

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S "TINTERN ABBEY"

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ABSTRACT

Conservation of Nature has become a primary task of every person in the contemporary world. The natural disasters in the recent years have not only enforced the human society to think of the importance of Nature for human survival and the need for a harmonious relation with it, but also have cautioned everyone that any human action against Nature will yield destruction of the humanity at large. Consequently, today, the study of Nature has formed an integral part of various academic domains. The focus given to Nature in literature is perceivable in the literary theory known as 'ecocriticism'. This paper presents an outline of ecocriticism, followed by the sources of ecological crisis, and solutions offered by Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" to protect Nature. It provides an account of the three stages of Wordsworth's attitude to Nature in the light of ecocriticism, and the portrayal of the reward for love of Nature.

Key words: Wordsworth, ecocriticism, Tintern Abbey, nature, and romantic poets.

INTRODUCTION

Though ecocriticism as a literary theory is of recent origin, the elements of it are found in the works of several writers in the earlier period. Romanticism, in this regard, is an embodiment of the rudiments of ecocriticism. The Romantic poets attempted to rediscover the mystery and wonder of the world, and tried to establish a meaningful relationship between literature and Nature. To them, Nature was the principal source of inspiration and spiritual enlightenment. William Wordsworth, who belongs to the first generation of the Romantic poets, is considered to be a Nature poet, who viewed Nature as a living entity, and who believed that Nature was endowed with feeling and purpose. According to Dean Church, "Wordsworth was first and foremost a philosophical thinker, a man whose intention and purpose it was to think out for himself, faithfully and seriously, the questions concerning man and nature and human life" (as cited in Bradley, 1999, p. 129). This paper is an attempt to substantiate that Wordsworth's poem, "Tintern Abbey", which is "an auto-monologue with a setting and an auditor" (Irvine and Honan, 1975, p. 123), is a typical ecocritical work.

1. An Outline of Ecocriticism

In order to analyze Wordsworth's poem, "Tintern Abbey," in the light of ecocriticism, it is fundamental to have an ample understanding of the theory of ecocriticism. Hence, a brief account of ecocriticism is presented in the following.

1. 1. What is Ecocriticism?

Glotfelty, in his introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), an anthology of American ecocriticism, defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (as cited in Garrard, 2007, p. 3). Ecocritics tie their cultural analyses to a 'green'

moral and political agenda. Ecofeminists, social ecologists and environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns (Garrard, 2007, p. 3).

1. 2. The Origin of the Term

The term ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in an essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". According to Greg Garrard (2007), the notion of ecocriticism has proceeded from the belief systems derived from Eastern religions such as Taoism and Buddhism, from heterodox figures in Christianity such as St. Francis of Assisi and Teilhard de Chardin, and modern reconstructions of American Indian, pre-Christian Wiccan, Shamanistic and other 'primal' religions (pp. 22-23).

1. 3. Ecocriticism as a Genre

The ecologically minded scholars had published works of eco-theory and criticism since the explosion of environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. However, there was no organized movement to study the ecological side of literature. So, those works were categorized under different subject headings like pastoralism, human ecology, regionalism and American Studies. In the 1980s, the scholars, through the Western Literature Association, began to work collectively to establish ecocriticism as a genre. In 1990, at the University of Nevada in Reno, Glotfelty became the first person to hold an academic position as a Professor of Literature and Environment. ASLE has burgeoned into an organization with thousands of members in the US alone. After late 1990s, new branches of ASLE and affiliated organization have been started in the UK, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India, Taiwan and Europe.

1. 4. Ecocriticism and Ecology

Ecocriticism is a unique contemporary literary and cultural theory because it has a close relationship with the science of ecology. The *New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010) defines ecology as "the relation of plants and living creatures to each other and to their environment" (p. 482). No living being is an island. Every living being interacts with other living beings and physical surroundings. All living beings in the world are interdependent. Human beings, for instance, depend on Nature for good air, water, food and shelter. Similarly, Nature depends on human beings in several respects, particularly for its own protection from manmade hazards. Thus, there is a symbiotic relationship between human beings and Nature.

2. ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WORDSWORTH'S "TINTERN ABBEY"

Ecocriticism examines environmental issues which include the causes for ecological degradation, the answers to which are found in the ecocritical analysis of Wordsworth's poem, "Tintern Abbey". In this regard, knowledge of the historical sources for the ecological ruin will enlighten the ecocritical reading of the poem. The following are the sources of ecological crisis.

