

Re-reading William Wordsworth and Thomas Hardy in Eco-Critical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Reading literature in ecocritical perspective is a late 20th century trend and it centers round the idea of discovering or rediscovering how literature and environment are interrelated. William Wordsworth and Thomas Hardy are two prominent literary personalities whose poems explicitly emphasize on this interrelationship and how literature is a stakeholder in the whole discourse on environmental issues. Ecocritical reading demonstrates that just as Wordsworth cannot be dismissed simply as a romantic poet or a worshipper of nature, in the same way, Hardy's dealing with the objects of nature and natural scenes also cannot be relegated simply to his fondness for such objects. What is important about them is why did they unequivocally dealt with nature with such an acuteness, though they are unlike in their approach to nature. Hardy started his career as a poet nearly a hundred years after Wordsworth established himself as a poet. During these hundred years radical changes loomed in English life. These changes have a far-reaching effect on the making of Hardy as a poet of nature and more so why in his poetry protection of the environment has been presented as a concern. Hence, while studying their poetry in the vein of ecocritical reading, it becomes pertinent to consider the factors behind the changes in Victorian England to understand greater nuances involved in the concern for global deterioration of environment in the contemporary age.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on the environmental issues is not very old and it stems from the realization that the environment has increasingly been hazardous for the survival of mankind. In the global concern for the deterioration of the ecosystem, not only the environmentalists, but people from other disciplines also, including literature written in various languages around the world, especially, English literature, have contributed a lot. That English literature, be it poetry, fiction and non-fiction, has played an active role in deciphering various issues

concerning the environment can be understood from the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850) and Thomas Hardy (1840 - 1928) when these are read in an ecocritical perspective. Both these two poets belong to two different literary periods. Wordsworth started his career as a poet in 1793 with the publication of *An Evening Walk*, a collection of poems. However, his *Lyrical Ballads* which he published in collaboration with S.T. Coleridge in 1798 gave him distinctiveness as a poet. It was such a work which marked the advent of a new kind of poetry, commonly known as Romantic poetry. After that he published *Poems in Two Vol-*

umes in 1807 and *The Excursion* in 1814. During the period between 1820-35, he devoted himself to writing sonnets. Hardy, who is basically known as a novelist, has published six volumes of poetry. His first volume of poetry, *Wessex Poems and other Verses* (1898), was published a hundred years after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge and this is a very long period if considered the rapidity with which English life underwent changes in the Victorian England. This transition also had a far-reaching impact on man's attitude to the environment and Hardy's poetry is significant in understanding how man's changing attitude is at the core of environmental degradation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is ecocriticism, a literary theory which originates in the phrase 'literary ecology' coined by Joseph Meeker (Meeker, 1972) and was propounded as a theory by William Ruekart (Ruekart, 1996). A comprehensible definition of the theory was given by Cheryll Glotfelty. That literature also has a voice for the protection of the ecosystem remained unexplored or ignored until recently when from 1970 the relationship between literature and environment became a topic for serious and widespread discussion, and the relationship between literature and environment was formalized in 1990 when the University of Nevada, Reno took the first initiative of creating the first academic position in Literature and the Environment. As defined by Glotfelty, ecocriticism objectifies the study of how literature and the physical environment are correlated with an 'earth-centered approach' (Cheryll Glotfelty, 1996). Eco critics consider that when a man reclines amidst a pastoral environment, he simply is moved by the idea of nature as stable and as having its own power to endure as well as to counter any disruptive energy emanated from the actions of human beings. Similarly, when a poet refers to 'wilderness', it signifies nature as pure or free from contamination inflicted by civilization (Garrard, 2013).

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

This paper centers round the following objectives.

- a) Environment as presented in the selected poems of William Wordsworth and Thomas Hardy.
- b) The dichotomy between Wordsworth and Hardy in their concern for the environment.
- c) Relevance of reading poetry of Wordsworth and Hardy in understanding and addressing environmental issues.

