

# Social, Psychological and Environmental Effects of Pollution in London from the Eyes of British Poets

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## Abstract

This study aims at studying social, psychological and environmental effects of pollution in London in British Poetry within the framework of ecocriticism. Since pollution is a growing problem in London since Middle Ages, the paper will focus on how pollution problem has been reflected in British Poetry with a brief background information on the history of pollution in London. Since England is the first industrialized country, London had been the first city that faced with the environmental pollution in the modern term. This problem which threatened the environment has been the subject of literature of the period especially to the poetry which had been the voice of the society for ages. However, it is ecocriticism, a new literary movement initiated in 1990s that paved the way to the analysis of literary texts under the light of environmental aspects. For this reason, environmental pollution problem in British Poetry will be handled within the frame of ecocritical method. In conclusion, with a study on environmental pollution problem from social, psychological, environmental aspects in the poems of selected poets from seventeenth century to the contemporary period within the frame of ecocriticism, the paper aims to emphasize that as the problem of pollution gets more serious, its reflection to the poetry is equally felt more obviously in the poetry.

**Keywords:** environmental pollution, British Poetry, ecocriticism, environment

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## 1. Introduction

Environmental pollution is a negative phenomenon that came into existence with the history of humanity, is continuing today and predicted to continue in the future. This problem has been seen in all nations at all times, but what makes this paper focus on British Literature is the fact that Britain is the first industrialized country, which made it face up with this problem collectively for the first time. There is a widespread belief that the origin of environmental pollution in England goes back to Industrial Revolution, but it is actually Medieval Period which witnessed technological boom and raise of population that gave way to pollution for the first time. Medieval English Period witnessed a technological boom in Europe, population growth, mass migration and mechanization, which caused serious environmental pollution. In 13<sup>rd</sup> century, with coal that was started to be used rather than wood as a fuel, England started to face with air pollution problem. During the time of Renaissance and 17<sup>th</sup> century, the problem was worsened with the rise of the population and use of the popularization of coal (Gimpel 1997, pp. i-ii). Since then, environmental pollution has been the subject of British Literature which was mostly in verse at that time. However, until the emergence of ecocriticism towards the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, environmental issues of literary works had not been studied thoroughly. With ecocriticism, literary and cultural works of art started to be evaluated from an environmental perspective. On the one hand, works of literature that draw attention to environmental problems were produced; on the other hand, pioneer literary works that were written before were re-examined under the light of ecocriticism (Bracke *et al.* 2010). Hereby, this paper focuses on the theme of environmental pollution in the selected British poems since Renaissance Period to the contemporary poetry in the scope of ecocriticism and aims to show that as the problem of pollution gets more serious, its reflection to the poetry is equally felt more obviously in the poetry. In this paper, mostly British Poems that are not very popular and not studied much are selected deliberately in order to point out to the fact not only the well-known poets, but also the poems whose names are not referred to frequently in ecocritical studies have been trying to raise an environmental awareness through their poems and paved the way for ecocriticism for centuries. The poems with the theme of pollution will be evaluated from social, psychological and environmental aspects. In this scope, the poems of William Strode, Sir John Denham, John Milton, William Morris and Seamus Heaney will be discussed. The paper aims to provide a contribution to ecocriticism by presenting the early signs of ecocriticism in British Poetry and the place of British Ecocriticism in ecocritical studies in general.

## 2. Environmental Pollution & Ecocriticism

Although environmental problems have been the subject of literature for ages, they have not been studied thoroughly in literature since the emergence of ecocriticism towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although there are some pioneering works that paved the way to ecocriticism, it is mainly Rachel Carson's novel *Silent Spring*

that initiated ecocriticism. In “Introduction: Literary Criticism in an Age of Environmental Criticism” part of the book, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ecocriticism is defined as follows:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment! Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty *et al.* 2012 p. xviii).

