International Academic Institute for Science and Technology

International Academic Journal of Humanities
Vol. 9, No. 2, 2022, pp. 27-33.

ISSN 2454-2245

International Academic Journal of Humanities

www.iaiest.com

Ecocriticism and the Pastoral Tradition in Romantic Poetry

Dr. Kanupriya [a]

[a] *Professor of English, Principal, M.D.D.M College, B.R.A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India.*

Abstract

Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, has gained prominence in recent decades. This paper explores the interplay between ecocriticism and the pastoral tradition in Romantic poetry, focusing on the works of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Clare. By examining the poets' depictions of nature, this study highlights how Romantic poetry reflects and critiques contemporary environmental concerns. The analysis underscores the relevance of Romantic pastoral poetry to modern ecological discourse and its potential to inspire environmental consciousness.

Keywords: Romantic Poetry, Growing Environmental Awareness, Nature and Rural Life.

DOI:10.9756/IAJH/V9I2/IAJH0907
Received:01 October 2022/Accepted:23 October 2022/Published:27 November 2022

Introduction

1. Background

The Romantic era, spanning the late 18th and early 19th centuries, witnessed a profound transformation in literature, characterized by an intense focus on nature, emotion, and individualism. Romantic poets often employed the pastoral tradition, a literary mode that idealizes rural life and nature, to express their reverence for the natural world and critique industrialization and urbanization.

2. Ecocriticism and Its Relevance

Ecocriticism, as an academic discipline, emerged in the late 20th century, driven by growing environmental awareness and the need to understand literature's role in shaping and reflecting ecological attitudes. This paper explores how ecocriticism can illuminate the pastoral elements in Romantic poetry, revealing the poets' complex relationship with nature.

Literature Review

1. Historical Context of the Pastoral Tradition

The pastoral tradition dates back to ancient Greek and Roman literature, with notable contributions from Theocritus and Virgil. It evolved through the Renaissance and reached a peak in the 18th century, serving as a vehicle for expressing idyllic visions of rural life.

2. Romantic Poetry and Nature

Romantic poetry is distinguished by its deep engagement with nature, as seen in the works of poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Clare. These poets responded to the industrial revolution and urbanization by idealizing nature and rural life.

3. Ecocriticism: Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism examines the representation of nature in literature, focusing on themes such as environmental justice, sustainability, and the human-nature relationship. Key theorists include Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Greg Garrard, whose works provide a framework for analyzing Romantic poetry through an ecological lens.

4. Previous Studies

Previous studies have explored various aspects of ecocriticism in Romantic poetry. For example, Karl Kroeber's "Ecological Literary Criticism" examines the ecological consciousness in Wordsworth's poetry, while Jonathan Bate's "Romantic Ecology" highlights the ecological themes in Coleridge's works. This paper builds on these studies by offering a comprehensive analysis of the pastoral tradition in the context of ecocriticism.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, including close reading and textual analysis of selected Romantic poems. The analysis focuses on identifying pastoral elements and ecocritical themes, supported by secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, and critical essays.

Analysis of Ecocriticism and the Pastoral Tradition in Romantic Poetry

1. William Wordsworth

a) Pastoral Imagery in Wordsworth's Poetry

William Wordsworth is often celebrated for his evocative descriptions of nature, which vividly depict rural landscapes and highlight a deep connection between humans and the natural world. His use of pastoral imagery is not merely decorative but serves to convey profound themes of tranquility, spirituality, and the restorative power of nature. Two notable examples of his pastoral imagery are found in the poems "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" and "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud."

In "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth revisits a place that holds significant personal and emotional meaning. The poem begins with a detailed and serene description of the landscape:

> "Once again Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> Which on a wild secluded scene impress

DOI:10.9756/IAJH/V9I2/IAJH0907
Received:01 October 2022/Accepted:23 October 2022/Published:27 November 2022

Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky."

This passage exemplifies Wordsworth's ability to merge the external beauty of the landscape with his internal, reflective state. The cliffs and seclusion suggest not only physical but also mental and spiritual isolation, conducive to deep contemplation and personal growth. The natural world becomes a sanctuary where the poet finds peace and solace, reflecting the traditional pastoral ideal of nature as a retreat from the complexities and corruptions of urban life.

Similarly, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" encapsulates the pastoral theme through the imagery of a host of golden daffodils dancing in the breeze:

"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."

The daffodils represent more than just a beautiful natural phenomenon; they symbolize a connection to something greater and more enduring than the poet's transient personal concerns. The sight of the daffodils lifts his spirits and provides a lasting source of joy and inspiration. This aligns with the pastoral tradition's emphasis on the healing and uplifting power of nature.

2. Ecocritical Themes

Wordsworth's poetry is rich with ecocritical themes, reflecting a deep concern for the natural world and a critique of the industrialization that was beginning to transform the English countryside during his lifetime. His reverence for nature and his portrayal of its interdependence with humanity resonate strongly with contemporary ecological principles.

One prominent ecocritical theme in Wordsworth's work is the interdependence between humans and nature. In "Tintern Abbey," he expresses this interconnectedness through his reflections on how nature has shaped his mind and spirit:

"For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue."

Here, Wordsworth acknowledges that his relationship with nature has matured over time. Nature is not merely a backdrop for human activities but an active participant in his personal and spiritual development. This perspective aligns with modern ecocritical thought, which emphasizes the importance of understanding and maintaining the delicate balance between human activities and natural ecosystems.