2. 1. The Sources of Ecological Crisis

2. 1. 1. The Classical Greek Humanism

The classical Greek humanism emphasized the inherent superiority of humans over other species, and defined man as a rational animal. The Greeks held that humans, in virtue of their rational capacities, have a kind of worth greater than that of any non-rational being. In other words, rationality was the key to human superiority over animals (Pojman, 1998, pp. 107-108).

2. 1. 2. Cartesian Dualism

Another tradition which seems to be the basis for human superiority over animals and other nonhuman beings is the Cartesian dualism of soul and body. In the opinion of Descartes, human beings have souls while animals do not have. To him, animals are mere automata and lack the divine element i.e. soul that makes us spiritual beings (Pojman, 1998, p. 108). Cartesian dualism implies that human beings, on account of the possession of soul, are superior to animals.

2. 1. 3. *The Judeo-Christian Concept of the Great Chain of 'Being'*

This is another major source of human superiority. Judeo-Christian teachings proclaim that humans are superior to animals and plants because of the higher place given to them by God on the great chain. The chain begins with God at the top. Then, there are the angels who are lower than God but higher than humans. The humans occupy the place lower to the angels. Then, the chain moves to the lower levels occupied by animals, plants and finally inanimate objects. In addition to this belief, there is another claim that human beings are made in God's image, and therefore, they are closer to God (Pojman, 1998, p. 108). The Christian monks, who had rightly understood the purpose of the creation of the world, were very much interested in Nature, and were concerned with its protection. However, persons who misconceived the teachings, assumed that since Nature is said to be subordinate to them, they could do anything with it.

2. 1. 4. *Anthropocentrism and Androcentricism: the Ecofeminism*

Deep ecology considers the anthropocentric dualism of humanity and Nature as the ultimate source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices. Ecofeminism blames the androcentric dualism of man and woman. The anthropocentric dualism distinguishes humans from Nature on the grounds of possession of an immortal soul or rationality and assumes that this distinction confers superiority upon humans. The androcentric dualism distinguishes man from woman on the grounds of some alleged quality such as larger brain size. It assumes that this distinction confers superiority upon men. These two arguments share a common logic of domination. Hence, as Davion points out, women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional and the particular. On the contrary, men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational and the abstract. Thus, there is a common cause for feminists and ecologists (Garrard, 2007, pp. 23-25).

2. 2. A Note on the Historic Tintern Abbey

Tintern Abbey, which stands as a ruined building, was established in 1131, by Walter Richard de Clare, the Earl of Chepstow, on the banks of the river Wye in Monmouthshire, which is located in Wales, United Kingdom. Henry VIII, in order to obtain a divorce from his first wife Catherine of Aragon, wanted to get himself away from the authority of the Pope. This led him to convert England from Catholicism to Protestantism. Consequently, all monastic communities were dissolved and most of their buildings were destroyed. The monks of Tintern Abbey were ordered to leave, and their monastery was demolished and left as a ruin. This Abbey was the inspiration behind Wordsworth's poem, "Tintern Abbey" or "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," which is considered to be one of the greatest romantic poems of English language.

2. 3. Rudiments of Ecocriticism in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey": Solutions to the Ecological Crisis**2. 3. 1. *The Poem, "Tintern Abbey" as an Ecocritical Work***

As described by one of the Wordsworth's biographers, "Tintern Abbey" is a landscape poem in the eighteenth-century tradition (Durrant, 1970, p. 87). Landscape is symbolic of the environment or Nature, and poetry is an important genre of literature. The very fact that "Tintern Abbey" is a landscape poem showcases that it is an ecocritical work which establishes a relation between Nature and literature.

2. 3. 2. *The Significance of the Demarcations in the Poem*

There are elements of demarcation in the poem, "Tintern Abbey," which can be given an ecocritical touch.