As this definition indicates, like other literary theories, ecocriticism has its peculiar approach to a literary text and handles the text from an environmental perspective. The field of ecocriticism was developed as a response to growing recognition of environmental crises in many parts of the world after the Second World War. It was popularized with a focus on American and English literary traditions and was inspired by nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau and environmentalists like Rachel Carson, and by scholars such as Leo Marx and Raymond Williams (Lidström 2015 p.2). While the roots of American Ecocriticism go back to American Transcendentalist writers such as Thoreau and Emerson, it is English Romantic Poets who awakened environmental awareness collectively for the first time, which made them the first British ancestors of ecocriticism (Opperman 2012 pp. 17-18).

Some terms concerned with environment such as environmental ethics and environmental justice were the pioneering fields that prepared the way for ecocriticism. The ideas that support these terms which emphasizes the significance of nature and seriousness of environmental problems will be scrutinized in the poems that are studied in this paper. Ecocritical studies have increasingly developed over the past few decades into diverse fields and its sub-branches such as ecopsychology, ecological economics, ecofeminism, ecosophy, postcolonial ecocriticism have come into existence (Hochman 1997). Since this paper focuses on how pollution problem has been handled British Poems the framework of this study is ecocriticism.

### 3. Environmental Pollution & English Poetry

In middle ages, Europe witnessed an unprecedented mechanization with the machines used for grain milling, vegetable oil extraction and etc. and significant amount of forest area was destroyed for clear-cut to build houses, water mills, bridges and fences and especially for the ovens for melting the iron. For these reasons, England had to import timbers from Scandinavia in the year 1230. In 13th century, coal started to be used as a fuel instead of wood (Gimpel 1997, pp. i-ii; 1-78). With the increase in timber prices, coal started to be used as a fuel in the industry especially in the industry of iron and in England in the middle ages, but it remained as a fuel used in merely in the industry rather than at houses and indoor places thanks to its smoke (Brimblecombe 1987, p. 29). In Renaissance period, thanks to the limited timber stocks and increase in its price, the coal with less sulphur obtained in Newcastle started to be used at houses including the houses of the nobles. For this reason, air pollution became a significant problem unable to be solved in London in Renaissance Period (Cavert 2016, p. 79).

In 17th Century, Great Fire of 1666 which continued for four days and destroyed most of the historical structure of London was one of the most prominent environmental disasters. In the second half of the 17th Century, London became the centre of political, financial, cultural and social life. With its peculiar theatre, unprecedented harbours, market, coffee houses, press, cultured people, London became a metropolitan. All these made London the most crowded city of England, which gave way to water and air pollution. At that time, London became the first city that struggled with air pollution problem of the modern ages (Field 2018, pp. 1,161; Hiltner 2011, p. 10). In 18th Century, with the invention of steam engine in 1775, Industrial Revolution was given start in England and with feudal social structure of the country turned into a capitalist one in time (Ferber 2012, pp. 10-13). At that time, urban pollution increased with an industrialized economy and it was in this period that British Romantic Poets collectively struggled to call nation back to the nature with their poems. In Victorian Period in which most of the people started to work in cities in the industry, England became the most powerful country financially with abundant and cheap coal and became the first country in the world whose most of the population is living at the cities, which increased environmental pollution to a great extent (Wheeler 1995, pp. 11-12; Thorsheim 2006, pp. 1-4, 48). In 20th Century, especially with the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the production of coal in England increased and, in some regions, people tried to provide more smoke to protect cities and factories from the enemy attacks, which caused serious air pollution. It is known that in the year 1952, the smoke of the locomotives, factories and the chimneys of the crowded cities killed 4000 people in a week thanks to air pollution. This rate is higher than the number of people who lost their lives after the German bombardment of England (Thorsheim 2006, pp. 362-363-183). Recently, the environmental pollution has reached unpredictable rate in terms of both its hazards and its complicatedness because currently the main reasons of environmental pollution are ranging from traffic, carbon dioxide emission, acid rains, solid industrial wastes, disused computers, cell phones, televisions including e-wastes such as lead, hydrogarum and cadmium (Curley, 2011 pp. 11-17).

