

ECOLOGICAL CONCERN IN MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Nature has profound influence for literary artists for a long time. Prominent writers and poets were fascinated not only through the beauties of nature but also its moods. The literary scenes of the artists illustrate the glory and glamour of nature in their creative and inspiring works. The pervading influence of nature refreshes the minds and moods of the readers. The mountains, the fountains, the birds, rivers, the sky, the clouds, the trees are the various objects of nature. Wordsworth, in his *The Prelude* consider nature as his teacher who uses to scold him and rebuke him by showing the harsh side of her, just as mother or teacher does to correct the child.

KEYWORDS: Modern American Poetry

INTRODUCTION

The natural sights are getting adversely affected during the rapid industrialization and technological advancement over the last century. Man is the annihilator of the devastating scenario of nature. In order to remain in the race for power and development, man exploits nature and environment. In return, he is leading a life of luxury and comfort. As a result, the existence of man is endangered by so many calamities that are playing havoc in the lives of so many people in so many countries. Nature has controlled mankind. She has shown her sterner moods to curb human beings from wrongdoings and is quite capable of teaching them morality. She is the guiding force for mankind. William Wordsworth, the high priest of nature states that Nature's power of doing all these things was unlimited and uncontrolled. 'When from behind that craggy steep till then/The horizon's bound, a high peak, black and huge, As if with voluntary power instinct /upreared its head'(The Prelude Book I, II 377-380)

Poets of England in different ages have expressed a greater affinity with nature in one way or the other. Their different attitudes towards various aspects of nature and environment reflect the relationship of nature and environment in terms of not only the physical existence of human beings but also their emotional and spiritual side. The study of the close relationship between literature and physical environment has been termed as 'ecocriticism' by Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in the field. A great deal of interest in the study of nature and literature with a focus on 'green' issues grew through the 1980s and ecocriticism had emerged as a recognizable discipline by the early 1980s. While ecocritics study literature written throughout history and analyse its relationship to the environment, most of them found significant subjects during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Victorian realists who wrote about industrialization changing the natural landscape, explorers and natural historians who wrote about newly encountered places and wildlife and pioneers and other travelers who wrote of their experiences with an emphasis on the natural setting. The present paper elucidates the themes and techniques of American poetry with the focus on the relationship between man and environment as perceived by some poets in contemporary times.

Ted Hughes is a prominent poet of the twentieth century. His poetry exhibits the fragmentation of soul and self and

subsequent alienation from nature and consciously aims to integrate man with nature. The modern man has discarded his world of feelings, imagination and pure instincts which is true to nature. But he has done at his own cost. In his poem 'Hawk Roosting', he has interpreted the metaphor of Hawk for the man, he shows the arrogance of a man who considers himself to be as powerful as God: "My feet are locked upon the rough bark/it took the whole of Creation /To produce my foot, my each feather :/Now I hold Creation in my foot"(ii.9-12)

The poet has explained the disastrous consequences of man without the supports of Nature. Nature is the protective mantle for mankind. It is the source of joys and pleasures, solace and contentment for mankind. Just as Hawk enjoys the support of tress and buoyancy of air which helps in flight, man makes maximum use of the gifts of nature for his own benefits and feels as if he is the master of all with everything at his disposal. However, the last line of the poem, ' I am going to keep things like this' has been interpreted by some of the critics as nature's intention to maintain its original diversity and composition in opposition to man-induced natural calamities. Thus the poem is a reflection of conflict between man and environment in contemporary times resulting from man's efforts to rule the environment and control it as per his needs and desires.