To arrive at the objectives the author has adopted descriptive and analytical method for presenting and analyzing data collected from the primary and secondary sources supported by observation as key technique. Primary sources are the poems of Wordsworth and Hardy selected for the purpose of analysis. All other books or journals used for the purpose of analysis and corroboration are the secondary sources.

Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Wordsworth

Wordsworth has been associated with 'Romantic ecology', a phrase popularized by Jonathan Bate in his book, and acknowledged as a pioneer of running an 'environmental tradition' (Coupe, 2000). The uniqueness of Wordsworth lies in the fact that he has presented in his poetry an account of how man is related to nature. He had a 'great romantic vision of cosmic unity' (Gerard, 1991) and considered all created things as part of a unified whole. His "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, 13 July 1798", commonly known as "Tintern Abbey" and which was included in *Lyrical Ballads*, expresses the indispensability of nature in human life. Here the poet gives an account of how he was moved by the landscape of Tintern Abbey which was tinged with beauteous forms of nature such as the river Wye making a soft murmuring sound as it rolls from mountain springs, mountain cliffs, the sky above, trees, orchard tufts, hedge-rows and cottage

-ground. He had been absent from this beautiful landscape for long five years and during that period the memories of the beautiful scenes had been a source of pleasure which refreshed his troubled and wearied mind. So, he writes,
 'But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
 Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
 In hours of weariness, sensations sweet...' (line 25-27)

The poet has not forgot to emphasize on the moral influence of nature. When he considers nature as teacher, mother and guardian and nurse of man, he actually emphasizes the communion between man and nature. It is nature which leads man 'from joy to joy' (line 125) and breeds lofty thoughts and ideals in the mind of human beings. In other words, nature is the true friend, philosopher and guide. So, he advises his sister, Dorothy, to allow the mountain breeze blow on her when she undertakes a 'solitary walk' (line 135). However, the poet is very much disturbed because of the selfishness of people of his time which made them blind even to the beauty of nature. So, in the poem "To Milton", he invites Milton to take a rebirth and give them 'manners, virtue, freedom, power' (line 8).

Wordsworth thinks that it is not the primary experience of a beautiful sight that only gives pleasure, the remembrance of it at any moment in life also has meaning in man's life. Hence in "The Daffodils" the poet mentions how the sight of ten thousand daffodils 'tossing their heads in sprightly dance' (line 12.) was a source of pleasure for him even when he was away from them.

'For oft, when on my couch I lie
 In vacant or in pensive mood,
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills' (lines 19-23)

The earth is a composite whole of various living and non-living things. Grass, trees, hills, mountains, springs, rivers and birds are some of its constituents which the poet frequently mentions in

his poetry. In "To the Cuckoo" he praises the cuckoo as a 'blessed bird' (line 29) and 'darling of the spring' (line 13) for its unmatched voice which the poet hears while 'lying on the grass' (line 5) passing from 'hill to hill' (line 7). Similarly, in "To the Skylark" the poet praises the skylark for the music she pours into the earth from the sky and hence calls her 'Ethereal minstrel' and 'pilgrim of the sky'. Like the songs of the birds, the murmuring sound of a spring is also significant. In "The Fountain, A Conversation" the poet mentions how the 'pleasant tune' (line 10) of a fountain invigorates man.

'And here, on this delightful day,
 I cannot choose but think
 How oft, a vigorous man, I lay
 Beside this fountain's brink' (lines 55-58).

In the sonnet "The World is Too Much with Us" the poet says that people are too much busy with the materialistic thoughts which have put them into oblivion about the role nature plays in man's life. The poet laments that the beautiful sight of the sea in moonlight, the 'howling' of wind throughout the day and its becoming very gentle like 'sleeping flowers' at night also fail to move these people (lines 5-7). So, he says that even though the people of his time failed to receive the gift of nature, he will not miss it and will stand by the pleasant sea to have a glimpse of old pagan gods Proteus 'rising from the sea' (line 13) or hear the Triton 'blow his wreathed horn' (line 14).

