

An Eco-critical Reading of William Wordsworth's Poetry and Pantheistic Strains in his Poetry

Hafiz Javed ur Rehman*

Syed Naeem**

Abstract:

The relation between people and environment has long been documented through literary works. Edward white gives the example of Adam and Eve journey through the Garden of Eden in the Bible and Odyssey dangerous trek across the Mediterranean Sea in Homer's Odyssey as early literary examples in which human path cross the nature and interact with the beauty of nature.

Etymology:

The term Eco criticism was first invented by William Rueckert in 1978, in his essay; Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco criticism (1978). Since then it is widely used in the study and analysis of literature.

Introduction:

Eco criticism studies the relationship between literature and the earth environment. Cheryl Glatfelter in his work The Eco criticism Reader (1996) defined the term as, "Eco criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, Eco criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies".

Eco criticism is an interdisciplinary approach that analyses the work of authors, researchers and poets in the context of environmental issues and nature. It seeks to investigate the relationship between humans and nature and analyzes the attitude of humans toward nature. Like all literary theories Eco criticism also provides a lens through which one can approach a literary text to highlight how is nature represented in literature and what role physical geographical setting can play in the structure of a literary work. Though eco-criticism as a literary theory is of a recent origin, the elements of it are found in the works of several writers in the earlier period. Romanticism, in this regard is considered an embodiment of the rudiments of Eco criticism.

Romantic Era:

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published Lyrical Ballads in 1798. This book contains the poem of both the poets. So Lyrical Ballads is a collaborative effort of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth added a preface to this literary work in

* PhD Scholar, Department of Communication Studies, University of Georgia, Athens, USA.

** Postdoc Scholar, UCLA, USA

order to help the public to understand this new kind of poetry. Through the preface Wordsworth also wants to inform the public that the kind of poetry they are going to read in Lyrical Ballads is more real and everlasting (1798).

This artistic work started a new era which is known as romantic period in the history of English Literature. The term romanticism is defined in a number of ways. It is considered as liberalism in literature because it liberated the poetic language from the classical rules and monotonousness. It is also defined as a renaissance of wonder as well as an addition of strangeness to beauty.

All the romantic poets tried to establish a meaningful relationship between literature and nature. Nature is a predominant theme in the romantic poetry. Romantic poets considered nature as a living entity and solemnize it in a number of ways.

William Wordsworth, who belongs to the first generation of the romantic poets, is regarded as a prophet and worshipper of nature. Among all romantic poets he is more concerned with the good influence of nature on human beings. According to him nature plays a vital role in the spiritual and intellectual development of humans. He considers nature a great teacher of humankind.

Wordsworth and French Revolution:

During French Revolution with pen in his hand he took an active part in the spreading of revolutionary ideas. He was very much fascinated by the motto of French Revolution, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. He wrote in the Prelude about that time.

Bliss was in that dawn to be alive

But to be young was very Heaven! (7-8)

Wordsworth was very much enthusiastic about the success of French Revolution. He was expecting the ushering of a new world where liberty, equality and fraternity would be the laws of the life. But when the French Revolution failed to deliver what it had promised earlier and the reign of terror started Wordsworth was so much frustrated and disappointed. He decided to leave politics and go to the lap of nature to seek its healing power and find some solace there. So, French Revolution helped a lot in directing Wordsworth attention towards nature.

Nature a Living Personality:

Wordsworth considered nature as a living personality. He believed that there is a divine spirit pervading all the objects of nature. This attitude of Wordsworth to nature is called as mystical pantheism. In Tintern Abbey (1798), he discusses the concept of pantheism in a more vibrant way.

And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thought; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused

Whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns

And the round ocean and living air

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man (95-101)

Wordsworth says that man sees god in nature and ultimately everywhere. God exists in every object of nature. God is described as dwelling in the sun, the ocean, the sky and the air. Wordsworth conceives nature as living personality.

Nature has a Healing Power:

When Wordsworth was frustrated and disappointed with life he decides to seek the beneficial influence of nature. He believes that the company of nature gives joy to the human heart. He looks upon nature as exercising a healing influence on sorrow- stricken heart. Nature consoles us,

All which we behold
Is full of blessings (Tintern Abbey)

Nature provides solace for man. It lightens its burden of humanity. He enjoys his time in the lap of nature. He feels free of all worries when he observes the beauty of nature. In Tintern Abbey,

....the heavy and weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened (18-19)

Unlike Wordsworth Thomas Hardy does not see nature as beneficial and benevolent being. Though Hardy portrays nature as an essential character in his work he regards nature as the agent of cruelty and destruction who is having no sympathy for human beings. Instead of seeking nature healing power he gets the lesson of pessimism from nature. In the Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) he says;

Happiness is but an occasional episode in
The general drama of pain.

