

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 12, December 2018

www.ijellh.com

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Nature in its Different Forms: An Ecocritical Analysis of Selected Poems of William

Wordsworth and Rudyard Kipling

Abstract

Nature writing has been an evolutionary area in which different writers have different views. The focus of the present paper is on the contrast between two poets of different eras who were prominent in writing about the natural world. Both the poets, William Wordsworth and Rudyard Kipling show the relation between the human world and the natural world but both had different approach to present the same. This paper explains how both the poets perceive nature in their poems at different times. Could this be the effect of their being in different

eras? The nature poetry of the romantic school has always been a key concern but Kipling's nature poems presents a modern view of the world where colonial natural scenario is presented by focusing the natural world of Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: Human world, Natural world, Alienation, Non-human, Forest, Flowers.

Green Studies is a development within the literary and cultural studies which is informed by the insights of ecology and environmental theories and practices. As a science, it began in the mid-nineteenth century and its impact on critical theory as an academic discipline was visible in the later twentieth century. It is when the relationship between human beings and their total environment had become unstable and the damage being done to nature had become an unavoidable challenge. The name given to green theory when it got established was 'ecocriticism' which is used as an abbreviation of 'ecological literary criticism'. Actually, the term 'ecocriticism' was invented by the American critic William Reukert in his article '*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*' which first appeared in 1978. "The prefix 'eco' is preferred over 'enviro' for the latter is anthropocentric and stressing duality implying that humans are at the centre surrounded by everything that is not us but the environment" (Sumathy 2).

Ecocriticism gives voice to the non-human other, that is, the natural environment. It reflects a new representation of nature's identity regarding man's view towards it and the relationship between the two. Different critics have tried to define ecocriticism in their own ways such as:

Ecocriticism, essentially, is the study of the relation between literature and nature: in particular, the literary representation of nature and, just as

importantly, the power of literature to inspire its readers to act in defense of nature. (Coupe 154)

With this, it can be said that the theory is related to nature writing in general that had already found an important place in literature for many centuries. It has coloured almost all the genres of literature and has been changing with the passage of time. Moving from the very concept of pastoral and nature writing, it has been named as the environmental studies. The present paper deals with the different perspectives of two poets, William Wordsworth and Rudyard Kipling, who views nature differently in their writings.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is one of the major poets of the Romantic era. The Romantics were known for their love for nature and nature was a source of inspiration for them. They believed that nature has a healing power. As a poet, Wordsworth is filled up with the liveliness and positivity towards the natural world. He considers nature as a guide, god and teacher. In other words, nature is a living being for him. His prime concern in his poems is to show the relationship between the human world and the natural world. His poetry strikes the imagination of the readers and takes them along into the natural world. His major works include *The Prelude*, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

Nature was a source of eternal joy and happiness to the Romantics. It acts as a guide or teacher that directs the life of the human beings. The instance can be seen in Wordsworth's poem "Daffodils" where he feels that nature has the power to heal and change the human mind. He was moving along the lake all alone and suddenly observes the daffodils in endless number. He states,

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;

Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (1-6)

In the very beginning of the poem, he uses a beautiful simile by comparing himself to the cloud which “floats on high over vales and hills”. Here, the lonely being observes the crowd of “golden daffodils” by the side of the lake that dances with the music and sound of the wind. The persona has the view of the Nature indulged in some joyful activity which provided him “a jocund company”. He could not resist being happy in such a positive and beautiful company as he says, “A poet could not but be gay,/ In such a jocund company” (15-16). And this particular show of the dancing daffodils gifted him with everlasting happiness.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (19-24)

The vision of the nature blessed him with pleasure which would stay with him forever. This show would “flash upon his inward eye” whenever he would be all alone or in a thoughtful mood. So, according to the Romantics, there is a relationship between the human beings and the natural world. Here, it can be seen that Nature has deliberately performed such an energetic and positive show in order to heal and soothe the lonely mind of the persona. Throughout the poem the contrast between the loneliness of individuals and the individuals in the company of natural world can be seen. The lonely persona gets his best company in the form of the daffodils and hence in the form of natural world which is the true companion of human and non-human beings and without which the life is not possible.