In "The Ode to the Intimations of Immortality" which was published in 1807, the poet focuses on the dichotomy between a child and a grown-up in their approach to nature. Referring to his childhood memories the poet says that he considered the objects, like meadows, forest, stream, rainbows, rose, the moon, the starry sky and sunshine as a divine gift of nature; but as he is grown-up, he does not feel the rapturous joy in them. So, he writes,

'Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song
 And while the young lambs bound
 As to the tabor's sound,

To me alone there came a thought of grief' (lines 19-22)

"Lines Written in Early Spring" is another poem which describes the beauties of nature in early spring. Here the poet says that the flowers, leaves and birds – all are creatures created according to a divine plan. All these creatures are happy to be a part of this holy plan of nature; but man has become a stranger to this bliss. So, he laments with the question 'what man has made of man?' (line 24). The poet feels that the earth entices man by offering earthly pleasures and comforts which ultimately make him detached from nature. The child, on the other hand, follows the footsteps of the elders and because of that it takes the path treaded on by the elders. This makes the child gradually lose the heavenly ideals or love for nature as he grows up. The poet feels that his loss of childhood vision has been compensated by another vision which is more vital and more mature. Instead of that rapturous vision, now he has learnt how to look at the commonplace objects of nature with sobriety and perceive the presence of something nobler and wiser in all such objects.

Wordsworth's concept of nature also rests on his belief in animism. The word 'animism', according to *The Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary* (2003), is the belief that all the natural things, such as plants, inanimate objects and natural phenomena contain a spirit. It was Sir Edward Burnett Tylor who brought forth the concept of animism into academic discourse and pioneered the study on animism. The doctrine of animism, according to him, is man's recognition of 'the operation of personal life and will' (Tylor, 1871). In the poem "It is a Beauteous Evening Calm and Free" while giving a beautiful picture of the calm sunset the poet says that the whole scene is a manifestation of a 'mighty Being' (line 6) whose presence can be felt in the thunderous sound of the sea. In "The World is Too Much with Us" the poet sees god rising from the sea implying the existence of spirit in the waves of the sea. His conviction finds explicit expression in

"Tintern Abbey" where he mentions his perception that in every object of nature there is a 'motion and a spirit' (line 102).

Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Hardy

Thomas Hardy, is 'much more widely famous for his novels than for any other part of his work' and is 'by nature poet rather than story teller or playwright' (King, 1979). However, be it poetry, novel or short story, he scarcely writes anything without a reference to nature. In his writings, nature co-exists with man. He perceives nature mainly from two perspectives: sometimes as a benevolent force and very often as indifferent to the existence of mankind and its sufferings. His earlier poems are chiefly nature poems where nature is portrayed as a companion of human beings; but in his later poems nature's indifference to the existence of mankind is depicted. He believes that man is an object of nature and suffers for his own actions. In his poem "Domicilium" he followed Wordsworth and gives a description of his father's cottage lying in the midst of nature. His preoccupation with the flora and fauna finds expression in the poem. The poet shows how nature seems to engulf the entire cottage, as if, it is wishing to consume it in the long run. The cottage is covered by 'a veil of boughs' (line 2) and 'wild honeysucks' (lines 3-4). Here he depicts how nature can exercise a conscious perversity against the tiresome construction works of man. He then talks of the wild growth of the red roses, lilacs, herbs, esculents, fields, distant hills and the oak grown from the droppings of some birds. He thus shows the affinity of nature with the man-made cottage and its inhabitants. This is further strengthened with the mention of the snakes, newts and bats in the last stanza. Human and nature co-exist in the countryside as the village people are primarily dependent upon nature for everything. Nature is their constant companion and hence they love and respect her. Hardy in this nature poem also shows the distance between man and his immediate neighbours who are the furze cutters.

In his later poems Hardy focuses on ani-

mals, birds and trees and man's exploitation and cruelty towards them. He is sympathetic to animals and he expresses his inability that he could do little for dumb animals. Throughout his life he campaigned against cruelty to animals and birds. His compassion for the animal kingdom is touchingly humane. This is reflected in poems like "Afterwards" where he shows his concern for hedgehogs and expresses that even an 'innocent creature' like hedgehog 'should come to no harm' (line 11) because it has a right to live besides having a value and worth of its own. Again, in "The Blinded Bird" he puts forward his compassionate feeling to a blind bird. According to him, the bird has suffered long, but is tolerant to all its sufferings; it is pure in its heart and is happy.