Nature is a great Teacher

Throughout his poetry Wordsworth emphasizes the belief that nature is a great moral teacher, the best mother, guardian and nurse of man. In Tables Turn (1798), he says;

Up up! My friend, and quit your books
Or surely you'll grow double
Up! Up! My friend and clear your books
Why all this toil and trouble (1-4)

Wordsworth as a spokes person for nature rejects all human knowledge gained through reading.

Books! It is dull and endless strife
Come; hear the woodland linnet (10-11)

He says that nature is a good teacher of human beings. We can learn a lot of things from nature if we interact with it,

Come forth into the light of things
Let nature be your teacher (15-16)

Wordsworth further describes that nature bestows on man the real knowledge,

One impulse from vernal wood
May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,
Then all the sages can (21-24).

Towards the end of the poem he tells the readers,
Enough of science and arts
Close up those barren leaves (29-30).

Nature and Childhood:

Wordsworth in his ode: Intimation of Immortality (1807) states that when he was child he could see the beauty of nature and the natural world was shining in the heavenly light.

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream
To me did seem

Appareled in heavenly light (1-4)

Wordsworth thinks that a child has a more close communication with nature in childhood. Every object of nature appears to him beautiful and attractive. Nature is more enchanting and appealing for a child.

But when the child grows old he goes away from the nature. At adult age he involves himself in worldly affairs so much that he does not give any attention to nature. He can not see nature in heavenly light anymore.

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now forever taken from my sight
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flowers (1807)

Wordsworth in the above lines mourns the idea that he cannot see nature in its bright light now. He is deprived of the insight through he would watch the beauty of nature.

Bates in his Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and Environmental Imagination (1991) maintains that romantic ecology reverences the green earth because neither physically nor psychologically we can live without green things. He further highlights that the new romantic mentality does not consider economic growth and material production as the ends of all human society. Wordsworth poem 'The World is too Much with Us' (1807) contains this idea,

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our power,
Little we see in nature that is ours
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon (1-4)

Romantic poets were the first proto-ecological thinkers who have tried to bridge the gap between human beings and nature. A close communion with nature can lead us towards God, whereas, Shelley intellectualizes nature Wordsworth spiritualizes nature. It will always guide you toward the existence of the God in nature. In Tintern Abbey he says,

Nature never did betray the heart
That loved her. (1798)

The ordinary sights and sounds of nature which we usually ignore captivated the heart of Wordsworth. He describes this idea in his poem in 'My Heart Leaps up'

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky (1-2)

The sweet memories and encounters of nature fill Wordsworth heart with pleasure,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bless of solitude
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

Conclusion:

Romantic Movement is generally considered as a return to nature. Nature provides solace for all the romantic poets. Though every romantic poet interact with nature and has a different concept about nature, but among them Wordsworth is considered as a prophet of nature. None other romantic poet has a more appealing concept of nature than Wordsworth. He sees nature as a panacea of all the evils.

Like all literary theories ecocriticism provides another lens through which one can analyze literature. Ecocritical study of Wordsworth poetry highlights the fact that he is a true nature poet. He engendered a new concept of seeing and appreciating nature. His poetry reconnects human beings and nature and tries to bridge the gap between nature and human beings. His poetry reminds man of his/her reliance on nature for survival

References

- Bate, Jonathon. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Collins, E. *Tintern Abbey: or, The Beauties of Piercefield: A poem in four books*; Chepstow 1800 print.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, Harold, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary*, Athens: University of Georgia Press 1996.
- Hardy, Thomas. *The Mayor of Casterbridge: The Life and Death of a Man of Character*, London; New York: Penguin Books, 1997.
- Milnes & Tredell, N. (2009). *William Wordsworth: The Prelude*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rueckert, William. *Literature & Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. 1978.
- Wordsworth, William, & Coleridge, S.T. *Lyrical Ballads: With few other poems 1798*. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. First, M, Reed & Bodly, Head: *Ode Intimation of Immortality: From Recollection*. 1928.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Tables Turned*: 1980. Print.