The problem of pollution which was the growing problem of British nation has been reflected to British Literature as well. Since poetry handles environmental concerns in a higher level than prose, this paper focuses on the selected British Poetry. In *A New Theory for American Poetry*, Angus Fletcher points out to the role of poetry in rising an environmental awareness as follows:

Unlike most prose discourse, poetry expresses close personal involvements, and hence pertains to the way we humans respond, on our own, to environmental matters. [...] An art like poetry that enhances the presence of the individual is bound to be central in showing how we should understand our environmental rights and obligations. The issue then is this, what is my own response to my surrounding? (Lidström 2015, p. 147)

As seen, Fletcher regards poetry as not merely a reflection or representation of nature, but as a nature itself. For him, the poem itself is an 'environmental form' (Lidström 2015, p. 147). For this reason, this paper prefers poetry as the form to be analysed to shed light on how British Poets handled the problem of pollution in their poems in the scope of ecocriticism.

Human beings had been burning fossil fuels for thousands of years, but never on the scale of 17th century London because by the beginning of this century, London experienced a new, unprecedented wave of sea coal air pollution. John Evelyn's work *Fumifugium* (1661) is the first work that handles the problem of air pollution in the most comprehensive way in the history of Britain as well as the world. For this reason, it is regarded as the origin of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* that initiated ecocriticism (Lidström 2015 pp. 96, 103). Although *Fumifugium*, that was written as a denunciation of London smoke, failed to reform the city, it influenced the king to check his own exposure to pollution (Cavert 2016, p. 16).

In verse, William Strode's "Chimney Sweeper's Song" in 1635 may be regarded as one of the first literary attempts that pioneered environmental justice which is the sub-branch of ecocriticism. In the poem, Strode points out to the injustice between the poor and wealthy Londoners in terms of their exposure to the problem of pollution as follows:

"The scent, the smoke, ne'er hurts me,  
The dust is never minded;  
Mine eyes are glass, men swear as I pass,  
Or else I had been blinded  
For in the midst of chimneys,  
I chant my lays in Vulcan's praise,  
As merry as the swallows.  
Still up I rush.

....

The boys that climb like crickets

And steal my trade, I 'll strip them" (qtd. in Hiltner 2011 p. 108).

This poem is an early example of supporting environmental justice which calls for an equal amount of exposure to pollution, environmental changes as well as suffering of resource scarcity among people without addressing their wealth and poverty (Lidström 2015, p. 85). It is because the poem makes it clear that working class performing the job of chimney sweeping suffered from the dangers such as toxic chemicals more than wealthier individuals. The chimney sweepers who are exposed to long-term creosote residue in chimney that gives way to serious health problems such as kidney and liver damage and cancer. Strode draws attention to this case with the phrases such as "The scent, the smoke, ne'er hurts/The dusk is never minded." He also puts an emphasis on the humiliation of the chimney sweepers by others with the phrase "men swear as I pass".

In addition to being an early example of a work that demands environmental justice, Strode's "Chimney Sweeper's Song" shows social effects of pollution. It is because the poem points out to the fact that there is an injustice in the society which is based on the social status of people and this social status has a determining role even the amount of exposure to the pollution. This poem also shows that even the profession of the people is determined in childhood in accordance with their social status. It is because the lines "The boys that climb like crickets/And steal my trade" show that the children of the working class are already been planned to do the same job as their fathers when they grow up (Hiltner 2011, p. 109). Therefore, the poem can be regarded as a summary of the condition of the poor in 17th century as well as a signal that shows that injustice was already evident in the society at that time.

