
Ecocritical Readings of Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas

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Declaration:

I, Arindam Ghosh do declare that the paper is original and unpublished and is meant exclusively for your considerations.

Abstract

Ecocriticism is a lately developed theoretical branch of literary criticism which explores the relationship between literature and environment. It reads literature from ecocentric perspective. Here in the article three mid-twentieth poets, namely Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas, are taken and their poetry is explored through the parameters of ecocriticism. Ted Hughes' poetry depicts the violence and struggle for survival of the animal world which becomes invaluable lessons for man in the contemporary world teaching him that ways about how to cohabit with nature. Heaney's poetry imbues literature with the spirit of the place. He explores place-consciousness of man in order to resituate him into the ecosystem. Thomas' poetry betrays concern for aquatic ecology and for the native flora and fauna; his pantheism often borders on deep ecological concerns. Their poetry explicates that man has done enough damage to the world and attempts to bring man back to their senses. Their poetry also stays witness to the fact that poetry can incite genuine ecological consciousness and love

for nature. Ecocritical study also throws new light on their poetry.

Key Words

Ecocriticism, nature, eco-poetry, violence, place, deep ecology, paganism, ecosystem

The term 'Ecocriticism' was introduced in the late 1970s ('Literary Ecology' is the earlier version and 'Green Studies' is more popular in Britain). Ecocriticism is the systematic and interdisciplinary reading of the relationship between literature and environment; with an awareness of the man made damage on nature, and with a motive of finding solutions to the contemporary environmental problems. The ecocritics approach literature from the point of view of nature and focus on earth itself instead of human beings. They try to analyze human culture through the reassessment of nature as it appears in the writings of different writers. The British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists

are eulogized and held up in a special status by the ecocritics.

The ecocritics while rereading major canonical works try to apply ecocentric concepts such as growth, balance, energy circulation, entropy, symbiosis etc even to things which are not directly part of nature.¹ The ecocritics thoroughly question the social and linguistics norms and preconditions and challenge them by emphasizing ecocentric values. They celebrate multiplicity and diversity in nature, for environmental essentialism or reductionism is as dangerous as pollution or global warming. The ecocritics are enthusiastically concerned over certain issues, such as: the role of the physical setting of a literary work; the metaphor of ‘Land’ or ‘Place’; bearing of scientific ecology with literature itself; the connection between the natural world and the cultural artifacts of language and literature. Environmentalism, we should keep in mind, is both a critique of modernity and a product of it. The issues regarding Ecocriticism may vary with the change of country and context. The ecocritics explore the possibility of a bonding between the environmental movement and the comparatively less industrialized cultures and hope to set them against the white, industrial capitalist trend. Thus they can bring the issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender and colonialism into ecocritical interpretation of texts and ideas in order to bring about justice. William Rueckert coined the term; Cheryl Glotfelty founded this movement in America and Laurence Coupe popularized this school in Britain. Terry Gifford, Lawrence Buell, Kate Soper, Greg Garrard, Jonathan Bate, Dana Philips, Karl Kroeber, Harold Fromm are the other important ecocritics. Various co-

philosophies like Eco-Feminism, Eco-Marxism and Deep Ecology have gained momentum.

The nature writings had long been studied keeping man at the centre. Romanticism reacted against industrial rationality and celebrated ‘unestranged’ (that is, still belonging to nature) conditions: childhood memories, rural setting, passive contemplation in nature and the moment of self absorption. While the ecocritics assert that the romantic joy in the contemplation of nature must be combined with ecologically informed practices. And the momentary epiphany upon which romantic nature writing visibly depends must be kept in balance with experience, skill and expertise.² The romantics had seen nature as ‘a space of leisure’ where we entertain our subjective feelings; the ecocritics try to unmask objectively the dependence between different spaces (‘Ecological Niche’) in the physical ecosystem. They thoroughly examine the ecosphere that surrounds the romantic text. Although Wordsworth and Thoreau and others thought about the moral widening in the liberty of nature, the ecocritics more systematically leads to moral expansion by helping us to achieve an integrated sense of the natural world that includes humanity.

