



AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF WORDSWORTH'S "THREE YEARS SHE GREW IN SUN AND SHOWER"

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ABSTRACT

The twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of a number of literary and cultural theories which have greatly enriched the field of literature by means of interpretations. An awareness about the damages done to the natural environment by human activities has led to the birth of a new branch of literary theory called ecocriticism. It seeks to explore the essential and fundamental relationship between the physical environment and literature. It brings to the fore the importance and significance of this relation. However, Wordsworth's lyrical poem "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower" is one of the five poems which are grouped as "Lucy Poems". The identity of Lucy, however, has led to much critical speculation. The present paper attempts to analyze this beautiful poem from the perspective of ecocriticism. It seeks to explore the relationship between man and nature, between nature and culture, and between physical environment and literature.

Key words: Ecocriticism, environment, literature, nature, culture, man



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INTRODUCTION

William Wordsworth was one of the most important Romantic poets in English literature. In collaboration with Coleridge, he published *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which marked the true beginning of the Romantic Movement. He was the high priest of nature. He looked upon nature as a friend, philosopher and guide. His poetry is also marked by mysticism and pantheism. Of his important poems, mention may be made of "Tintern Abbey", "Ode on The Intimations of Immortality", "Resolution and Independence", "Micheal", "Lucy Poems", "The Old Cumberland Beggar", "The Solitary Reaper", "The Prelude" etc. Wordsworth also wrote a drama entitled *The Borderers*. Throughout his life, he

continued to explore the fundamental relationship between man and nature in his poetry. In "Tintern Abbey", he points out :

"...nature never did betray

The heart that loved: 'tis her privilege,

Through all the years of this our life, to lead

From joy to joy..."

The present poem, i.e. "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower" forms part of the "Lucy Poems". The name "Lucy Poems" is given to a group of five poems by Wordsworth-"She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways", "Strange Fits of Passion have I Known", "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower", "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" and "I Tavelled among Unknown Men". These lyrical poems were

published in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800. They centre around a girl named Lucy who may be the poet's sister or his beloved or his daughter. She may also be a figment of the poet's imagination. Her identity remains a great mystery. However, we come to know that Lucy died at a tender age, leaving the poet desolate and grief-stricken. These poems are remarkable for their simplicity, lyrical intensity, musicality and purity. The poem "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower" tells us how Lucy grew up at the lap of nature and how she was educated by the objects of nature. It also records her premature death and the poet's profound grief at this personal loss. Nature is here personified as a guardian and a good teacher.

Most probably, the term 'ecocriticism' was first used by William Rueckert in 1978. He sought to suggest that one can usefully apply ecological terms and concepts to the study of literature. However the term now-a-days refers to the study of the relationship which exists between the natural environment and literature. In other words, it seeks to explore the connection between the natural world and literature. Though critics like Leo Marks and Raymond Williams had already suggested the importance of natural environment in literature, the term 'ecocriticism' emerged as an important sub-branch of cultural and literary studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is a recent phenomenon simply because people did not have to worry about the environmental degradation in the past. However, ecocriticism may be defined as the practice of evaluating literature from an earth-centred perspective. It is interesting to point out that ecocriticism is often marked by an activist dimension. More often than not, the ecocritics seek to raise awareness about the need for concerns and constructive measures for the protection of the natural environment. They, therefore, bring to the fore the centrality of nature in literature. So, it is no wonder that many ecocritics take active part in the environmental justice movement.

In the U.S.A, the acknowledged founder of ecocriticism is Cheryl Glotfeltry, co-founder with Harold Fromm of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. It was an important collection of definitive essays. In 1992, she also co-

founded ASLE which stands for Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. It publishes a journal called *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. In the U.S.A, ecocriticism takes its literary bearings from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. All of them are major nineteenth-century American authors. Needless to say, their works celebrate the beautiful aspects of nature, the wilderness and event the life force. On the other hand, in the U.K, green studies or ecocriticism takes its cue from the British Romanticism that became prevalent in the 1790s. The British founder of this criticism is Jonathan Bate who wrote *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*.

Abrams and Harpham have beautifully defined ecocriticism in the following lines:

"Ecocriticism... designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities"(96)

Now, one may feel tempted to point out the circumstances that led to the emergence of this theory. The latter part of the 20th century saw the increasing damage being done to the environment. The earth was undergoing an environmental crisis. It was due to the industrial and chemical pollution of the elements of the environment. The destruction of forests, the extinction of different plants and animal species, the population explosion – all these add to the environmental degradation. All these factors were responsible for the inauguration of Ecocriticism. Thus, it is only natural that many ecocritical writings seek to heighten the readers' awareness about the damages caused to environment by the thoughtless and cruel activities of man. These writings often incite the alert readers to social and political action. The concern of the ecocritics is not only the wellbeing of man but also the survival of human life by means of protecting our natural environment.