Robert Frost is a prominent American poet of nature who has reflected on nature and natural objects. The beauties of nature, the landscape and the natural surroundings fascinated him a lot and he was drawn to them mysteriously. In ' Stopping by Woods on Snowy Evening' he reflects on the beauty of forest experience with snow falling."Whose words these I think I know/His house is in the village through/He will not see me stopping here /to watch his woods fill up with snow(ii.1-4)The poet believed that we should strive for harmonious coexistence with nature, for nature can be both friend as well as foe to man. In these lines from 'Our hold on the planet', he presents benevolence and malevolence in nature. 'We asked for rain/it did not flash and roar/It did not lose its temper /we owned to a wish for rain/It did not flash and roar /it did not lose its temper at our demand /And blow a gale. It did not misunderstand /And give us more than our spokesman bargained for/And just because we owned to a wish for rain/send us flood and bid us be damned and drown /It gently threw us a glittering shower down'(III 1-7)The poet explains to work in conjunction with nature rather than competing with it. ' Take nature altogether since time began /including human nature,in peace and war /And it must be a little more in favour of man'(ii 13-15)

Mary Oliver and Edna St. Vincent Millay are two notable American poets who remain silent on the clash and conflict between humans and the environment. They celebrate the natural beauty that surrounds the human race. The poetry of Mary Oliver connects us with our sources in the natural world: the beauties, the terrors, mysteries and consolations. In the poem, 'The Sun', Mary draws our attention towards the various natural beauties that are around in visual charm and appeal. She elucidates the unique charms and perfections resulting from the rising and setting sun. This is more wonderful than anything else in the world. She feels that this world is probably too busy to notice or in these charms that nature offers us unconditionally. She asks 'or have you too /turned from the world/or have you too gone crazy/for power, for things ?'(ii 31-36)

Like Mary Oliver, Edna St. Vincent Millay feels awed by the glory of the natural world and finds it too overwhelming for her to take in it completely. In the poem, 'God's World', she finds herself almost at a loss for words at the mystic beauty of this God created natural world :

'O world, I can not hold thee close enough /Thy winds, thy wide grey skies/Thy mists, that roll and rise/Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag /And all but cry with colour/...../World, world, I can not get thee close enough'(ii,1-6)The poets realize the celebration of Nature and Environment. This can be enjoyed rather than be exploited for practical

uses.

A prominent American poet who acquired reputation and distinction in the field of literature by projecting himself as a distinguished environmental activist and voicing ecological concerns is William Stanley Merwin. 'Merwin recognizes that the threats to the earth and humanity are not millennial religious threats but very real ecological ones. He is concerned with apocalypse as a destiny we are choosing ourselves by our own actions, rather than as a fate to be imposed on us by an angry God'(Hix 60)

Through the fictional character of Peter, Merwin wants to make us realize that with the ending of this natural world, our world is also ending. Another remarkable poet related to his ecological concern is 'For a Coming Extinction' in which, grimly regretful of human waste, Merwin expresses pessimism about earth's future. It is addressed to the Grey whale, a symbol of an endangered species, and begins with a request to the beast for forgiveness for causing its destruction. The poet-speaker promises the whale that it will have company among long-extinct beings: 'When you will not see again/The whale calves trying the light/Consider what you will find in the black garden/And its court/The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas'(ii.22-26)He concludes with the repetition 'Tell him' and stresses that humanity has hastened nature's death out of arrogance.

It is observed that the later half of the twentieth century was dominated by works contemplating the ecological concerns and environmental issues. Literature is the representation of time and age in which it is written. The literary thoughts, themes and interpretations are the reflections of poets and writers. The ecological imbalance is a reaction to the poetic sentiments in the contemporary periods of American. The poets are deeply agitated by the cruelty and inhumanity of men and women. The eternal flow of fountains, the majestic sight of mountains, the chirping of birds and the fruits, flowers and flavours are the day-dreams. Mankind is totally preoccupied with comforts and comfortability in living in buildings. The scenic beauties are missing and the peace and tranquility of life are disturbed. The preservation of ecology has become a great necessity. In the words of H.L.Hix, "Humans think of themselves as the rulers of the earth but in fact, we are utterly dependent on it and subject to its every whim. It's seen as an object of exploitation, rather than as something of which we are a part. We are neither superior nor inferior, we are a part of it. It is not different from us. So when we treat it with contempt and exploit it, we are despising and exploiting ourselves.'"(70)

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