In an age of high theory the idea of ‘Nature’ is marginalized. Literature and criticism in general romanticizes and often humanizes nature and reduces it to a background, a mere setting. In the present world everywhere there is a sense of commercial value, utilitarianism and post-industrial apathy to the environment. This in turn affects literature and its criticism as well. Although the romantics appealed for a return to nature and an escape from the daily drudgery of the urban life to a rural surrounding, it was only

in relation to man that nature was valued, such as in *The Prelude* we find the formative influence of nature on the growth and development of a poet. In other words in their works nature appears to have validity only when it is useful to man. As a result, writers like Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas are often projected from psychoanalytical and mythological angle where nature is not just the external nature of sun, moon, and mountain and of birds. But nature and its agents are made to perform symbolic functions. Thus the ‘crow’ is an emblem, a demigod – a symbol of a writer struggling for existential questions; the ‘North’ is a mythic voice establishing the poet’s relationship with the Irish soil and the Mythic Irish past;³ ‘Fern Hill’ only complex studies of psychology and synaesthesia. Ecocriticism opens up new possibilities while reading those writers from ecocentric perspective. We have seen that on the ecological level Hardy’s poems are environmental protests against the mechanization of the rural life; in the poems we find an ideal fusion between the vegetable world of the plants and landscapes and that of the human, between the patient process of growth and cultivation and that of the destructive human activities that have led to the present global ecological crisis.⁴ Hughes’s is a predatory, elemental and nihilistic world where violence and vitality merge; this also embodies an awe at natural processes, recognition of a creative destructive world, the marriage of the inner to the outer world, of the self to nature. He addresses the problems of human cohabitation with nature. Heaney following the line of Wordsworth craves for a closer relationship of the individual with earth and soil, and his writing is deep rooted in tribal passion. Even in the face of political imbalance

he focuses on the rural, the rich and the hopeful anticipation of a rich crop, although somewhere there is a sense of betrayal and abandonment. And Dylan Thomas opposes intellectualism in verse; draws on a range of subject matters like human body, sex, religious associations along with the appreciations of landscapes and childhood memories. He often pursues the ‘Eden-motif’, that is, a simple, natural and instinctive mode of life which has often been the dreams of escape. The Ecocritics frequently explore this area for a systematic resolution of the Nature/Culture, Reason/Nature dualisms.

Ted Hughes’s (1930-98) poems written from the point of view of nature share the basic concerns with the environmentalists and ecologists. His myths heighten the ironic human tendency to control and exploit the wild forces of nature. Here Ecocriticism tries to switch the critical attention from the internal human desire to the external nature so that Hughes’s birds and beasts are simply birds and beasts sometimes; thereby it offers to heighten ‘natural interdependences’, which is the key word in ecology. Earlier Hardy saw rustic life threatened, overrun by the invasion from modern mechanization and Hughes writing in a more industrialized, sophisticated setting considered as his theme the conflict between elemental life force and death. Environmental changes have vehemently affected literature and Hughes likens some of the darker episode of human history with the dark unsentimental reality of the animal world, presented in his poetry in a more elemental way: deromanticized and deconstructed.⁵ The fact is that we have become over-sophisticated, almost cyborgs. And Hughes’s contention is that the violence, the vitality and the sheer power of the animal world

might inspire us to resist the all sweeping grip of urban cosmopolitanism. Hughes's 'folks' of the animal world, such as, jaguar, pike, hawk, skylark, owl, horse, the 'manner less monster' do not present any transcendent reality. In Hughes's alternative cosmology they are the reality. Hughes even challenges Darwinism by endowing the hawk with the control over creation.

Hughes has shown his consciousness for nature preservation while commenting on Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution*. Ecocriticism tells us that the poet must use his pastoral vision as a form of social therapy and in this respect Hughes is always believed to be a healer – an environmentalist for our endangered earth. His earlier volumes, like *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal* view natural forces with a harsher eye and focus on the prehistory of natural forces, stressing its indifference to man; nature in these poems is a self-possessing, predatory power. But he believed in our potential to live in harmony with nature. A kinship with nature is developed in *Wodwo* with a questioning of anthropocentrism. Accordingly in his later volumes, like *River* and *Gaudete* he tried to restore the fractured bonding between man and nature with the aid of a biocentric vision. In *Wodwo* we find the agony, suffering and victimhood as a necessary precondition for redemption and enlightenment. In 'Winter Pollen' Hughes asserted that Christianity had taught man that nature is the resource given by God to him, for serving all his needs. In Hughes, pastoralism works as a self protective instrument (his 'Defense Mechanism'). The poem 'Egghead' metaphorically linked an intellectual's skull to a fragile egg shell through which he filters the world and is able to perceive wonders what others cannot. In this poem the poet shows

