocated by technological pollution.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, Ecocriticism, Romanticism, Nature, interdependence, mutual relationship, suffocated, technological pollution

Introduction

Ecocriticism emerged towards the close of the 20th century and at the dawn of the first decade of the 21st century. It is one of the few recent theories used and applied in the realm of literature to scrutinize literary piece of works by eco-scientific criteria. It is the analytical study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary perspective where all subjects come together to analyze the environment and find out possible solutions to the current environmental issues. With the publication of two seminal works, both published in the mid-1990s—*The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell, the term “ecocriticism” first officially came into our view. Ecocriticism offers a broad study approach and is recognized by a number of other designations, such as, “green cultural studies”, “eco-poetics”, and “environmental literary criticism”. Since “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, (Fromm, 1996). It may be said that any piece of literature which portrays nature as an instrument with intent of delivering a message to the reader may fall into the category of an ecocritical piece of writing. In this context, William Wordsworth might be entitled as an environmentally conscious literary preacher, since much of his poetry is a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (Buell, 1995)

Ecology is closely related to human beings and the natural world. When we talk about ecology, it is unavoidable to discuss the relation between man and nature. The relationship between man and nature is often described in Wordsworth's work, but is overlooked by many critics. Since the issue of ecology has become important in the 1990s, people start to pay attention to it and read Wordsworth from ecological point of view. This paper will explore Wordsworth's concept of ecology, especially the idea of relationship between man and natural world. For the purpose of this research paper, reference will be made to two major groups of critics. The first group includes Bate (1991), Kroeber (1994), and McKusick (2000) as those critics who support Wordsworth's ecological position and the second one consists of Hartman (1970), McGann (1983), and Simpson (1987) who reject Wordsworth's ecological stand as a mediator between human being and Nature.

Research questions

- Does Wordsworth's poetry represent ecocritical concerns with reference to his poem 'The Prelude'?
- How does Wordsworth's poem 'The Prelude' highlight his preoccupation with ecological issues which are increasing the ecological consciousness of modern man?

Literature Review

Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. It is fairly a recent phenomenon in Literature and Literary Studies. Emergence of ecocriticism changed the whole literary tradition of viewing the works of art with reference to nature. As a result mutual relationship between nature and man became the center of critical inquiry in literature. Romantic poetry, the literary epoch of the adoration of nature, became the icon of ecocritical

studies.

It is argued in “Ecocritical thoughts in John Keats poetry” by Nawazsakib that Keats’ ideas and thoughts are related to ecocriticism. For, his literature is mostly related to the nature and the human condition. Mortality, death, sex and transience of life are major subjects of his poetry and he mostly talks about the idea of mortality/immortality. Often associated with the term love in his poetry, he talks about the nature and its relation with human being. The poem “To Autumn” is exemplified to bring forth ecocritical aspects of Keats poetry. The poem focuses on the relationship between nature and the literature. It talks about the human conditions and its surrounding effects. The season autumn is the part of our ecosphere and ecocriticism is about the ecosystem and its relation with human. (nawazsakib, 2014)

Hamoud Yahya Ahmed and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, in their article “An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh” attempt to explore selected poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh using some concepts from ecocriticism as an analytical lens. They based the premise of their study on the poet’s mutualistic relationship between man and nature which has become a significant feature of his work. Analyzing his various nature poems, they reveal Muhammad’s idea of mutual relationship between the human world and the natural world of environment. More, they show the poet’s concern about the slightest interference of human beings into the world of nature which results in the disruption of human-nature relationship. By the textual and thematic analysis of Muhammad Haji Salleh’s poems, it is brought to surface that he does not limit himself to presenting the brighter and darker side of nature, rather he has gone a step further to reveal the very concept of ecosystem and reflect the blossoming of ecological consciousness in modern Malaysian society. By expounding the inherent features of nature in his selected poems, the two authors try to inculcate environmental awareness and inspire ecological consciousness among people in Malaysia and elsewhere in the world. (Hashim)

Dr. S. Ambika, in her article, “An Ecocritical Reading of Robert Frost’s Select Poems” endeavors to highlight the dualistic separation of human from nature in Frost’s poetry. She claims that Frost’ poetry represents modern man’s isolation from nature. She also proposes that Frost, mostly, uses nature as background to “to reveal his concept of the human relationship to this planet upon which the human race is destined to live out its days. Rural scenes and landscapes, homely farmers and the natural world are used to illustrate a psychological struggle with everyday experience faced by men but met with courage, will and purpose to keep moving on” (1). In this way she proposes that Frost uses nature to understand the intricacies of human nature. She says that Frost uses the imagery and analogy of nature to comprehend the subtleties of human life. Moreover she asserts that Frost’s poetry represents limitations of human beings, that nature is not reliable friend. She finds those human relations, in Frost’s poetry are hostile, “Man can never find a home in nature, nor can he live outside of it” (2). She compares Frost’s poetry with Emerson’s to show that Frost interest and engagement with nature is not limited to the aesthetic appraisal of nature. (Ambika, 2011)