In the poem "Cooper's Hill" Sir John Denham also dealt with pollution problem. Denham points out to the environmental degradation. The speaker of the poem explains that "I see the City (London) in a thicker cloud/Of business, then of smoke" (Hiltner 2011, p. 113). After imagining himself raised well into the "aerie, secure from danger and fear" the speaker describes London:

"So rais'd above the tumult and crowd  
I see the City in a thicker cloud  
Of business, then of smoke; where men like Ants

Toyle to prevent imaginarie wants;  
Yet all in vaine, increasing with their store,  
Their vast desires, but make their wants the more.  
As food to unsound bodies, though it please  
The Appetite, feeds only the disease;  
Where with like haste, though several waies they runne:  
Some to undoe, and some to undone:  
While Luxury and wealth, like Warr and Peace,  
Are each other's ruine.  
In tumults seek their peace, their heaven in hell,  
On happiness of sweet retir'd content!" (qtd. in Hiltner 2011, p. 113)

Readers at the time would have immediately recognized London's air pollution problem in Denham's description of the city (Hiltner 2011, p. 114). He describes the city in "a thicker cloud" and as a "crowded place". The people of the city he describes are resembled to "ants" who try to disregard their imagination and as "vaine" and insatiable individuals with their "vast desires" which "makes their wants more." With these qualities of people, Denham points out to unsatisfactory desires of human beings that has a role in the air pollution of the city.

With this poem, Denham points out the role of human beings in the appearance and worsening of the pollution problem. As seen in the line "The Appetite, feeds only the disease", Denham implies that insatiable desires of human beings make them want more, which he defines as an activity that "feeds" their "disease".

Milton is another poet who referred to pollution problem in his poems, especially in his well-known poem *Paradise Lost*. Milton was almost the only popular poet who dealt with the air pollution problem of the time [10] (p. 112). In his famous poem London's air pollution problem is felt in these lines:

"As one who longs in populous City pent,  
Where Houses thick and Sewers annoy the Aire,  
Forth issuing on a Summers Morn, to breathe  
Among the pleasant Villages and Farmes  
Adjoynd, from each thing met conceaves delight,  
The smell of Grain, or tedded Grass, or Kine,  
Or Dairie" (qtd. in Hiltner 2011, p. 1132)

In these lines, a "populous City" like London is compared to Hell because of its air quality, but, in contrast, the fresh air of the countryside is used as analogy to better understand the Eden of Satan [10] (p. 112).

With the beginning of the industrial revolution in England, London had been the first city that faced with the environmental pollution in the modern term. Therefore, pollution problem was started to be taken as the subject of British verse more frequently and seriously. At that time, British Poets especially British Romantic Writing tried to call people back to a time in which people and nature are united to prevent environmental degradation. British poet William Morris was one of those poets who took the subject of pollution as the subject of his poems. In his poem *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), Morris called on his readers to:

"Forget the spreading of the hideous towns;  
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,  
And dream of London, white and clean,  
The Clear Thames, bordered by its gardens green" (qtd. in Thorsheim 2006, pp. 37, 38).

With this poem, Morris tries to remind his readers the time in which London still resembled to an "earthly parade" when London had not faced with "the spreading of the hideous towns" and it was still "white and clean". With this reminder of the past of London by making his readers envisage such a pastoral scene, the poet points out to the psychological effects on pollution on the people. He tries to emphasize how pollution effected people in a negative way by transforming "the earthly paradise" to dirty city with a polluted river (Thames) that is no longer "bordered by gardens green".

In 20th century in which pollution problem became more and more serious, British poets started to handle this problem more frequently. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney is one of them. When he is asked about his early awareness of environmental cries, Heaney replies as follows:

Pollution, especially the pollution of rivers, was an obsession with the pair of them, and it was something I myself knew about from childhood. There was always a dread of allowing 'lint water' to get into the Moyola, since it was deadly for the fish – lint water being the water left in a flax dam after the flax had been retted. And I also remembered the sight of the first white froth floating down the Moyola after Nestlé opened their factory at Castledawson. So I was an apt pupil (Lidström 2015, p. 17).