that excluding or ignoring natural forces is ultimately self-annihilatory; these forces may turn harmful but have cleansing purposes. In 'Revenge Fable' from the collection of poems *Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow*, the crow tells the story of a person who compares himself with the highest branch of a tree and his mother with the tree itself. In order to get independent of his mother he kills her using various technological devices and weapons. Ecocritical consideration shows us that the tree becomes the emblem of 'Mother Nature' which comes under the threats of global warming and atomic explosion. In his earlier collections Hughes wrote poems which celebrated natural forces together with anti-pastoral poems that exposed the deceptive social construction of nature (such as, 'Thrushes', 'The Jaguar'). His mythic sequence of poems *Cave Birds* begin and end with a critique of the pastoral (that is why Terry Gifford termed Hughes's poems as 'Anti-pastoral').⁶ The cockerel protagonist faces a trial for his neglect of his inner self and his alienation from natural forces. His accepting of his own death in the poem 'The Knight' marks the recognition of a creative-destructive world of which he is a part. The fact that the process of outer nature is also happening in the inner nature is subtly hinted in 'A Green Mother'. In *Cave Birds* he is using myth to bring out the essence of the physical universe and thus reconnects us with the environment and tells us that nature is generally mediated by culture. Earlier Hardy mourns the death of an era and anticipates the coming of another with all the threats of such issues as pollution, industrialization and mechanization etc; this includes the withdrawal of nature's consolatory power. Actually, ruthless treatment had made nature indifferent and

callous to men's good. A distance has been created; this alienation upsets ecological balance. And poets like Hughes and others try to bring men back to their senses.

Seamus Heaney (1939 -) revisits the pastoral, ignores socially preconceived notions about man and nature; and seeks, rather finds consolation in the supposed perfection of the past. Hardy's poems in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are largely traditional and show continuity with the Wordsworthian art of recording ordinary daily events, but a sudden sense of death and impermanence pervades the pastoral moments of domestic happiness: hope and pessimism exist with equal intensity against a vivid background that is often more lively and sentient than the people who dwell upon it. Ecocritically this is no negative view of humanity, but a confirmation that nature itself is a presence, an entity and has intrinsic value. Heaney's poetry is often a continuation of and an addition to the poetic tradition of Hardy. Heaney cautiously celebrates and glorifies nature, evoking landscapes and immemorial culture of the Northern English countryside along with an awareness of nature as culture and culture as nature. Heaney wrote about Hughes's England which is a savage, primeval realm of nature, holding a close yet detached relationship with human beings; and called Hughes a pagan, a heath-dweller. These observations might intuit us about a possibility of exemption from anthropocentric attitudes. The Gaia Hypothesis⁷ considers earth as a sentient, self-regulating organic whole; and Heaney shares these concerns in his longing to fuse with nature's vital energies in order to be consumed into the biocentric organism. He thought of tuning one's personal self with nature that would lead us to cope with

the strife of daily life, yet he differed from the Romantics who had shown certain tendencies of escapism.

The poems of Heaney's first poetic volume *Death of a Naturalist* are full of beautiful images taken from nature and related agricultural activities. The images of ground, digging, ploughing, landscapes, tilling, lea, shovel working all emphasize the topography of a particular region. This regional space coupled with the reminiscences of childhood memories of the pastoral calm make them liable to Ecocritical reading. In his sonnets growth and fertility are allusively used for art and creative process. From ordinary images of the pastoral world to the grand geographical scenes of land, ocean and mountains are abound in Heaney's poetry and this is an attempt at finding a coherence between the subjective inner emotions and the objective outer world. But he differed from the Romantics in that the Romantics in order to valorize the vastness, beauty, sublimity and endurance of the natural landscapes, had overlooked the sense of biodiversity. They have diverted our attention from such places, like bog, fens, and marshes which are ecologically under more pressure.⁸ It is Heaney, who has interwoven these less enlightened spots within the body of his poetic imagery. Heaney hoped to explore love, politics and his role as a writer through images of nature in his poetry and these further affirmed the typical Irish identity. For instance, the activity of handling spade ('Digging'), the pastoral image of butter making ('Churning Day'), the potato heaps ('At a Potato Digging') essentially highlight the simple rural touch of the unaffected country life of Northern Ireland. However, the danger of idealizing nature is one of the themes in Heaney's poetry as we find in 'Glanmore

