

ECOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT AND ECOCRITICISM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The function of literature has been a contentious issue since the time of the masters of Greek. The “Arts for Art’s sake” group who advocated a philosophy that the intrinsic value of art and the only “true” art is divorced from any didactic, moral, or utilitarian function, making a literary text or piece of art as autotelic. It was, in fact, a silent but strong protest against materialism, which extolled that everything should have a use and practical value. But the opponents of this inward looking ideology questioned the theoretical framework of such claims and called for pro-human approach to literature. They argued that human being the principal producer of a literary text or piece of art as a social animal and a member of society has primary responsibility to the society. Artists and writers in all their work should promote essential values of goodness, truth and beauty; and more than that, they should have an eternal commitment to any attempt to actualize such ideals. The debate still goes on even now; and there have been several literary theories subtly aligning with either of the above views. Ecocriticism, when scrutinized from the above debate, can said to be a theory which promotes a pro-human culture. It explores, investigates and questions the relationship between man and his environment. In the backdrop of these roadmaps this paper traces the Victorian ecological sensitivity from a historical perspective to see the evolution and major concerns as far as ecology is concerned.

Keywords: ecology, ecocriticism, Victorian, nature and literature

Introduction

Ecocriticism, from Glotfelty’s perspective is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. In this theoretical approach a literary work is closely studied to see environmental ideas and representations as they appear at various cultural spaces. In the backdrop of these roadmaps this paper traces the origin, development and ideology of critical terms like ecology, environmentalism and ecocriticism against the socio-cultural space of Victorian society from a historical perspective. The Victorians lived at a crucial time in world

history as their generation was dawned to a new awakening in various new knowledge systems hitherto unknown like scientific, social and epistemological. These facts not only perplexed the Victorian writers but also stirred their philosophical enquiries to new avenues to encapsulate the realities that they encountered. The rapid changes that gradually unfolded as a result of material progress wreaked havoc on the serene country side of Victorian England to which the thinking minds of the time responded cautiously. It was not just the beautiful landscapes that were under attack but largely human conceptions and attitudes particularly about his/her own role on this planet whether to “subdue everything and rule over” or “care for everything that matters and affects my own existence” was a question that they tried to answer individually, of course without much clarity as we have today about its ramifications. This paper makes an attempt to historicize the evolution of ecological concern during the Victorian period and answers how the social and scientific advances impacted the literature and hermeneutics of the period.

Victorian England and Emergence of Science

Queen Victoria's reign, spanning from 1837 to 1901, made England Europe's most stable and prosperous country. Her long and bold leadership made England first in many fields such as maritime activities, trade and commerce, agricultural production, general education and above all in military might. Such a privileged position further boosted England's status as a colonial super power bringing many nations in Africa and Asia under her military clout. The industrial revolution which paralleled the Victorian period, paved the way for scientific advancement and extensive technological development. The invention of steam engine led to massive increase in motor transport and bequeathed the railway age. New roads, Ports, mines and factories were built all across the country and raw materials were in great demand and nature was mindlessly exploited by the nouveau riche. Small towns were beginning to swell into smoky centers of manufacturing industry. All this was taking place at a time when the iron hand of power still wrested with a privileged few, who were wealthy by birth or becoming wealthy in commerce. In spite of all the developments wrought by the industrial revolution through factories, mills, mines and workshops, England remained largely an agricultural country. Three major development in the scientific arena paved way for a paradigm shift in the way man/woman understood the meaning and his or her role in the universe. They are: Laws of Thermodynamics from physical sciences, Theory of evolution from the field of natural sciences and the general scientific discoveries leading to Industrial revolution.

Socio-Cultural Context of Victorian Ecology

The foundational question that bewilder us while talking about ecology and literature is that what is the connection between Victorian writers and ecology. Do the books written in this period in any specific way communicate the concern for the nature? In his book “The

Environmental Tradition in English Literature”, John Parham outlines four reasons for proposing to study Victorian writers from an Eco critical perspective .

