

An Eco-critical Reading of William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"

Nure Jannat¹, Md. Tapu Rayhan², Maruf Rahman³

^{1, 2, 3}Lecturer, Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Bangladesh

Abstract: *The study focuses on an outline of ecocriticism and the threats nature as well as human being faced in the world that William Wordsworth lived in. It presents William Wordsworth as very prescient about the dilapidation of the nature and solutions offered by him in "Tintern Abbey" to protect nature. I will try to show his attitude to nature in the light of ecocriticism and the expression of his feeling and passion as a part of what he appreciates and describes. Considering William Wordsworth's love for nature this paper examines him as one of the pioneers in contributing to the thinking through his poetry that has made us to be eco-conscious and led to the development of the literary theory that is ecocriticism. This paper looks at the three stages portrayed in "Tintern Abbey" in the light of ecocriticism in order to agree that William Wordsworth was eco-conscious who viewed nature as a living entity and believed that nature was blessed with feeling and purpose. The findings reveal William Wordsworth as an eco-critic and substantiate William Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" as a typical eco-critical work.*

Keywords: William Wordsworth, prescient, Tintern Abbey, nature, eco-criticism, impingement

1. Introduction

Ecocriticism also known as green criticism or green studies or eco-poetics is a theory which is the result of environmental consciousness. It has brought about a significant evolution in the thought of environmentalist since 1960s. It emerges in the USA in the late 1980s whereas in the UK in the early 1990s but it is still an evolutionary movement[1]. American scholar Charly Glotfelty initiates the regeneration of environmental consciousness in literature. She thinks that there is a connection between literature and the physical environment. The study of this connection is known as ecocriticism. The study of this connection is termed by her as ecocriticism[2]. But the history throws light to the essay "literature and ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" by William Rueckert as the first attempt to draw attentions toward environment and literature relationship. William Rueckert shows the link between biology and literary activities[3].

Lawrence Buell sees the relationship between literature and environment and states that the study of this existing relationship in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis as ecocriticism[4]. As Slovic puts it, Ecocriticism is "the study of explicitly environmental texts from any scholarly approach on conversely the scrutiny of ecological implications and human nature relationship in any literary text [or other artistic text], even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the non-human world[5]." Camilo Gomides' definition of ecocriticism makes it more explicit. He says it is, "the field of enquiry that analyses and promotes works of art which rise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations[6]."

Ecocriticism is regarded as a literary theory of recent origin but actually its elements are found in the workings of the Earlier writings. Romantic poets are considered as the rudiments of ecocriticism. The rediscovered this mysterious world and gave a new vision for enjoying the beauty of

nature. This new vision takes its complete form with the meaningful relationship between literature and nature. Jonathan Bate believes romantic ecology as theory of ecosystems and unalienated labor which is firmly rooted not in idealist and elitist texts, but in the pragmatic texts. He deeply observes William Wordsworth's concern for nature and presents him in the modern tradition of green politics and an ecological perspective[7].

Wordsworth is highly lauded as a pastor of nature. His love of nature works as a pole star of his life. In his whole life he loves nature more truly and sincerely than any other English Poet. He considered that there is an ethereal vigor existing in all the elements of nature. From this consideration he advocated for the conservancy of nature for the Preservation of society and durable peace in human mind. These notions find an entire exposure in his poem "Tintern Abbey". Geoffrey Durrant describes "Tintern Abbey" as a landscape poem in the eighteenth century tradition[8]. Environment or nature is prime concern of a landscape poem. The very fact that "Tintern Abbey" is a landscape poem which enlightens the mysterious silence of nature, showcases itself as an eco-critical work which demonstrates the existing relation between nature and literature.

It is very surprising that even in 18th century, William Wordsworth comprehended the danger of demolishing nature and warned mankind against it. Though he is known as pantheist but we can't ponder his pantheism as a philosophical term merely indicating his idea of the existence of god is everywhere in the nature. It is more than his spiritual aspect. It echoes the quest of modern man for a mitigative, lenient and balsamic nature which will bring tranquility and serenity in his life. He describes water, mountain-spring, sky, cottage-ground, orchard –tufts, unripe fruits, woods, green, landscape, hedge –rows, pastoral farms, wreaths of smoke etc. to clarify the beauty of nature. He divinizes these elements and this divinization denotes his whole heart respect for nature. This respect thrust him towards the conservancy of all objects of nature.

Nature and human beings are interrelated. Nature finds its meaning when human beings enjoy it. But human beings feeling of superiority to nature lead them towards the destruction of nature. As a result nature in turn destroys them. In "Tintern Abbey" the ruined Tintern Abbey symbolizes the impingement of human domination over nature which results the degradation of ecological balance. "Tintern Abbey" fulfills almost every criteria of Romantic poetry. Romantic poetry is the true reflection of nostalgia of human being as a man's isolation from nature[9].

To Wordsworth, Nature is always a superior phenomenon than human being. This very intellectual and scientific perception shows human being's dependency on nature for their survival. His pantheistic view objugates human being for demolishing nature that is nothing more than hurting God. The far-reaching social and political upheaval in France which took place during French Revolution drew his attention. He experienced the violent periods of political turmoil and remorse that he could feel nature in:

"The still, sad music of humanity
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts;"

"Tintern Abbey" can be judged as a record of Wordsworth's profound relationship with nature. He feels the existence of a celestial spirit in nature. All the objects of nature excite his thoughts and make him speculative. Nature as an incomparable nourished of thoughts enriches his knowledge and wisdom. He considers nature as a teacher who is teaching him moral things from his early childhood and has changed his view towards life. So, he asserts nature-

"The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul
Of all my moral being."