2. 3. 2. 1. *Nature versus Culture*

From the aesthetic point of view, the ruined Tintern Abbey, which was built with human hands, adds beauty to the picturesque scene of Nature. From religious angle, it is emblematic of the monks who were in harmony with Nature. However, from an ecocritical point of view, the abbey, just as a dilapidated building, without any reference to religious aspects, can be taken to be a metaphor that refers to culture (that which is manmade), symbolizing the impact of human domination over Nature, which results in the destruction of mankind. A house or a building becomes meaningful only when it is inhabited by human beings. If human beings feel superior to Nature and destroy it, Nature will destroy them back. As a result, the world, like the ruined Tintern Abbey

which has no human inhabitants, will become devoid of human race. In other words, human race will be obliterated. Therefore, human superiority over Nature should be totally eliminated.

2. 3. 2. 2. *Fretful Life of the City versus Peace of the Wye: Nature as a Symbol of Harmony*

Life in the city is characterized by uproar, agony and fretful situations. But Nature is a symbol of peace and harmony. If the fretful life of the city dominates Nature, humankind will become agitated, and life will become meaningless. If people realize the importance of Nature, it will offer them a harmonious life. This is crystal clear in Wordsworth's account of his experience. During the five years, i.e. from 1793 to 1798, when Wordsworth was 'in lonely rooms', amid 'the din of towns and cities', he was 'in the hours of weariness', and was depressed by the sad happenings around him. The recollection of Nature seen at Wye tranquilized his mind and gave him peace and joy, alleviating his agony and depression.

2. 3. 3. *The Three Stages of Wordsworth's Attitude to Nature in the Light of Ecocriticism*

As various critics have pointed out, Wordsworth's attitude to Nature in his "Tintern Abbey" can be categorized into three stages such as boyhood, youth and stage of transformation which can be looked at from an ecocritical point of view.

2. 3. 3. 1. *The Stage of Childhood or Body: the Stage of Avidya (Ignorance)*

Wordsworth, at the stage of childhood which is also regarded as the stage of body, was ignorant of the value of Nature and therefore did not realize and appreciate its beauty and worth. At this stage, he had only the sense perception of the scenic beauty of Nature, and therefore Nature did not influence his mind. Consequently, he could not enjoy the pleasure and happiness offered by Nature. He was filled with fear rather than joy. This is evident in his poem:

when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led: more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved. (Green, 2007, p. 76)

Durrant (1970) observes that Wordsworth, throughout the poem, "Tintern Abbey", attempts to convey that "mind of man 'half-creates' what it sees, and that the world 'of eye and ear' depends for the revelation of its beauty and order on the activity of the observing mind" (p. 90). From an ecocritical perspective, the childhood stage of Wordsworth is a stage of avidya or ignorance which symbolizes the recent past life of humanity. In the beginning, the primitive people were very close to Nature. With the emergence of globalization and modernization, the people in the recent past, had forgotten to perceive the value of Nature, and had become ignorant of its importance to their existence. Therefore, in the name of modernization and scientific advancements, they had been inflicting on Nature all kinds of injuries in the form of deforestation, pollutions, nuclear tests, over-use of natural resources, and the like. As a result, the Nature has begun to react against humanity in the form of natural calamities like tsunami, earthquakes, global warming and climatic changes, and it has begun to pose itself as a symbol of terror to human beings.

2. 3. 3. 2. *The Stage of Youth: the Stage of Mind*

In his youth, which is regarded as a stage of mind, Wordsworth was captivated by the external beauty of Nature — the colours and forms of Nature. His contact with Nature had mellowed him and made him feel for the sufferings of his fellow beings. However, he did not rationalize at his 'thoughtless youth'. This stage represents the present circumstances in the world. People have become aware of the importance of Nature to their existence, and they have realized after the tsunami and recent climatic changes that human life is not possible without Nature. However, the measures that have been taken in the world at present are not adequate to protect the earth from the ecological crisis that is prevalent.

2. 3. 3. 3. *The Stage of Transformation: the Stage of Intellect*

2. 3. 3. 3. 1. *The Experience of the One Underlying Principle*

The third stage of his life is a stage of transformation or the stage of intellect wherein Wordsworth begins to rationalize why he should feel for the sufferings of his fellow human beings. When he begins to rationalize, he discovers that the same principle which is in him is present in all other beings. In other words, there is 'one underlying principle' which is pervasive in all beings:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (Green, 2007, p. 77)