Sonnets' in the volume *Field Work*; in 'Sonnet-III' the cuckoo and the corncrake 'consorts' but that is biologically impossible. Yet he discovers the organic continuum ('Iambic') between the poet's art and the natural rhythms. Connections between land and language are Heaney's mode of response to the tensions in the contemporary Ireland (*North*). 'Sonnet-I' of the 'Glanmore Sonnets' works at sensory perceptions of the land to find a 'dream grain' of poetry and likens it to the rhythmic way of working in the field. Heaney believed that natural processes are at work within us and they have purgatorial purposes. He refers to the poet's voice as plough producing rich ideas and entering the fertile mind of his countrymen; and uses nature imageries as life-sustaining energies of earth and sky for the entire nature is actually embedded in a process of growth and rebirth. He uses familiar natural images (alders, mushrooms, dung, that is, they consume garbage and dead and rotten materials and keep environment clean) as a demand to confront social corruption through images that represent organic process of dissolution. In the poem 'Gifts of Rain' Heaney uses the images of water and river; its flow can produce and circulate positive energies that in turn connects the human, the natural and the elemental worlds. In 'Blackberry Picking' the poet recalls his childhood experiences of blackberry picking; in the poem the rotten, crushed and fermented fruits are realistically equated with the loss of peace, innocence and freshness of childhood. For Heaney 'Evasion' into childhood fancies are no permanent solution to the contemporary social and ecological problems; it only produces nostalgic pastoral – mysterious and idealized. He tried to maintain a balance between the pastoral's

impulses to return into a rural setting and culture's corruption and uncertainty.

Dylan Thomas's (1914-53) poetry moves away from the politically committed poems of the 'Auden Group' of the 1930s. We find in his poetry a more sustained focus on the themes of childhood and nature, both depicted as sublime and magical, suffused with a rare spirituality. Amid the interplay of dark and light, death and decay, love of nature persists. His works are much praised for their so called 'pantheism' or deep ecological concerns: a world view in which divine, human or natural are 'fused' together. Disgusting images of heron, black rooks, the roaming fox barking clear and cold, the hawk on fire are present along with the images of sweet berries, sunshine, feathers, seeds, song birds, fish and bird's nest. These at the same time remind us of an idyllic rural setting and of a merciless, violent nature ready to devour us. In case of Hardy we have seen that despite his preoccupation with destiny, fate, cosmic forces there is a constant search for immutability and permanence even in trivial on field agricultural practices ('In Time of The Breaking of Nations'). In Dylan Thomas's poetry the consolation and security of childhood is frequently interrupted by the images of death and decay: 'Fern Hill' is no paradise regained; for the young boy is both 'green and dying'. This is highly important in the context of the Second World War and in the actual precariousness of the ecological balance in a world culturally mobile and environmentally endangered. The impulse towards neo-romantic poetry in the post-war period is not only a matter of looking back and nostalgia but an environmental resistance whose cultural function was to reconnect the urbanized and war-trampled

readership with the consolation of the pastoral and the infancy.

