

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF G. M. HOPKINS' "BINSEY POPLARS"

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Abstract

The age of enlightenment was dawned during the Victorian period as a result of rapid changes in the field of social, scientific epistemological realms. The Victorians lived at a crucial time in world history as their generation was grappling with emerging new knowledge systems hitherto unknown. 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. But what is important is that they began to take note of a paradigm shift that was happening and were keen on taking a stand for the future of the planet. In the backdrop of these roadmaps the paper attempts an ecocritical reading of Hopkins' "Binsey Poplars: felled 1879" to see the under currents of the ecological concerns of the poet.

Key words: Victorian, ecology, epistemology, planet, development, Binsey Poplars

Introduction

Gerard Manley Hopkins, who shot to fame with the publication of his poetic works, nearly thirty years after his death, was a representative poet of the Victorian era. He carried within himself a vision of both personal and global collapse and it is often reflected in his poems. He assimilated the literary tradition of English literature and in his own way enriched what was authentic in the old, and ushered in a genuinely valuable new trend in English poetry. His poems express a deep concern for the losing sheen of greenery in the name of progress and

development at the time of industrialization in Victorian England. He was deeply disturbed by the unmindful cutting down of trees, limitless consumption of natural resources and above all the growing apathy and callousness towards nature and the divinity in nature. As the present age is grappling with the phenomenal crisis of environmental destruction as a result of increased anthropocentric interferences, the paper asks whether Hopkins got something to offer to remedy the situation. Taking cue from Ecocriticism, a branch of literary criticism that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, the paper explores whether Hopkins presents an alternative worldview to address the environmental crisis in his poems. Hence, the study intends to analyze Hopkins' "Binsey Poplars: felled 1879" to see the under currents of the ecological concerns of the poet. An ecocritical rereading of his poems can bring about a new world view that can provide an attitudinal change in human community for a sustainable and harmonious coexistence.

Victorian Ecological Perceptions

The Victorians lived at a crucial time in world history as their generation was dawned to a new awakening in various new fields 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 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. In this context of changing socio-cultural scenario Victorian writers in general conceived nature as an anomalous symbol having diametrically opposed features of beauty and cruelty. Nature, for Tennyson and Arnold, was not a beneficent force but was often looked upon as an indifferent presence, opening a possible escape from the materialistic values of the day. For the Pre-Raphaelites too nature "becomes a sensuous lure tempting them away from worldly responsibility, a lure that represents death (total loss of responsibility) as much as sensuous pleasure." (Susan 79)

The isolated individual in the huddle of things is celebrated by the Romantic writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Whereas, the Victorians, coming in terms with socio-cultural changes of their times advocated for the world outside human creation by equipping themselves with the advances of science and technology to better understand nature. There is unanimity among the scholars about the fact that the Victorian era stands as the true beginning of contemporary ecological thought. Some important developments informed by the scientific understanding of the nature in the Victorian era demonstrate the increasing awareness among the people about the fragility of nature. The Selborne Society for the

Protection of Birds, Plants, and Pleasant Places was established in 1885 advocated for their proclaimed causes. Other groups included: The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty, and the Commons Preservation Society. Clearly, Victorian society invested heavily in the welfare of the natural world and some of the famous writers of the period collaborated and enthusiastically participated in such social causes bringing about an early link between literature and ecology. The Wordsworthian “nature” of the Victorians was further enriched, extended and particularized by Hopkins’ ecological consciousness. Kathleen points out that. “If Wordsworth re-situated humankind in nature, as prodigals welcomed back to our native country, it remained for Hopkins to re-situate nature in the context of man, and both man and nature within the Christian context which sees man, if not as the be-all, at all events as the end-all of creation”. (202)

This refined understanding of ecology informed by science and man’s place on this universe prompted Hopkins to write such environmentally sensitive poems. Hopkins was the most important Victorian poet, according to Parham, who “consistently, imaginatively re-created the specific conditions of the Victorian ecosystem.” His poems “contain an imaginative seed with the essence, not just of a broader understanding of Hopkins, or of Victorian ecology, or even of ecocriticism, but of ecology, itself” (170-171).