The relation or interaction between the human world and the natural world is one of the major concerns of the Romantics. And this can be seen in the beautiful poem of Wordsworth, “The Solitary Reaper” where the person is indulged in performing the reaping in the lap of nature. Wordsworth has depicted the affinity between the human being and his work in the natural scenario. In the very opening lines of the poem, the persona directs the readers’ attention towards the lonely reaper working in the field. The poet states,

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain,
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound. (1-8)

The girl is completely involved in “reaping and singing” while doing her job in the field. She herself “cuts and binds” the grain and keeps on singing such a sad note that the whole valley is deeply overflown with the effect of her melancholic song. So, nature acted as a great companion for the girl who is probably affected or undergone through some stress in her life. The viewers who passed her by do not feel like disturbing her and just move on after observing and listening to her song. The poet has compared the song of the isolated girl to the nightingale and the cuckoo who sings in the spring season. It is further observed that the song sung by the solitary reaper is mysterious that could not be understood by anyone. The poet poses so many questions and trying to find the subject of her song as he states,

For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:

Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again? (19-24)

So, it could be so that she is singing of some 'familiar matters' that happened in our daily life or she could be singing of some kind of suffering or pain that every person has to face in his or lifetime or she could be singing of some kind of loss of relation between the natural world and the human world. She could be depicting her sorrow over the lost bond of the humans and the nature. Being unable to find the answers to the question of the subject matter of the song of the girl, the poet describes the effect of the music on the viewers and listeners when he says,

I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more. (29-32)

The song of the girl makes the listener numb and motionless and after enjoying the musical company of the natural world, he moves on towards his way. Though the song fades away as he moves forward but it leaves a long lasting effect to the heart of the listener.

One further point to note about the poem is the representation of all humanity by the girl. If the girl is representing the rest of human beings having a sickle in her hand and cutting down the crops, how far the violation of the natural world at the hands of human intervention is depicted in the poem? And if the girl is cutting down the crops with a melancholic heart, does not it mean that she (and all those to whom she represents by implication i. e. humanity) knows the outcomes of destruction and degradation of the natural world? In this way the poem reveals various layers of human-nature relationship.

Another poem in which Wordsworth gave glorious descriptions of nature is “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798”. The poem provides the idea about the past experiences, present feelings and future expectations of the poet regarding the natural world. The poet feels happy to revisit the river, Wye, where he had visited five hours ago. And that particular experience served him as a blessing during his lonely hours. As the poet says,

But, oft, in lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration (26-31)

The memories of his first visit endowed him with sweet sensations, peace of mind in ‘the lonely rooms’ and crowded ‘towns and cities’. He also says, “How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,/ O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,/ How often has my spirit turned to thee!” (57-58). He is greatly indebted to the nature through which he would be able to sustain in the materialistic world. and his second visit freshens up his old memories and he could recall the entire view and feels that this present moment can act as ‘life and food’ in the upcoming years. It is stated as,

The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. (63-67)

So, in a way the poet wants to explain how nature acted and acts and will act as a positive energy and pleasure for him. He believed that nature communicates and appeals to the senses which guides, guards and nurses the heart and soul of the living beings. And for him, nature is not otherwise as he says,

—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (108-113)

In his another poem “Calm Is All Nature as a Resting Wheel” Wordsworth is observing the surroundings at the time of twilight. The entire atmosphere is calm and is soothing the disturbed nerves of the people. The day time anxiety is over because the evening and then night is the time to enjoy the company of one’s dear ones and the natural world as the persona of the poem is doing. The material lives of human beings depend upon their work due to which they cannot enjoy and praise the natural beauties. But at the time of night they try to forget all those worries.

Now, in this blank of things, a harmony,
Home-felt, and home-created, comes to heal
That grief for which the senses still supply
Fresh food; for only then when, memory
Is hushed, am I at rest. (7-11)

In this way the poem is about the enjoyment of the natural world by discarding the day-to-day troubles out of the mind and concentrating the attention on the charming world of nature.