As seen, Heaney had witnessed the pollution problem, especially river pollution since his childhood. He complaint about River Moyola's being polluted by "link water" that kills fishes. He also refers to the Nestlé factory that polluted River Moyola whose first signs of pollution the poet witnessed. The poet was so much

effected by the pollution of River Moyola that he wrote a poem entitled “Moyulla” that was published in District and Circle collection (Lidström 2015, p. 18). In this poem, the poet complains about the pollution of the river as seen in these lines:

“her stones, her purls, her pebbles slicked and blurred with algae, as if her name and addressing water suffered muddying, her clear vowels a great vowel shift, Moyola to Moyulla” (qtd. in Lidström 2015, p. 18).

In order to point out to the pollution of river over time and worsening of ecological conditions, poet changes the name of the river in the poem from “Moyola” to “Moyulla” with “a great vowel shift”. With this “shift” of the vowel, the poet emphasizes ecological degradation of the river and its surrounding. He also lays stress on the “blurring” and “muddying” of the river (Lidström 2015, p. 18). This poem recalls an earlier poem of Heaney “A New Song” that was published in *Wintering Out*. In the first stanza of “A New Song”, the poet remembers the beauty of the river and its surroundings:

“the river’s long swerve, A kingfisher’s blue bolt at dusk [...] The Moyola Pleasuring beneath alder trees” (qtd. in Lidström 2015, p. 18).

This pastoral and idyllic Irish scene of the The Moyola that provides pleasure “beneath alder trees” and portrayed in the first stanza is countered by the speaker’s memory of British presence in the area. However, in this earlier poem, the poet’s aim is to point out not to ecological degradation of the area, but to British presence of the area:

“But now our river tongues must rise From licking native haunts To flood, with vovelling embrace” (qtd. in Lidström 2015, p. 18).

While in the poem ‘Moyulla’ Heaney points out to the ecological problems, this poem refers to colonialization that is a social and political problem with the degradation of Irish rural idyll (Lidström 2015, p. 8). This approach of Heaney is in the line with postcolonial ecocriticism a sub-field of ecocriticism that was proposed by ecocritic Lawrence Buell in his work *The Environmental Imagination* (1995). As its name suggests, postcolonial ecocriticism calls for the need to combine postcolonial theory with ecocriticism and to combine the concerns over social justice and environmental issues (Lidström 2015, p. 85).

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is observed that the pollution problem has been always been the subject of British Poetry since 17th century onwards to the contemporary period. The analyses of the selected poems show that with its emphasis on social, cultural and environmental effects of pollution in London, British Poetry has pioneered ecocriticism by pointing out to either environmental degradation or the sub-fields of ecocriticism such as environmental justice and postcolonial ecocriticism. This paper makes it clear that although as a literary theory, ecocriticism came into existence towards the end of 20th century, the background and principles of ecocriticism had already been shaped in British Poetry from 17th century onwards. Finally, this paper shows that the pollution problem effects both human and non-human world negatively. If it continues to do so, pollution will be the main subject of the poems of the future who will have to wear a gas mask to be able to produce their poems as seen in the below picture which is planned and designed by the author of this paper:

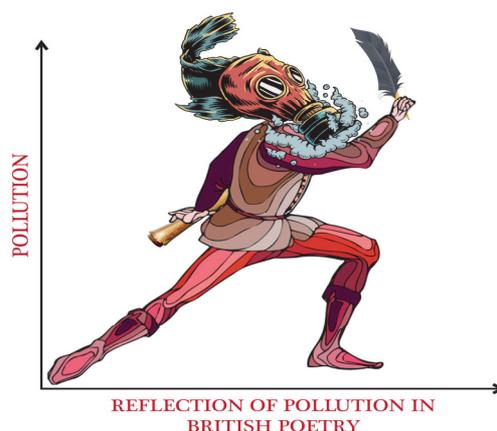


Figure 1. The Rise of Environmental Pollution & Its Reflection to British Poetry  
Description for the above figure.

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