According to Geoffrey H. Hartman (1964), a "sentence from 'Tintern Abbey' may start with the first person yet end on 'all things'" (p. 27). That which moved the poet sometimes, somewhere, as a personal feeling, is the principle which animates the world (Hartman, 1964, p. 27). Wordsworth's contact with Nature has made him experience the unseen principle. That is why, whenever he looks at the Nature, he is reminded of the sufferings of human beings, and he feels for them. Like Wordsworth, there is a need for every individual in the present world to perceive the animating principle of the world so that an intimacy with Nature may be developed, and thus Nature and humanity may be shielded from all sorts of perils that would devastate them. Some critics refer to this principle as God, and relate it with pantheism. To avoid further debates on this, the animating principle could be regarded as intrinsic value and worth of Nature. Whether one believes in God or not, one cannot deny the indispensability of interrelationship between Nature and human being. Therefore, every individual in this world is required to perceive and comprehend the worth of Nature in his or her life.

2.3.3.2. Wordsworth's Antagonistic Attitude towards Anthropocentric Approach

The classical Greek humanism, Cartesian dualism, the Judeo-Christian concept of the great chain of 'Being' and anthropocentricism have emphasized the superiority of humans over Nature. This feeling of superiority and domination is the major cause for the environmental degradation. Wordsworth, who had experienced the divine principle that seems to pervade in the entire creation, was antagonistic to the claim of human superiority. This is remarkably observed by R. O. C. Winkler who, commenting on the above-quoted passage, contends that "the dichotomy between the mental and material worlds which philosophers had increasingly taken for granted since the seventeenth century was to Wordsworth (as to Kant) wholly antipathetic, and he frequently in his verse attempts a general statement of the basis of their unity" (as cited in Durrant, 1970, p. 95). Thus, Wordsworth stands as a bridge between humanity and Nature.

Wordsworth's third stage of life that is portrayed in "Tintern Abbey" is symbolic of an ideal stage that is yet to be achieved. Like Wordsworth, every individual in this world should love and appreciate Nature, and should perceive the divine beauty in it. Everyone should realize the essentiality of Nature in his or her life and should contribute to its protection. All the nations should make a joint effort to put an end to all that is harmful to Nature, and should go for alternative policies that would safeguard both human beings as well as Nature. It is quite necessary for the human world to develop respect and regard for the natural world.

2.3.4. *The Reward for Love of Nature*

Wordsworth marvelously portrays the reward offered by Nature, if humanity loves it:

well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and the soul
Of all my moral being. (Green, 2007, p. 77)

Wordsworth realizes that unlike human beings, Nature will never betray 'the heart that loved her'. Hence, if human beings safeguard Nature from all manmade dangers and all environmental hazards, it will in return guard, nurse and guide them.

3. HEIDEGGERIAN ECOPHILOSOPHY AND ECOCRITICAL APPROACH OF WORDSWORTH

Heidegger is believed to have inspired a number of ecocritics. He makes a difference between mere natural existence and a revelation of 'being' or the thing-ness of things, which requires human consciousness as space in and through which it is disclosed. Responsible humans have an implicit duty to let things disclose themselves in their own inimitable way. To him, poetry is one of the modes for disclosure of being. Through poetry, we learn that man is not the lord of 'beings,' but the shepherd of 'Being'. Thus, Heidegger assigns a pivotal role to the work of art (Garrard, 2007, pp. 31-32). Thus, Heideggerian ecophilosophy has attracted the ecocritics to a very great extent.

Wordsworth's claim seems to be analogous to the views of Heidegger. Nature, Wordsworth argues, discloses the one underlying principle, which the people have failed to identify. He advises every human being to recognize this animating principle. In fact, he has used his poetry to disclose this fact, and he attempts to articulate that man is not the lord of Nature. He advises everyone to realize his or her duty of loving and preserving Nature.

CONCLUSION

Wordsworth, through the poem, "Tintern Abbey", has shown a way to establish a better world and a better life, and has taught how a close relationship with Nature could be created in order to give birth to a peaceful and harmonious life in the world. He advises everyone to learn from the past. This is perceptible in the words of Geoffrey H. Hartman (1964) who claims that "Wordsworth's poetry looks back in order to look forward the better" (p. 29). Thus, the poem, "Tintern Abbey", is a typical ecocritical work which strives to promote a relationship between Nature and human being. It also indirectly advises every reader to look back and see how human beings have behaved towards Nature in the past, and what the consequences of their anthropocentric attitude towards Nature are. It also insists on the need to take proper measures to establish harmony with Nature.

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