As the time passes, there is a change in the themes and concerns in the writings of Wordsworth. This change comes due to the industrial revolution. His poems started showing the alienation of man from the natural world. And the same concern is shown in his poem “The World Is Too Much With Us” in which he discussed the rift between the human world and the natural world. He laments on the condition of man whose sole purpose in life is to earn and spend. The modern man has bargained his soul for the materialistic world. As he says,

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;-
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon! (1-4)

So, the poet feels sad viewing the condition of the modern man who ignored nature for the sake of materialistic world. This is how he posed the problem of the modern man and later on, he himself gave the solution for the same towards the end of the poem. He wished to be a pagan who had faith in some primitive religion and who could see the sea Gods, Proteus and Triton and stay away from the worldly-minded society. He states,

..... Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn. (9-14)

The poet has not only described the problem and solution for the human world but he has also portrayed the beautiful picture of the natural world. While describing the differences

between the humans and the nature, he presented the beautiful and pleasant view of nature which no longer affects the modern man. The poet says,

This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. (5-9)

The poet has tried to strike the imagination of the readers with such a visual description of the activity of the natural world. He has made an effort to move the readers or the human world when he says, “we are out of tune”, “moves us not”. So, he is trying to direct the human world to regain their lost relation with the natural world.

So, the Romantics view nature in a glorifying manner. But there was a great change in nature writing after the Romantic era. With industrialization, nature becomes the victim of many environmental problems. Time came when people started destroying and using nature for their own self. With this, one comes to know the mysterious nature of the natural world. There lie number of secrets in the natural world and this came to the forefront when one becomes aware that nature also acts in response to the damage caused by the human world. This becomes the focus of writers and now they not only focus on the beautiful and glorifying descriptions of the natural world, but they start describing nature in its real form. Now the other side of the nature can be seen and observed in Rudyard Kipling’s poems which show a kind of contrast to the earlier nature writing.

As a poet, Rudyard Kipling (1865 – 1936) claims credit for reintroducing realism and a racy vigour into the verse of the modern period. At his best he achieves best poetry; at his worst he can be mechanically and stridently crude. He lacks delicacy of touch. He is a ceaseless experimenter in verse forms and rhythms. His fluent versification, with its powerful

echoes of hymns and ballads, and his use in both prose and verse of colloquial speech, impressed many but alienated others; even such admirers as T.S. Eliot, Henry James and W.B. Yeats were uneasy about the nature of his art. But Eliot, with an introduction to *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (1941) revived Kipling's reputation in which he remarkably makes the distinction between poetry and verse. He analyses Kipling as a great verse writer who achieves the depth and intensity of great poetry in ballads such as "Danny Deever" and "Recessional". His verse is to be found in *Departmental Ditties* (1886); *Barrack – room Ballads* (1892); *The Seven Seas* (1896); *The Five Nations* (1903); *Inclusive Verse, 1885 – 1918* (1919) and *Poems 1886 – 1929* (1930).

Kipling infuses vitality into his verse and his poetry is genuine in its theme and thought. He can be realistic and forceful and his words strike us with deep knowledge and understanding. His poetry infuses action and adventure and his poem "The Way through the Woods", which is a part of his collection of short stories *Rewards and Fairies*, is not otherwise. The poem talks about three key aspects – presence of the metaphysical in earthly life or the natural world, the power of nature over man, and how history can never completely be erased and wiped out.

The keyword 'earthly life' denotes the physical world. However, some of the events in life cannot find any logical explanation. In "The Way through the Woods", the poet creates suspense by moving between the time when there was existence of forest path and the time when it got disappeared due to undergrowth of forest. The poet then mentions about the horse's hooves and the swishing sound of a woman's skirts which is heard by the observer. As the poet says,

You will hear the beat of a horse's feet,

And the swish of a skirt in the dew, (19-20)

The point to notice here is that there is no horse and no woman visible to the observer. Probably, this could be the woman who got victimised and died whose death had resulted in the closing down the forest path. However, the material provided here by Kipling is not confirmed to such a reading and this could be intentional on his part. So, such descriptions hint at the presence of the metaphysical within the area of the forest, that is, the natural world.

