

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

Understanding Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Thoreau's *Walden*

Dr. NAMITA LAXMI JAGADDEB

Lecturer in English, Mahima Degree College,

Bijapali, Dist. Jharsuguda, Odisha, India

E-mail: njagaddeb@gmail.com



Article Received: 20/06/2021

Article Accepted: 30/07/2021

Published online:09/08/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.68](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.68)

Abstract

Understanding nature is critical to a lasting solution of the grave ecological crisis facing the world today. The scope for such an understanding is nowhere better found than in the realm of literature. Thus, in this era of Anthropocene and globalization, while the environmentalists labour to engage the attention of world communities with the problems of a crumbling eco-system; invoking great nature writers' masterpieces for a reading- for -understanding nature, will definitely be a profitable workout. Such a reading will help one look afresh at the self and environment as integral parts of one unity in urgent need of care and protection. With this perspective in mind, "Tintern Abbey" of Wordsworth, and *Walden* of Thoreau have been chosen for ecocritical reading and analysis. Wordsworth, the famous English Romantic poet and Thoreau, the eminent American writer, though grew up in different companies and distinct cultural spheres, used to write against similar backdrop of industrialization and the accompanying hazards, the awareness of which led to their close proximity to nature. Wordsworth's visit to Tintern Abbey ; Thoreau's retreat at Walden pond are genuine attempts at bonding with nature for sustenance of a meaningful life. The analysis of both the texts will offer a picture for recognition and understanding of the whole eco-system as a live, responsive entity to which the human beings owe inalienable continuance. Such a recognition will wake them to their ethical responsibility and accountability to nature and environment which they cannot afford to ignore any more.

Key words: nature, environment, ecological crisis, eco-system.

Introduction:

Ecocritical study of literature is fundamental to understanding nature in the context of the grave ecological crisis facing the world today. Such study is commonly termed as "ecocriticism", which refers to the environmental oriented study of literary texts with a view to addressing the environmental

concerns qualitatively. Following the publication of *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 by Lawrence Buell and *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996 by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, ecocriticism has been engaging global attention and thereby has taken the centre stage in the studies of environment. It is a common knowledge that the world scale ecological crisis resulting mostly from indiscriminate

application of technological knowledge, pushing globalisation to its farthest one-dimensional limit, has entailed a virtual collapse of the life support system of the planet endangering humans and non-humans alike. A large number of ventures by scientists, policy makers, political and social organizations have been undertaken to address the problem. But, the result is far from satisfactory. Indeed, the issue at stake is more psychological than physical in nature. The malady is deeply rooted in modern psyche. Lawrence Buell has rightly diagnosed it as “a crisis of the imagination”, a failure to understand nature and its relationship to human beings (Buell 2). Ecocriticism is considered to be a befitting mode which can offer ample scope for overcoming the said crisis of imagination in understanding nature in the proper perspective. With this point in mind, “Tintern Abbey” of William Wordsworth and *Walden* of Henry David Thoreau, which are among the great nature writings of English and American literature respectively have been taken for ecocritical reading.

Purpose

The objective of this research paper is to analyse ecocritically the two great nature writings of English and American literature namely “Tintern Abbey” of Wordsworth and *Walden* of Thoreau respectively to show how both the writers have understood and valued nature as precious for human beings who are, thus, required to maintain a healthy human-nature relationship for leading a meaningful life. The lesson derived from the study will help addressing the ecological crisis qualitatively.

Methodology:

This paper is research based and qualitative in methodology, sourcing the materials from reference books and the internet. The cited materials have been examined in terms of their usefulness and relevance to the issue in question and have formed part of the findings.

Discussion and Findings:

The issue to be discussed is what is the need for understanding nature and how ecocriticism or ecocritical study of literary texts as have been

chosen for the study will help one in such understanding and what purpose it would serve. Since the issue is linked to the broader issue of human-nature relationship which has suffered setback in this Anthropocene era owing to mindless handling of the natural habitat destroying ecological equilibrium, it needs to be discussed accordingly.

Prior to the advent of industrial revolution, the human-nature bond was almost intact. Human beings never interfered with environment unless it was unavoidably required. Ancient literature bears ample evidence of such human-environment interconnectedness in which nature and the non-human have been splendidly portrayed with love, compassion and reverence. Man’s holistic attitude has undertaken radical change with the advent of industrialization on the back of scientific discoveries. He has grown utterly utilitarian; learnt how to control nature with the help of new knowledge and meddled with nature, misutilizing each and every object of the natural environment to meet his selfish ends. Further, the two world wars and their vicious impact followed by the all-encompassing technological revolution and globalization across the world have accelerated the destabilization of the ecological balance of the world. The soil, the water, the air have got polluted; forests and mountains devastated. The green earth has virtually turned in to the proverbial waste land, unsustainable and unsuitable for habitation. All these have resulted in nature revealing unpredictable behaviour through highly improbable events such as flash floods, cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, tornados, extreme heat conditions etc. which Amitav Ghosh termed as “uncanniness”. In explaining this situation, Ghosh remarks:

No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors. (Ghosh 40)

This failure in recognition hinges on human failure in understanding the working of nature. It is the mindset which needs remediation which the projects of the environmentalists and various governmental interventions cannot effect. The meaning and message preserved in literature particularly in nature writings, if administered with sincerity, can bring home to human beings as to how they should deal with the environment on which they are dependent for survival. Here, ecocriticism or the ecocritical study of literature provides the qualitative perspective to address this sensitive issue of environmental crisis plaguing humanity. However, in furthering the discussion on this issue, it is considered necessary from academic interest to state how some famed ecocritics have thought and commented on its critical ability, usefulness and relevance to the ecological issues under study. Glotfelty in the introduction to "The Ecocriticism Reader" observes:

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-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty XIX)

Like Glotfelty, Richard Kerridge remarks that ecocriticism, "seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (Kerridge 5). To Greg Garrard, "Indeed, the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself". Garrard further certifies, "Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theory because of its close relationship with the science of ecology" (Garrard 5). Lawrence Buell et al in a highly perceptive remarks on the origin and function of ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof – by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven and direct environmental concern – can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict planet Earth today (Buell et al 418).

The aforesaid observations point to the centrality of ecocriticism as an authentic way of addressing the environmental crisis qualitatively. What is essential at present is a change of mind and behaviour of human beings towards the natural habitat. It is ecocritical reading of literary texts which can bring about this desired change by inculcating an understanding of nature. Thus, a reading of Wordsworth and Thoreau as they have imagined and professed and practised fellowship with nature will be useful in the understanding of the human-nature relationship and the urgency of resurrecting human companionship with nature. It is worthwhile to mention that the works of Wordsworth and Thoreau have substantially contributed to the growth of ecocriticism as a discipline. Pastoral imagination in the lyric tradition of Wordsworth and his Anglo-American successors and the literary nature writings from Thoreau to the present have promoted ecocriticism during its early formation (Buell et al 419). Works of both the writers are ecocritically very significant and meaningful. Both are passionate and compassionate to the natural environment and have shown ethical concern for it. Jonathan Bate has found Wordsworth's poetry steeped with ecological values, reverences for the green earth as a single vast ecosystem which cannot be destabilized without hazards to humanity (Bate 40). Similarly, Lawrence Buell in appreciation of Thoreau's contribution to ecological awareness has described him as the environmental saint of America in the final section of his *The Environmental Imagination* entitled "Environmental Sainthood" (Buell).

Now, Wordsworth's representative poem "Tintern Abbey" may be taken for consideration of its ecocritical significance. The poet hardly requires any introduction, he being the leading Romantic

poet of nature of English literature who have been influencing generations of writers and readers to the present day with his unique concept of nature as "The anchor, of my purest thoughts, the nurse / The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul / Of all my moral being", and message to humanity that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her".... (Wordsworth 238). For Hudson, "His love of nature was boundless and his knowledge of nature was equal to his love." He is the keenest eyed of all modern poets for what is deep and essential in nature (Hudson 190). Of all his poems, "Tintern Abbey" claims a special position as a moving record of the poet's life-long association with nature. In it, the poet has traced the evolution of his mind under the impact of nature beginning from his young days to mature years; from the boyish pleasure of "aching joys", "dizzy raptures", followed by the next stage of sensuous pleasure of "The sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion", to the third stage of listening to "the still sad music of humanity" and finally experiencing divinity in nature where "A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts / And rolls through all things" (Wordsworth 237). The poet's personal experience is so intimately conveyed through the manifest nature with a full scale green landscape framing the poem, the reader is compelled to move with it from stage to stage undergoing similar experience.

The poem is virtually, a feast for the eyes and ears of a nature lover. The very first passage presents a bouquet of nature's gift, "These waters, rolling from their mountain springs / With a soft inland murmur"; "these steep and lofty cliffs"; "The landscape with the quiet of the sky"; "the orchard tufts"; "hedge-rows"; "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods"; "Hermit's cave" and so on (Wordsworth 235). All these make for a soulful green earth for the reader. As one proceeds through the poem as the poet recalls his earlier days with nature and his gradual transformation of mind, the reader will undergo a similar transformational experience. The natural objects change their significance, forms and colours as the poem passes through poet's growing years till the reader listens in nature "the said music of humanity" which help him identify with

nature and humanity and finally forging a unity with nature.

A serious reading will help the reader find a sense of belonging to nature and oneness with it. He may or may not venerate it, but will definitely experience a kind of affinity to which he is hitherto not privy. He will be awakened to a new realization of the presence of nature as something benign, wholesome and integral. This is precisely what an ecocritic expects of a poem for the reader. An ethical understanding of nature as something desirable and lovable is all that is needed for any qualitative approach to deal with the environmental crisis.