The ecocritics use a wide range of perspectives or procedures, e.g., traditional approach, postcolonial perspective etc. First and

foremost, they advocate that anthropocentrism should be replaced by ecocentrism. Incidentally, anthropocentrism holds that the human beings are opposed to and superior to nature and that the human interests and needs are of paramount importance. Ecocentrism, on the other hand, proposes that all living things and the natural environment are equally important and valuable, and they even possess moral and political rights.

Secondly, the ecocritics reject and criticize the traditional binaries like man/nature or culture/nature. Traditionally, man and nature are often viewed as mutually exclusive entities. Even culture and nature have been presented as binaries which are poles apart. But the ecocritics assert that man and nature are interconnected and mutually inclusive. Nature, man and culture all share an essential kinship with one another.

Thirdly, many ecocritics recommend the expansion of the "green reading". They argue that a text should be analyzed to see if it contains any concern for the environment. The hitherto undervalued forms of nature writing must be included within the major canon of literature. The status of such writings must be elevated. For example, the regional fiction by Thomas Hardy, Mark Twain and Sarah Orne Jewett must be granted a prominent place within the literary domain.

Fourthly, ecocriticism offers an analysis of the differences found in different people's attitudes towards the environment.

Last but not least, the ecocritics show a growing interest in the religions of so-called primitive cultures. They also take a keen interest in Hindu, Buddhist and other religions. They attach special importance to those civilizations that do not embrace the western opposition between man and nature. While western religions grant man an unquestionable dominion over the non-human world, these primitive cultures project the natural world as a living and holy entity in which human beings live in harmony and reciprocity with other living beings. In a word, such traditions help strengthen the bond between man and nature.

Peter Barry has pointed out:

"...the ecocritics reject the notion ...that everything is socially and/or linguistically

Constructed"(243)

But this notion is common to all other theories. The ecocritics hold that nature really exists and so it has no need to be turned into a concept.

The poem "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower" is, no doubt, a beautiful lyric marked by simplicity, spontaneity, subjectivity and musicality. However, the poem begins with the information that Lucy grew in "sun and shower" for the first three years of her life. Then, nature took her away from the human world of corruption and evil to the natural world of peace, joy and virtue. Quite in tune with ecocriticism, the poem presents nature as a living human being. At the very outset, we come across the essential relationship between the natural environment and human beings. Nature is here presented as a friend, philosopher and guide. It is not an inanimate entity but a living being with human emotions, feelings and other attributes. The natural world here directly comes forward to rear a human child:

"Then Nature said, 'A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A lady of my own"

Thus, Nature shoulders the responsibility to bring Lucy up in a proper manner. Most of the poem comprises the words of Nature. She tells us how Lucy will grow up under her guidance. Nature will not only rouse noble feelings but also curb evil desires in Lucy:

Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me,
The girl in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain".

Lucy, nature goes on to say, will live in harmony with natural objects and other living beings. Different objects of Nature will impart education, beauty and charms to Lucy. For instance, the "mute and insensate things" will infuse in Lucy "the calm and the silence". The floating clouds will lend their majesty to her. The willow will teach her how to remain humble. Lucy will even find grace in storm, which will help mould her physical structure:

“Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the storm
Grace that shall mould the Maiden’s form
By silent sympathy”.

Thus, from an ecocritical perspective, one must point out that the traditional binaries like man/nature or culture/nature have been abolished here. Again, nature is not a cultural or linguistic construct. Rather, it is a living entity that is part and parcel of our life. The physical environment is here projected as sympathetic to man.

However, Nature proceeds to state that Lucy will grow fond of stars and she will also love the murmuring sound of rivulets. That sound will lend beauty and charms to her face. The objects of nature will continue to provide Lucy with “vital feelings of delight” which will help develop her physical form:

“And vital feelings of delight
Shall rear her form to state height,
Her virgin bosom swell”.

That man and the physical environment are mutually inclusive and interconnected is once again emphasized in the following lines:

“Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy dell”.

However, Lucy grew up under the caring influence of nature but she died a premature death, leaving the poet grief-stricken. In spite of that, Nature continued to be a source of consolation to the poet, to some extent :

“She died and left to me
This heath, this calm, and quite scene;
The memory of what has been.
And never more will be”.

In this way, the entire poem announces the triumph of ecocentrism over anthropocentrism. In other words, the poet seems to suggest that it is always preferable to live in close communion with nature and the physical environment, far from the madding crowd. It is also an ecocritical writing in that it rejects the notion that man is superior to nature. It also shuns the belief that man has full dominion over the environment. Rather, the poem propagates that we should co-exist with the elements of nature as our near and dear ones.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the present poem explores the essential relationship between man and physical environment, which is an important aspect of ecocriticism. Here nature is not removed from man or culture. Rather nature forms part of everything that man thinks and does. A pure environment free from pollution has been presented here. Thus, Wordsworth’s “Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower” contains valuable insights into man-nature and nature-culture relationships. It will survive in the hearts of the readers also as a nature writing.

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