The prevalence of darker images in his poetry shows that life for Thomas is essentially tragic; yet he balances this with a sentimental yearning for the bliss of childhood, sublimated into an enduring sanctification of the creatures, wild fields, lanes, woods. In the 'Poem in October' the poet speaks of the tragic loss that he feels for an adulthood that had somehow betrayed the child: the wonder of summer, the parables of sunlight, the twice told fields of infancy and the true joy of the long dead child. And this is the feeling that most of Thomas's mature poems, like 'Fern Hill', 'Over Sir John's Hill', 'In the White Giant's Thigh' and 'A Winter's Tale' produces. Ecocriticism equates this separation and doubt with modernism's skepticism and treats this syndrome in the context of cultural progress by reassessing the history of nature. In the poem 'The Force that through the Green Fuse' the poet even when he is acknowledging oneness with nature, reminds us that he is unable to talk to nature, that is, he fails to identify himself purely with nature. The poem thus refuses to sentimentalize in the manner of conventional nature poetry; therefore natural images do not provide any untrue solution to the contemporary existential problems. Thomas's late poems convey the poet's complex and troubled relationship with nature; nature in these poems resists the idea of 'nature' as being 'culturally constructed'.⁹ In the poem 'In Country Sleep' an unusual emphasis is given to the word 'pastoral'. Man has already ruined the beauty of nature; nothing is left to mourn at. Thomas's intention here is that pastoral's assimilating power may act for redeeming a world under the threat of atomic war. The

thought is carried over in the collection of poems, entitled *In Country Heaven*. Thomas argues contemporary poetry cannot be a celebration of nature but an elegy for the loss of a presence that used to be. But he is not that pessimistic; the fact that the process of life and nature never fails, that the seasonal changes with time are themselves beneficent are beautifully expressed in 'Especially When the October Wind'. This idea is anticipated in 'Poem in October'; various aspects of nature such as birds, trees, weather, sun and sea have been engaged to explore the poet's inner life and language here becomes the vital mode for conveying that experience. Thomas's awareness about the relationship between his own physical body and the process of nature is explored vividly in *18 Poems*. This is an identification of man and the universe where nature becomes his elemental origin and his destiny too: when alive blood moves like the ocean in him; at death flesh becomes the earth.¹⁰ His poetry thus brings the British landscape vividly to life but is also enhanced by his humane concerns. He therefore goes beyond the simple pastoral because he is able to project onto nature some innately human fears and concerns and intertwines the flow of nature's year with these pressing problems of human life – such as change, decay, reproduction and death.¹¹

Apart from these above three poets I have gone through some of the poetical works of Gary Snyder, Wendell Barry, D.H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman. There are immense possibilities in their works which can valuably contribute to the field of Ecocriticism. The first two are themselves directly related to the Ecocritical movement; and the last two foregrounded nature

in their poetry and have shown a tendency to write from nature's point of view.

In these days our thinking and perceptions are modified by the technological environment rather than the natural. In this context reading Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas might help us to understand their poetry in a new light and we may observe that ecological problems which are mainly scientific issues can be understood and addressed through critical reading of texts. Any full length research, taking the above poets together in the field of Ecocriticism have not so far come to my notice and that is why I attempt this reading. Moreover, if environmental change depends upon transforming individual perception, then poetry can both survey and modify the perception of its readers by directly affecting their intellect; and thereby bringing about environmental revolution. The vivid, pessimistic, almost hopeless worldview, violent and forceful imagery, presentation of an uncontrollable natural world, the mythical cycle of earth-fertility and the painful threats of death, mixed with beautiful landscapes and birds and beasts cite a different dimension in the relationship between man and nature – and this is at the heart of Ecocriticism.

¹ P. Barry. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester U P, 2007. Print. p. 248
ii P. Waugh. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. London: Oxford U P, 2006. Print. p. 541
iii H. Bloom (ed.). *Seamus Heaney*. USA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003. Print. p. 10

⁴ P. Barry. *Beginning Theory: an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. London: Manchester U P, 2007. Print. P. 265

⁵ S. Hirschberg, *Myth In the Poetry of Ted Hughes*. Country Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981. Print. P. 15

⁶As asserted in the last chapter of the book, T. Gifford. *Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1999.

⁷ The name suggested by novelist William Golding; and theory developed by James Lovelock

⁸ G. Garrard. *Ecocriticism: the New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print. P. 43

⁹R. Chamberlain. *Fuse and Refuse: the Pastoral Logic of Dylan Thomas's Poetry*. www.dylanthomasboathouse.com. Web. Accessed at 8 pm on 28.06.11

¹⁰ J. Ackerman. *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose*. 1991. Houndmills; Basingstoke; Hampshire: Macmillan P Ltd, 1994. P. 83

¹¹ P. Morrel." Rage against the Dying of the Light: the Poetry of Dylan Thomas". www.homeoint.org/morrel/peter/htm. Web. Accessed at 2 pm on 08.05.2010

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