With the new awareness about the ecological devastation caused by the process of development, it was necessary, for the poets of the age to come to terms with the changes, but only to impact a positive effect on the society. Armed by science, Victorians, particularly Hopkins adopted an integrated stance beholding the fragility of nature. Hopkins succeeded in blending spirituality with ecological concern:

“It is significant, then, that to Hopkins nature simultaneously beneficent, beautiful, and representative of some higher reality. Although nature at times may seem cruel for Hopkins, it is a larger sense beneficent, not because one may see God in nature (Wordsworth would) but because nature reflects God's benevolence power and because it functions to ready man for God's harvest”. (Susan 79)

Hopkins's basic understanding revolves around his God experience. All things of the world are created in order to serve God. Human beings, instead of posing themselves to be masters, should realize that they too are part of this intricate link of interconnected beings. This concept of creation and the interrelationship among the creatures makes Hopkins apart from other poets of his time. “Hopkins”, as Rebecca writes, “with his concern for the individuality of creatures and objects, the utterly unique self carried by each of them, reaches a pitch of intensity and passion unmatched by other poets who treat these topic. (831)

The Present Environmental Crisis

In the twenty first century, environmental issues have moved from the fringes to the very center of the political and ethical debate, now acknowledged as among the most crucial and pressing issues faced by the whole global community. The realization that our earth is slowly disintegrating largely due to human atrocities on nature has sent an alarm across the globe. On the face of this crisis humans find themselves in the dock for being responsible for the devastation that they have caused. A critical analysis of the social system unravels how the powerful have distorted the divine precepts on human coexistence for their own selfish motives. The prevailing ideas of economic growth and modernity have offered a perverted concept of what defines humanity. The profit oriented new economic considerations have reinforced the perverted idea that the “other” is only an object destined to satisfy me, the “subject”. Over the centuries particularly in recent times, the ‘objectification’, both of human beings and the universe for self-benefit, has led to the calamity that the environment is facing today. The home of the humanity, the earth, is sick with many evil symptoms: glacial melting, rising sea levels, severe weather patterns, including oppressive heat, punishing wild fires, unusual floods and storms, increasing desertification, crop failure, food and water shortages, etc. Unfortunately, a great part of responsibility falls on human interventions on our environment. “Few realized more artificial man's environment became, depending own technology for survival, the more precarious its equilibrium became and the closer it approached to catastrophe”. (Bump 241) At this critical juncture, human beings are unable to contain the ill effects of their own wrong doings; it is this human made crisis which the humanity is called upon to address. On the question of who is responsible for the environmental crisis and what is the function of a literary critic in facing this mess, historian Donald Worster explains:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding. (27).

A creative artist or a literary critic with a bent on ecological consciousness attempts, primarily, to become aware of the impact that we place on the environment and gradually to critically develop and communicate an ethical system with a view to correct the unhealthy practices and promote a culture of mutual coexistence.

The Earth-centric Vision of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism plays a crucial role in the study of human association with nature. In the last couple of decades, ecocriticism has captured the attention of scholars and has proved itself to

be an interesting field of investigation in literature. Before we enter into a critical analysis of Hopkins' Binsey Poplars, it is a prerequisite to know what ecocriticism is and the various sub-fields involved in ecocriticism. Regarding the origin of a newfound interest in environment, Bump summarizes that:

"Search for a word for the greater whole which includes both man and nature has been intensified by the sudden increase in our capacity to destroy our world since World War II, dramatized by nuclear explosions and the extinction of various species. The result has been the sudden popularity of the term "ecology." (227)

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 perspective a text has much to say about the specific period in which it was written. Hence, an Ecocritic attempts to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear in diverse cultural spaces. In her effort to define ecocriticism, Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the pioneers of the field explains:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (xviii).