His poetic expression is unique. And this uniqueness is nothing but the result of his impressive and emotional account of man's relations to nature. His thoughts of nature have a great influence in public consciousness concerning the environment. He introduces the healing power of nature to the human being and opens the door to perceive the catastrophe which will cause due to the separation of man from the nature. For this reason in the field of ecocriticism, Romantic poetry in general and William Wordsworth in particular become the icons of eco-critical studies. Romantics create an ecological perspective to understand the interdependency of human being and nature which Worster defines as, "a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth[10]."

"Tintern Abbey" can be seen as the best example of Romantic poetry focusing on the interconnectedness of human being and nature and the nostalgic notion of separation of human being from nature. In this poem, Wordsworth suggests the humankind to learn from the past.

Geoffrey H. Hartman sees Wordsworth's poetry looking back for a better life[11]. His attitude to nature in his "Tintern Abbey" can be divided into three stages such as boyhood, youth and stage of transformation. Every stage is a revelation of his closeness to nature and the essence of taking its care.

The first stage is marked as a simple delight of freedom where he roamed about in the midst of nature with pleasure. He wandered about wherever nature led him. His wanderings and pleasures are described in this poem as "The Coarser pleasures" and "Animal movements". As a child he believed nature to be a great source of animal pleasure. We all know that pollution free nature is essential for the development of a child's mind and thought as it promotes a healthy mind. So, for specific reason Wordsworth as a child, as a beholder of immature mind is having pleasure as well as animal pleasure from the beauty of nature. It is animal pleasure because at this stage he had only the sensual ability to enjoy the beauty of nature but this beauty couldn't influence his mind. Because of his fear he couldn't enjoy the blessings of nature. This becomes clear when we find the below given lines:

"Wherever nature led: more like a man
Flying from something that he dreads, than one
Who sought the thing he loved."

Here, he was afraid of enjoying the beauty though he was living at the midst of it just like the primitive people who were close to nature. So, from the eco-critical perspective the first stage is the recent past life of humanity. In the ancient time, the people were very close to nature. But Globalization and Modernization changed the people's life. As a result, the people in the recent past couldn't enjoy the nature. Even they forgot the proper use and value of nature. Therefore, they are demolishing the nature in the form of nuclear tests, pollution, deforestation etc. All of these things are now deteriorating the ecological balance and the result is the frequency of natural calamities and global warming as well as climatic change. Therefore, nature, instead of becoming a source of healing power, is becoming a token of terror and destruction.

The second stage is the stage of mind where he is observing the external beauty of nature. As he says-

"Their colors and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye."

Here he is captivated by the colors, the fragrance, the objects and the sweet sounds of nature. They are an appetite for him and his this feeling and passion are unreflecting or thoughtless. This is the outward beauty that enchanted him and brought him the deep realization of the importance of nature. From the eco-critical perspective, here, he stands as a representative of the present circumstances in the world. Now, people have accepted the eternal relation between the nature and human life. They have suffered a lot for the destruction of nature. Recently, they have understood the

relation of nature and human life what Wordsworth understood a number of years back.

Third stage is the stage of transformation. Transformation of the poet's realization which is now very much spiritual and intellectual. Now, he can feel and rationalize his feelings for the sufferings of his fellow human beings. This feeling makes him thoughtful. As a result, he finds the inner-meaning and the hidden significance in nature. At the second stage, he was attracted by the external beauty of nature but now the realization of inner or hidden beauty attracted him and quickened him into thought. For that reason he can now feel the existence of divine spirit in all objects of nature. At the same time he focuses on the educative influence of nature where nature has the ability to mould the human personality. Like Wordsworth, everyone needs to perceive the animating principle of the world in order to develop the intimacy of nature and humanity which will work as a shield to protect them from all sorts of perils that would devastate them. To universalize this idea Geoffrey H. Hartman says, "A sentence from 'Tintern Abbey' may start with the first person yet end on all things[11]." This is really the exact as Wordsworth writes,

"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."

Like this, all of us need to perceive and comprehend the worth of nature on this earth.

Thus, in these three stages Wordsworth develops his this omniscience idea of urban environmental degradation and shows the threats industrializing and urbanizing people have posed in this green world. He seems to indicate very prophetically the degrading relation between nature and human being and expresses very poetically that he senses a crisis which is looming for mankind that will create problems in human life if they deny the human being's relation with nature and go on polluting their environment in this reckless and heartless manner. For this Williams says that Wordsworth's poetry, "foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its holistic conception of the Earth as a household, a dwelling place for an interdependent biological community[12]."

Though in "Tintern Abbey" the poet tries to establish this phenomenon but actually his ecological consciousness was not an isolated phenomenon but part of the developing awareness and of the importance of preserving the green world. So, Wordsworth is preternaturally sensitive to the destruction of nature caused by humankind and the devastation of human life on earth caused by the ecological imbalance as well as nature. He advises everyone through suggesting his sister to understand this relation and uses this

poem to disclose this fact of human being's responsibility to protect nature.

"Tintern Abbey" gives the humankind a spiritual vision to feel the interconnectedness and the interdependence of man and nature from the eco-critical perspective. This poem is the justification of his greatness who inaugurated a new way of seeing, believing, appreciating and living in relation with nature which reminds the saying where Williams says, "We are both a part and a part form nature[12]."

"Tintern Abbey" exhibits a commitment to effectuating changes in human being's practices and to rethink their interdependency on nature from an environmental as well as eco-critical perspective. This poem is an attempt to build up a mutual world between man and nature which establishes it as an eco-critical poem and Wordsworth as an eco-critic. For this reason this poem as well as Wordsworth's poems are well worth reading still in our time where the nature is being destroyed recklessly and the environmentalists are trying to cultivate eco-consciousness among the human being.

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