1. The proximity to the scientific developments that converge[d] to form ecology allowed the Victorians to develop a partial understanding that humans are part of an interrelated network of species.
2. From the new scientific knowledge emerged a materialistic awareness that the concept of “human being” resides in the nature and quality of humanity’s relationship with other species and the surrounding physical environment.
3. The awareness of humankind’s interdependence on other species and the physical environment led to the emergence of an early environmental activism and ‘green politics’.
4. Victorian writers, often ambivalent about new scientific ideas and sometimes alarmed by the implications of their own social-environmental critiques, constantly ‘shuttled’ between a bewildering array of influences trying to make sense of the scientific, social and epistemological complexities with which they were confronted. (Parham, 157-59)

In the Victorian period the impact of Industrial revolution as experienced by or sensed by the Romantic artistic was on the rise. Problems such as urban expansion unleashed a host of other issues: housing facilities of the burgeoning migrants to the city centers, working conditions, unemployment partly due to the collapse of agriculture sector and partly as a result of mechanization-direct ecological problems such as sanitation, air quality, diseases, deforestation- proved to be issues that those writers found it hard to come to terms with. As Parham points out, “it became an age of observation, investigation, and social responsibility, in turn, promoting campaigning, political intervention and legislation. This impulse to intervene permeated the Victorian literary culture.” (Parham 163) Informed by the developments in the arena of science particularly natural science and thermodynamics the writers began to write more accurately about nature showing careful observation and detailed nature description as an anticipation of scientific ecology and an understanding of the atmosphere as a sustainable energy system.

Environmentalism to Ecology

Conservation is “as a utilitarian notion, the orderly exploitation of resources for the greatest good to the greatest number over the longest time” (Tim O’Riordan 12). Understood from this definition, conservation is the management of natural resources for human benefit based upon scientific understanding and this presupposes the notion of limitation in terms of resources. The next terminology is Preservation which is concerned with protecting the existing environments. Preservationism can be defined as a social philosophy “which is premised upon a corresponding notion of limitation, advocating limited access to wilderness or other such areas so as to preserve the integrity of a supposedly natural state”(John Parham Green Man Hopkins 15). As an ideology and political stand environmentalism has gained much popular support in the last few decades of twenty-first century. From a scientific

perspective, Environmentalism is “the study of the specific physical, chemical and biological surroundings in which organisms live and the changes wrought on them by human activities” (Michael Allaby 9). The word ecology was coined and defined by German Zoologist Ernst Haeckel as “the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and organic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact” (Robert P McIntosh 7-8).

From Ecology to Ecocriticism

Eco criticism is a branch of literary theory which study ecological concerns in a literary text. Glotfelty, one of the pioneers of the field defines Eco criticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. (Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm viii) As a literary theory, ecocriticism was not born on a single day but has had a historical evolution over a long period of time.

“Unlike feminism or post colonialism, ecocriticism did not evolve gradually as the academic wing of an influential political movement. It emerged when environmentalism had already turned into a vast field of converging and conflicting projects and given rise to two other humanistic sub disciplines, environmental philosophy and history. This diversity resonates in the different names by which the field has been identified: ecocriticism has imposed itself as convenient shorthand for what some critics prefer to call environmental criticism, literary-environmental studies, literary ecology, literary environmentalism, or green cultural studies. (Ursula K. Heise 503)

A work of literature is the product of a social milieu in which it was written expressing the ethos of that particular culture and environment. Looking from this angle a text has so much to say about the specific period in which it was written. Hence, as Kerridge says an Ecocritic “wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces”. (Kerridge and Sammells 5) Thus ecocriticism does not see a text as a mere collection of words dissociated from the social realities but rather very much rooted in the context with a corrective purpose. Buell echoes the same: “Ecocriticism is one of the new approaches to literature that have presented themselves as correctives or enhancements to literary theory’s preexisting toolkit.” (Buell, 11) Later in this study we see how Victorian society is slowly reawakened to realize if they go on in this attitude they will have serious consequences to face. The literature of the period act as a corrective measure as far as ecology is concerned. “Contemporary ecocriticism is both deliberate in its focus on the materiality of the environment and interdisciplinary in its approach.” (Mazzeno, Laurence W and Raonald D Morrison 1) On the basis of a close analyzes of recent research and publication in this field we can conclude that ecocritics have appropriated freely from different theoretical or disciplinary models such as animal studies, feminist theory, the history

of science, Marxist theory, New Historicism, and post-colonial theory, often employing these methodologies in unique combinations.

Victorian Poetry

Tennyson writes in 'In Memoriam', giving a clear indication of the changing world view informed by the development of science:

Sweets after showers, ambrosial air
That rollest from the gorgeous gloom
Of evening over break and bloom
And meadow, slowly breathing bare ... (Ixxxvi 1)

He further writes lamenting that the natural environment is lost as a result of disruption of balance by evolutionism:

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands
Like clouds they shape themselves and go (cxxiii. 5)

Mathew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' demonstrates similar sentiments about nature and society in the context of evolutionary theory undermining religious belief. He makes a famous analogy between inhospitable nature and the decline of organized religion:

Hath really neither joy, nor love nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain.