In poems like "Neutral Tones", nature is portrayed as a being neutral or indifferent to the sufferings or conditions of human beings. Nature in this poem is just an on looker and do not console the heart broken lover. It is cold and lacks colour and thereby perfectly match the emotions of the two lovers involved, unlike in "Domicilium" where nature is vibrant. He uses ordinary images and symbols, such as ponds, winter day, leaves, winter sun to create an atmosphere of doom and somehow feel sinister. The barren winter soil on which 'a few leaves lay' reinforces the impression of something that is alive otherwise everything in nature lacks strength. In "Friends Beyond", he picturizes how nature is indifferent to the chances and changes of human life.

In "Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard" the poet gives a picture of the remoteness or aloofness of nature from human beings. In this poem flowers whisper among themselves in the voice of the humans whose death has given them birth in a graveyard.

'These flowers are I, poor Fanny Hurd,
Sir or Madam
A Little girl here sepultures.
Once I flitted like a bird
Above the grass, as now I wave
In daisy shapes above my grave,

All day cherrily
All night eerily!' (lines 1-8)

ANALYSIS

Though nature is the prime concern in the poetry of both Wordsworth and Hardy, they hold a dichotomous view in their approach of dealing with nature; while Wordsworth considers nature as a guiding force, anchor and nurse, Hardy establishes the indifference of nature to human beings. Wordsworth depicted nature as a living force which has a capacity to heal human being. Hardy, on the other hand, never depicted nature as a nurse and guardian. What he shows is that man and nature do not co-exist always in friendly manner. This difference in their treatment of nature can be attributed to the changed attitude of man towards nature mainly because of fast-rising materialism in the Victorian era owing to various mechanical inventions and advent of new machineries which paved the way for Industrial revolution. As said by William J Long the nineteenth century is remarkable for invention of various machines (Long, 1993). These inventions on one hand stimulated setting up of various industries, on the other hand, industrialization facilitated urbanization and material prosperity. It also created radical changes by creating a class of industrialists or owners of factories and merchants who dominated the society and the working classes who had to strive for minimum needs. All these aspects became a guiding force of literature of the nineteenth century. Again, Darwin's theory of human evolution had a far-reaching effect on people's withdrawal of faith in God as the creator of the universe. The pantheistic beliefs which pervaded in the poetry of Wordsworth and overruled the minds of people of that time started to wane because of Darwinism which compelled man to look at the old ideals and beliefs with a questioning look. Matthew Arnold in his poem "Dover Beach" lamented how the bond between man and nature fell apart due to the 'clash, struggle and flight' (36-37). While such withdrawal of beliefs from traditional outlook effected the

poetry of late Victorians including Hardy, it also has a lot to say about the materialistic tendencies that started to grow in the human mind in general and it catapulted disrespect to the serenity of the environment making man unmindful to the destruction caused to the ecosystem and it is a trend that can be witnessed globally. Thus, both Wordsworth and Hardy presented two worlds dichotomous in nature and the study of the factors involved in this dichotomy is very much relevant for understanding and addressing the nuances embedded in the environmental issues which have appeared to be threatening to life in this green planet. Further, the poetry of both the poets is earth-centered and is suitable for understanding the interrelationship between literature and the physical environment.

CONCLUSION

It is a wrong notion to consider literature standing for its own sake. Behind every text there is a man who is born out of a society. The basic purpose of literature is to raise societal issues with the ultimate aim of reforming the society. Hence, literature and change are correlated. This is true of Wordsworth and Hardy. Both wrote poetry in their own ways to bring about a social consciousness for saving the pure and serene atmosphere of nature. The difference in their approach is basically because of the changes that scientific revolution and industrialization brought about in the society making man more and more materialistic. Their poetry lets us contemplate on how man's ungratefulness, depravity and wantonness have transformed himself to an onlooker of the destroyers as well as the destruction caused to the environment.

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