Firas A. Nsaif Al Jumaili, in his article “An Ecocritical Reading of Gary Snyder’s Select Poetry” explores the ecological implications in major poetic works of Gary Snyder: *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems (1959)*, *Turtle Island (1974)* and *Mountains and Rivers without End (1996)*. He reads the works from an ecological point of view to highlight the significance of the environmental concerns embodied in Snyder’s poetry and states that “Snyder believes nature as composition of microscopic organisms, animals, plants and human societies. He raises voice for the protection of nature from the damages of civilization and insinuates humans to be in touch with their “wild” selves and return to a sense of union with nature. In all his works, ecological concerns are given great importance, particularly in *Turtle Island*. Snyder fought for the protection of the environment from the deadly harm caused by modern civilization. By showing the supremacy of the natural world and giving a revered dimension to the moral commitment to the environment’s protection from any possible human damage, Snyder could attract the people’s attention to the beauty of the wilderness and urge them to protest against any harm which might be done to the natural world. He refers a poem from *Riprap*, “Milton by Firelight,” in which Snyder warns against the decline of the natural environment. The poet is concerned about the damage caused to the environment by scientific “progress” which had given man superiority over the nonhuman elements of nature. In this poem, Snyder especially exhibits his cosmic consciousness which he always expresses in his writing. (Jumaili, 2014)

Methodology

The mode of inquiry for this research paper is qualitative. It is based on textual analysis. The ecocritical theory will formulate the theoretical framework and form the parameter for analysis and discussion of the selected poems of Wordsworth.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Lawrence Buell, Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty’s theories of Ecocriticism. Glotfelty and Fromm, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, explore the relationship between literature and nature. What they call physical environment, literary ecology is

the study of the ways that writing both represents and influences human interactions with the natural world. The aim of this study is to investigate the ecocritical concerns of Wordsworth's poetry.

Discussion

Wordsworth loved the outward appearances of nature, her grandeur in color and beauty, her form and external features like many other poets of his own and subsequent ages. But to study his poetry with a subtle inquisitiveness means to relearn his way of looking at nature. His nature poetry took a new turn passing beyond sensuous penetration and description of nature with a keen moral and ecocritical insight. The previous approaches to his nature poetry fail to account for the ecological aspects and significance of typical Wordsworthian pastoral writings, which actually attempts, at least to a certain limit, to search for human problems and their solutions in "an unmediated, unalienated relationship with nature" (Bate, 1991).

Although Wordsworth's poetry has been widely analyzed in terms of mystical and philosophical aspects of nature, yet his concern for ecology has to be explored. An examination of his Wordsworth's poems in the light of Eco-criticism might be useful in establishing his position as a poet for future generations. Wordsworth was a great admirer of the fascinating facets of nature. He describes the sensuous appeal of the breeze in the start of his poem "The Prelude":

"Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze / A visitant that while it
fans my cheek" (1-2).

However in the same vein, he describes the dullness of city life. He describes his stay in the city as:

"A discontented sojourner" (8).

Decaying condition of nature: Wordsworth's poem "The Simpon Pass" depicts the effects of deforestation. He seems to create awareness against the ongoing impact of human civilization on nature "The immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed" (4-5). He concludes this poem with an apprehension that constant deforestation might end up in the disorder of life.

Nature undisturbed is balanced and harmonious: Wordsworth tries to propagate eco-critical idea that "nature undisturbed is balanced and harmonious" (Gerrard, 2004). He points out this mysterious bond that unites nature and man: "there is a dark / Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements, makes them cling together / In one society" (341-3). Describing his childhood adventure of plundering the nest of raven, Wordsworth recalls his strange feelings:

While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth--and with what motion moved the clouds! (336-9)

Multiple roles of nature: Nature in Wordsworth's poetry assumes different roles. It is simultaneously mother, teacher, companion and even God. Recalling his childhood event of stealing a boat, Wordsworth highlights the role of nature as a teacher. He felt as if he was warned against his immoral action of stealing a boat.

And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me (380-4)

He describes the consequence of his trespassing of man in the world of nature. As a result of his confrontation with the horrifying aspect of nature, he was deprived of every day joys of nature

My brain worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

Conclusion

Wordsworth is not only a spiritual thinker but also an ecological activist of his time. His poetry, especially "The Prelude" conveys his ecological concerns. He reports through his autobiographical recollections that every phase of human life has its own intimate relations with nature. However, human awareness of the value of nature varies in different periods of life. Although his preoccupation with the spiritual element of nature cannot be denied, the infusion of ecological elements in his poetry imparts another dimension to his work. His nature poetry restores

the connection between man and environment through engenderment of respect for non-human world, and contributes to make him stand in line with other environmentalists and ecologists of modern world.

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