Hopkins contemplates this destruction of nature and how it is, in many ways, typical of mankind's behaviour in his famous nature poem *The Binsey Poplars*:

Since country is so tender
To touch, her being só slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,

Hopkins likens this wanton destruction of the nature to the way in which the delicate wonder of nature that is the eyeball can, with a simple 'prick' from a pin or needle be turned into 'no eye at all'. This analogy is obviously designed to strike us at our very core, to hit us right between the eyes: who is not extremely delicate and queasy around the idea of their eyes being harmed? It reminds us that our responsibility to look after nature as a whole should be as keenly felt. It also likens the organs of sight, the eyes, to the beauty of the trees: one enabled us to enjoy the other, and both are capable of being snuffed out in seconds.

Victorian Prose and Philosophy

Thomas Carlyle was a forerunner of advocating this new trend in English literature through prose. His 'Sartor Resartus' is a metaphoric representation of universe as a huge steam

engine—a symbolic manifestation of the fact that energy is the elementary entity in nature—which is the conclusion of the first law of Thermodynamics. Carlyle through this work was pitching for conservation of energy from unprincipled exploitation. He even called for a new understanding that the Romantic idea of superior perception and critical insight of the artist should be in the service of society. Men of letters, according to Carlyle, must replace the priests as the dispensers and living types of God's everlasting wisdom through their writing as it is required in their particular age.

Another prominent thinker of the time John Ruskin, in his work *Modern Painters* attempts to differentiate 'typical' and 'vital beauty'. The former refers to the outer form and is constituted by aesthetic rules supposedly derived from nature so that for example, artists would follow the graceful symmetry of oak leaves. Whereas, the latter denotes the inner goodness or a personal or spiritual beauty, that is. The link is that a person's ability to perceive typical beauty depends on their mastery of 'vital beauty' implying art becomes a barometer for the moral health of the society. All throughout, Ruskin relates the rules of art to a proper understanding of nature. This some way or other had an impact on Victorian relationship with, attitudes to nature and treatment of the natural environment. Grounded on such an ideological framework Ruskin attacks Victorian environmental damage in his *Fors Clavigera*, which actually contained his ninety six letters to the workmen and labourers of England about the pitiful state of environmental degradation: "you are vitiating [the air] with foul, chemical exhalations; and the horrible nests, which you call towns, are little more than laboratories for the distillations into heaven of venomous smokes and smells, mixed with effluvia for decaying animal matter, and infectious miasmata from purulent disease." (Cook and Wedderburn 91)

Victorian Novels

Victorian novelists too were not far behind in assimilating and communicating these scientific trends discoveries. William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, a soft science fiction work speaks of an ideal society where nature is well taken care of. Gaskell's works creatively foreshadows the convergence of social and environmental ills in the Victorian city. Dickens demonstrated how a social organization through the urban environment moulds both the non-human and human components of the eco system. Finally Hardy another prominent writer to delve on nature wrote about the impact of non-sustainable economic and development policies on the rural eco system and its people.

Conclusion

Victorian writers championed the causes of nature by positively seeking to use the means available to preserve beautiful places and conserving natural resources, standing as a proxy for nature that has no means of expressing its own distress. They so revolutionarily did it at a time when massive level atrocities against the nature were taking place in the name of

development and progress. In such a context, the texts of the Victorian era show the importance of masquerading as nature, recognizing that there can never be a voice of nature. While ecocriticism may not be able to share all the basic goals of other approaches to literary criticism, eco-criticism is an important exploration of how humans interact with the natural world. Most of the authors of the period found inspiration not only from the natural world, but from the power of information and scientific exploration.

ⁱ Parham, John. ed. *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*. Hampshire: Ashgate publishing Limited, 2002

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ⁱⁱⁱ O' Riordan, Tim. *Environmentalism*, Pion, London, 1981

^{iv} Parham, John. *Green Man Hopkins*, Rodoni, New York, 2010.

^v Allaby, Michael. *Basics of Environmental Science*, Routledge, London, 2000.

^{vi} McIntosh, Robert, P. *The Background of Ecology: Concept and Theory*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

^{vii} Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.

^{viii} K Heise, Heise. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," *PMLA*, Volume 121, Number 2, March 2006.

^{ix} Kerridge, Richard and Neil Sammells, eds. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. London: Zed Publications, 1998.

^x Buell, Lawrence, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

^{xi} Mazzeno, Laurence W and Ronald D Morrison. *Introduction*, Victorian Writers and the Environment. Routledge, 2017.

^{xii} *The Poetical Works of Tennyson*, Oxford University Press, 1959

^{xiii} E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. Eds, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, London: George Allen, vol.27, 1903-12