Approaches adopted in ecocriticism are also changing over time. In the beginning it was a selective reading of texts on nature as if nature was speaking but then, slowly, the emphasis was on the text becoming a voice for the nature. "Ecocritics need not", Post argues, "rely on the Romantic ideal of finding texts that most nearly convey the voices of nature". The present day ecological writing, he continues, "champions the causes of nature, actively 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". (Post 12)

Contemporary Ecocriticism is both deliberate in its focus on the materiality of the environment and interdisciplinary in its approach. As a critical theory, Ecocriticism has 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. Lawrence Buell considers "the environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice" (138). So, in the light of the above arguments and perceptions Hopkins poem is approached from an interdisciplinary perspective to show how the ecological insights that he shares in his poem can be handy in offering a lasting solution to the environmental crisis.

Ecological Concerns in “Binsey Poplars”

English Philosopher Arnold Berleant proposes that the arts play an important role in generating an “environmental” consciousness by explicitly appealing to the senses and with their capacity to enliven us to the tissue of the world. The arts, says Berleant, “embody their continuity with other human domains,” providing us an understanding, through their deliberate engagement of the conscious body, that “the perceiver is an aspect of the perceived and, conversely, person and environment are continuous” (xii). In a nutshell, Berleant articulates that art renders the world in the fullness of its texture, subtly illuminating the world from within the body of the perceiver and calling us to a consciousness of ourselves as “enviored beings”. Jude V. Nixon, while investigating the genesis of “Binsey Poplars”, proves with substantial evidences that the junior Hopkins was undoubtedly inspired by the senior man in writing the “Binsey Poplars”. Hopkins senior wrote about the fate of well walk trees in Hampstead Heath, whereas, subsequently, the junior Hopkins inspired by his father wrote about the felling of Poplar trees in Oxford where he spent his life as a student. (191) Further to this episode, in his journal entry for April 8, 1873, echo another experience of his pain about the felling of trees near his residence. “The ashtree growing in the corner of the garden was felled. It was lopped first: I heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more....”(230). The striking feature of his pain about the felling of the tree that is expressed in the poem testifies his ability to see the selfhood of the tree centered scene.

The scientific temper of the Victorian period, particularly how it influenced Hopkins, is clear in the opening lines of the poem. By the latter half of the eighteenth century it was clear to the scientific community that the leaves of the trees absorbed the carbon dioxide that animals emitted and in return produced oxygen, the life line of animal Kingdom with the help of sunlight through a chemical process called photosynthesis. Brian J Day suggests that “such a transformation quells or quenches the sun’s energy by sacrificing it to the inevitable seasonal cycle of the tree, but it also gives life to this world as the air we breathe and the beauty of inscapes by which we know the beauty of this world” (188). Hopkins himself was conscious of this silent but essentially valuable process and communicates to the public with a premonition that if humans fail to realize the value of trees they are bound to suffer.

“My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun...
O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew-

Hopkins’ concern is not just about the lost aesthetic beauty of the landscape as a result of a massive felling of poplar trees but his keen vision points to a much greater danger of

humanity losing its humanness by failing to notice the loss of essential properties of nature. "In "Binsey Poplars", the failure to perceive the unselfing of the trees is fundamentally a statement about failed human visual perception of a specific place". (Day 185) A failure to see the scenes leads to a loss of the scene itself and poet's pain and agony at this calamity is clear from the lamentation.

Hopkins deftly communicates his ecological concerns wrapped in theological and moral terms. The heart of the matter is the belief that everything in the nature is sacred or in another sense, possesses an intrinsic value and ultimately what is done to it is in effect is done to oneself. Through Binsey Poplars he puts across the inevitability of a mutual coexistence. By being an integral part of this universe, every wrong move from the part of human community can jeopardize our own existence on the face of the earth.

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

A characteristic feature of Hopkins' poems is his steady use of inscape and instress. For him, the essence of an object is to be found in its individual distinctiveness, which he termed as inscape. Whereas, the total effect that an individual inscape produces on the viewer is the instress. For Hopkins, "a thing forms part of nature, is created by God, and possesses an inscape-an essence or identity embodied in the thing and dealt out by it for others to witness and thereby apprehend God in it" (Rebecca 831). Hopkins' poetic techniques are a natural result of his theories of inscape and instress. "There is a dual intent in Hopkins' nature poetry, then. He not only serves God by universalizing the message of nature through his "instress", he serves God as well by preaching to the "selfbent" the need for man to preserve nature as a symbol of God" (Susan 86). The inscape of the rural scene that is imprinted in the poet's mind still evokes an instress that is all powerful and difficult to ignore. So, in powerfully evocative terms he laments the lost rural scene caused by the reckless felling of trees that gave the landscape its distinctive inscape.