Coming to Thoreau's *Walden* for analyzing its ecocritical significance, it is noteworthy to mention that the writer is considered "a key figure" in American ecocriticism (Garrard 54). To Lawrence Buell, "..... no writer in the literary history of America's dominant subculture comes closure than he to standing for nature in both the scholarly and the popular mind (Buell 2). Garrard describes him "an ornery sage retreating from the bustle of civilized life to rediscover the fundamental truth of human existence (Garrard 55). Thoreau himself stated his mission to "Walden" pond, acknowledging his allegiance to nature:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived (Thoreau 89).

Walden is Thoreau's literary masterpiece on the pragmatic relationship between the humans and the world of nature, which he himself has practised and displayed. It is ecocritically very significant in sending out a meaningful message to humanity as to how and why one should live close to nature with simplicity and sincerity. This piece of message is highly relevant for understanding nature in the present context of environmental crisis. *Walden* records how Thoreau has spent two years, two months and two days near Walden pond and built a hut himself, thrived on frugal meals, lived a life of utmost austerity and sincerity amid nature with the minimum necessity of the life. In the opening chapter of the book, a reader will receive practical

advices to reduce the necessities of life and reject luxury and comfort and all superficialities in order to lead a purposeful life. To him, "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable but positive hindrances to elevation of mankind (Thoreau 19)." In exemplifying it, he cites wisdom of the ancient Chinese, Hindu, Persian, Greek philosophers who were outwardly poor, but rich inwardly. The reader will find the cottage, Thoreau built himself on the shore of Walden pond is a basic of 10"x15" in size. He has performed all the labour himself and wants all to aim at, "Simplicity! Simplicity! Simplicity! which holds the key to a significant life. Near his hut, Thoreau has grown beans over a large area, and with it he feels attached to the earth firmly (Thoreau 148). This sense of belonging to earth and its vegetation is the principal lesson for the reader and the humanity who are required to protect nature in their own interest of safety, wellbeing and progress.

Thoreau loves everything at Walden: its water, its sounds, solitude, morning, Winter, Spring, its birds and animals. He finds himself identified with each and every object of the natural habitat surrounding Walden. For him, "Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and heavens, it partakes of the colour of both (Thoreau 169). The lake is "is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature (Thoreau 178). This speaks of Thoreau's deep belief in the inherent relationship between human beings and nature. For a reader, Thoreau's description of his experience amid nature from morning to night and through different seasons is simply breathtaking. Through the printed pages, he will have a real feel of the sounds and colours of nature which Thoreau experienced long time back.

Morning is the most significant hour for Thoreau at Walden which he wants to celebrate as nature calls for awakening to a joyful life. For him, "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself (Thoreau 87). Among the seasons, Thoreau loves Spring the best. It symbolizes new life and new hope. He rejoices at the approach of Spring as an enlightened experience. For him, "...the

coming of Spring is like the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos and the realization of the Golden Age (Thoreau 292).

At Walden, Thoreau has never felt alone with nature. The solitude, Walden provides is his best companion. For him, "Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows (Thoreau 130). He has perceived that nature is the great benefactor of humanity suffering from loneliness and melancholy. To him:

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature, - of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter - such health, such cheer, they afford forever! And such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve (Thoreau 132).

These experiences of Thoreau at Walden presenting nature in all its beautiful, beneficial manifestations for humanity is bound to have a constructive, ethical impact on the reader and the humanity in general, who must look at nature and environment as not something of an objective entity existing only for his materialist needs but, a live, organic system of which the humanity is an indispensable part.

Conclusion

In the context of the discussion and findings in the foregoing passages, it is concluded that proper understanding of nature and the environment on the part of human beings is crucial to the solution of global ecological crisis. Since understanding of the matter depends on the change of mindset and behaviour, lessons from the ecocentric literary texts should be utilized prudently for this purpose. It is advisable that such texts be incorporated in the educational syllabi for creating sufficient awareness among the younger generation, whose inheritance of the planet is now at stake. Thus, it is incumbent upon all to rescue the nature and environment from further degradation and resurrect the planet to its

former health for the benefit of posterity. In the fitness of things, let "ecocriticism" be granted the primacy of position it deserves, in the common global endeavour towards resolving the fatal ecological crisis threatening the world today.

Works Cited

Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology-Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Buell, Lawrence, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber "Literature and Environment". *The Annual Review of Environment and Resources*. 2011.36: 417-40. Web Retrieved on 15.10.2019 from environment.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Buell_Heise_Thornbe_ARER_2011_Lit_and_Env.pdf

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1995.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge; 2012.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 2016.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. Introduction, in Cheryll C. Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. London: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Hudson, W.H. *An Outline History of English Literature*. Delhi: AITBS Publishers, India, 2011.

Kerridge, Richard. "Small rooms and the ecosystem: environmentalism and DeLillo's *White Noise*", in Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (eds) *Writing the Environment*. London: Zed Books, 1998.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Other Writings* New Delhi: FULL CIRCLE PUBLISHING, 2008.

Wordsworth, William. "Tintern Abbey". *Fifteen Poets*. Indian Ed. New Delhi: OUP, 1960.