There is no denying the fact that it is human intention that has resulted in the forest path being closed down. However, the poem depicts that nature has completely repossessed the place and the creatures of nature are seen running around the trees and shrubs. The poem reflects the effect of time and change in weather as the rain has resulted in the disappearance of the forest path. So, time and rainy weather has removed the dominance and stamp of the human world. This is how the poet depicts the power of nature and how nature can reclaim the area possessed by man. As he says:

They shut the road through the woods
Seventy years ago.
Weather and rain have undone it again,
And now you would never know
There was once a road through the woods... (1-4)

Another thing that has been shown in the poem is that history usually leaves its traces of existence in one way or the other. In spite of the disappearance of forest path, the rider who had ridden over that area on the forest can still be noticed through the horse's hooves.

The forest path in the poem could be used as a metaphor for the human beings who have lost their way. The poem could be depicting the alienation of the human world from the kind and way of life that had existed before industrialization and urbanisation, when man used to live in close contact with nature. However, there is no existence of such a life except in tales and folklore.

Kipling discusses the activity of nature in "The Dawn Wind". This poem seems to be simple but the idea that could be brought out after reading the poem is that everyone in this world is performing his role. It is not only the human beings who are performing their jobs or roles but the nature is also doing its task. The poet personifies the wind and trees as a being which can walk and speak.

...You will hear the feet of the Wind that is going to call the sun.

And the trees in the shadow rustle, and the trees in the moonlight glisten,

And though it is deep, dark night, you feel that the night is done. (2-4)

The poet mentions the process through which the dawn wind wakes up the sun. He describes the activities of the trees as they also perform their part in the task. The activities of the cows and the birds are also described. And the wind which became restless performing his deeds, observed all the activities till the darkness breaks. Then the wind, with the full strength, wakes the whole world. As the poet says:

Back comes the Wind full strength with a blow like an angel's wing,

Gentle but waking the world, as he shouts: "The Sun! The Sun!"

And the light floods over the fields and the birds begin to sing,

And the Wind dies down in the grass. It is day and his work is done. (9-12)

"The Dawn Wind" is a highly inspiring poem which shows how the whole nature can act as a guide or teacher for the human world. The whole poem is about the movement and action which begins with the waking of someone early and opening the window and listening to the sounds made by the trees and wind.

Another significant poem of Kipling is "The Morning Song in the Jungle". The poem is in the ballad form and the beat of the rhythm matches very effectively with the ideas and senses depicted here. The poet is depicting some people and their experience of the morning freshness or bleakness. Here a non-healthy relation and connection between human beings

and natural world of flora and fauna is depicted. Time and again the poet is talking about the keeping of the jungle law. May be it is a reference through which the poet wants to check the growing intervention of human beings with nature. May be the poet is warning the rest of humanity to be careful about their exploitative nature which would lead to great destruction. As:

And creaking through the young bamboo

The warning whispers pass. (Kipling 19-20)

The people are afraid of the consequences of their actions and the way the jungle is responding to them. The warnings of the natural world are given through the extreme heat and humidity. The sun's getting warmer day by day and the utter draughtiness caused by it is expressed in these lines by the poet:

Ho! Get to lair! The sun's aflame

Behind the breathing glass: (17-18)

Here the struggle is between two forces – humanity and nature, ecocentric and anthropocentric world views. One is trying to dominate the other and no-one is ready to lose the battle or leave the ground. But the vulnerability of human beings in front of the power of nature is obvious enough. The nature is as much hard and harsh as it is sweet and delicate. As:

In morning-hush, each rock and bush

Stands hard, and high, and raw: (Kipling 5-6)

Kipling is indeed a poet who has concern for the growing deterioration of natural world. The industrial development has caused a lot of trouble to the world of trees, plants, animals and birds. In order to save them human beings have to change their ways. Either they should leave everything on the natural powers which the potential to regenerate themselves, or they should try to do so through their own efforts.

The concern for the human intervention in natural world and the consequences which it brought is one of the main issues dealt by Kipling in his poems. And the same concern is also dealt by Wordsworth in a different way. The powers of nature, either destructive or generative, are depicted by Kipling as in his poems. But Wordsworth has either celebrated or lamented over the lost relation between the human and the natural world. The depiction of a connection or relation between man and nature is the similarity found in their poetry. Sometimes this connection is positive whereas most of the time it is depicted in negative sense by Kipling where one is exploiter and the other is exploited. So, their poems give us abundant scope to know about the interaction, interconnection and interchange between nature and man, between non-human and human beings.

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