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc unselfe
The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene

As someone who saw the country landscape with the trees and cherished its beauty, the poet is unable to come to terms with its loss. He laments that: "After-comers cannot guess the beauty been" making Hopkins' concern for the posterity evident here. Human role in the protection of the universe is that of a steward nursing it for the master.

Theological Underpinnings of “Binsey Poplars”

“Hopkins”, according to Bump, “From 1875 to 1879 achieved an extraordinarily vision of God, man, and nature and created new words and rhythms and metaphors which communicate that vision and plead eloquently for the preservation of the earth” (230). This vision of God is the result of the Jesuit training that he underwent in the Society of Jesus. For Hopkins’, the nature of being is interrelated, and it has its foundation in Ignatius Loyola’s spiritual insights given in the “Principium sive Fundamentum”, upon which Hopkins wrote a spiritual commentary during a retreat in Liverpool in 1880. Loyola’s succinct exposition throws a profound insight on human relationship with the almighty:

Man was created to praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord, and by so doing to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth were created for man's sake and to help him in the carrying out of the end for which he was created. Hence it follows that man should make use of creatures so far as they help him to attain his end and withdraw from them so far as they hinder him from so doing. (“Principium,” p. 122)

For Hopkins, the world is a book written by God and by an insightful look into nature we get to know God. The all-pervading presence and power of God is reflected on this nature. Therefore nature share the sacredness of God and human beings are mandated to nurture and protect it rather than exploiting and annihilating it in the name of development and industry.

O if we knew what we do
When we delve or hew-
Hack and rack the growing green

The above lines are an invitation to recognize the inherent sacredness in nature and to deal with it respectfully. As a Jesuit, Hopkins underwent the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises at the beginning of his priestly formation. One important stage of his Spiritual journey is finding God in all things (nature) and developing a spiritual ability to see all things in God. Such a transformation helped him immensely to vibrate with the wounded nature in the face of material progress.

Conclusion

A closer reading of Hopkins’ Binsey Poplars, informed by ecocriticism, brings alive the salient features of his poetic sensibility. The primary quality that embellishes his poetry is an awareness that the intrinsic beauty that God sees in his creation in its bounty and variety of life, the world is good and ought to be respected and admired. “Binsey Poplars” communicates the intrinsic beauty through the presence of a row of trees with “aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled...” The poet foresees an attitudinal change from a mastership to stewardship as a prerequisite to see the inherent beauty to respect it and protect it for the

future generations. The next major insight of Hopkins in the poem is that the universe was arranged in the divine wisdom so that in the balance of nature all creatures depend upon it for their sustenance and wellbeing. The all permeating presence of the divine on this nature is seen and felt like “That dandled a sandelled /Shadow that swam or sank/On meadow and river and wind wandering weed winding bank”. For Hopkins, once the human community is able to see the inscape and experience the instress of this abiding presence of the divinity, they realize the interrelatedness leading to mutual inclusiveness. The materialistic understanding of the modern man towards nature needs to be replaced with an attitude to nurse and nurture. Thirdly, God's presence ultimately holds all things in unity and constantly renews the world. According to Hopkins the ability to see a scene makes the scene exist and by being open to the happenings on the nature humans let themselves be transformed in the rejuvenating power of nature. Therefore, Hopkins comes to the conclusion that the humanity is are called upon to perceive earth as an autonomous entity bound not just by the restraints of physical law but also by respect for its inherent goodness and the covenanted limitations placed upon our earthly sojourn. If imbibed, such an attitude and outlook envisioned in Hopkins’ “Binsey Poplars”, the human community can, to a great extent, bring under its control the environmental crisis that the present world is facing mainly due to its anthropocentric perceptions on life and nature.

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