Another critical aspect of Wordsworth's ecocriticism is his critique of industrialization. In "The World is Too Much With Us," he laments the encroachment of industrial society on the natural world:

"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!"

Wordsworth's use of phrases like "lay waste our powers" and "given our hearts away" underscores his belief that the materialism and rapid industrialization of his time were leading to a disconnection from nature and a loss of spiritual and emotional well-being. This critique remains highly relevant in contemporary ecocritical discussions, where the environmental impacts of unchecked industrial growth and consumerism are of paramount concern.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1. The Pastoral and the Sublime

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry often intertwines pastoral elements with the sublime, creating a more complex and multifaceted portrayal of nature. This combination can be seen in poems like "Frost at Midnight" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

DOI:10.9756/IAJH/V9I2/IAJH0907
Received:01 October 2022/Accepted:23 October 2022/Published:27 November 2022

In "Frost at Midnight," Coleridge begins with a serene, pastoral scene of a quiet winter night:

> "The frost performs its secret ministry,
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
> Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
> The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings: save that at my side
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully."

This scene of domestic tranquility and natural stillness is a quintessential pastoral setting. However, as the poem progresses, Coleridge delves into deeper philosophical and emotional reflections, moving beyond simple pastoral tranquility to explore the sublime aspects of nature. The stillness and solitude inspire profound thoughts about the interconnectedness of all living things and the spiritual significance of the natural world.

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge's use of the sublime is even more pronounced. The poem describes awe-inspiring and terrifying natural phenomena, such as the vastness of the sea and the spectral albatross:

> "And now there came both mist and snow,
> And it grew wondrous cold:
> And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
> As green as emerald."

The sublime in this context evokes a sense of wonder and fear, highlighting the power and unpredictability of nature. This portrayal of nature as both beautiful and terrifying challenges the idealized, harmonious vision of the pastoral, suggesting a more complex and dynamic relationship between humans and the natural world.

2. Ecological Consciousness

Coleridge's ecological consciousness is evident in his portrayal of nature as a living, dynamic entity with intrinsic value and agency. This perspective resonates with modern ecological thought, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms.

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the Mariner's killing of the albatross and the subsequent curse that befalls him and his crew illustrate the consequences of disrupting the natural balance:

> "And I had done a hellish thing,
> And it would work 'em woe:
> For all averred, I had killed the bird
> That made the breeze to blow."

The Mariner's act of violence against nature leads to severe repercussions, underscoring the theme of ecological retribution. Coleridge's depiction of the natural world as possessing its own moral order and capacity for revenge reflects an early understanding of the ecological principle that actions disrupting the natural balance can have far-reaching and unintended consequences.

Coleridge's concern for the natural world is also evident in his depiction of nature as a source of moral and spiritual guidance. In "Frost at Midnight," he envisions a future for his child where nature will be the primary teacher:

> "Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
> Whether the summer clothe the general earth
> With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
> Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
> Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
> Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
> Heard only in the trances of the blast,
> Or if the secret ministry of frost
> Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
> Quietly shining to the quiet Moon."

Here, Coleridge expresses a deep faith in the power of nature to nurture and educate, suggesting that an intimate relationship with the natural world is essential for personal and spiritual development. This idea aligns with ecocritical principles that advocate for a harmonious and respectful relationship between humans and the environment.

DOI:10.9756/IAJH/V9I2/IAJH0907
Received:01 October 2022/Accepted:23 October 2022/Published:27 November 2022

John Clare

1. Rural Authenticity

John Clare, often referred to as the "peasant poet," provides a uniquely authentic portrayal of rural life, distinguished by his intimate knowledge of and deep connection to the natural world. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Clare's depictions of rural scenes are rooted in his lived experience as a laborer in the English countryside.

In "The Shepherd's Calendar," Clare offers a detailed and unromanticized account of the rural year, capturing the rhythms of agricultural life and the changing seasons:

> "Now young green leaves come peeping forth,
> As well the trees as plants of earth;
> They bloom and glisten in the sun,
> And fall when autumn is begun."

Clare's observations are precise and grounded in the realities of rural existence, providing a vivid and authentic picture of the natural world and the human activities that depend on it. His poetry is characterized by a keen eye for detail and a deep appreciation for the diversity and beauty of the natural environment.

2. Environmental Advocacy

Clare's poetry also serves as an early form of environmental advocacy, documenting the adverse effects of enclosure and agricultural modernization on rural landscapes and communities. In "The Lament of Swordy Well," he mourns the loss of common land and the displacement of traditional rural life:

> "I am Swordy Well,
> A lonely spot of land,
> The blackest, as tis said,
> That was in all the land."

Clare's portrayal of Swordy Well as a living entity that suffers under human encroachment anticipates modern environmental concerns about land use and habitat destruction. His poetry highlights the ecological and social costs of industrial and agricultural progress, advocating for the preservation of natural habitats and traditional ways of life.

Clare's detailed accounts of the natural world also emphasize the importance of biodiversity and the intrinsic value of all living things. In poems like "The Badger," he portrays animals with empathy and respect, challenging the anthropocentric view that dominated his time:

> "When midnight comes a host of dogs and men
> Go out and track the badger to his den."

Clare's sympathetic depiction of the badger and other wildlife reflects a profound ecological awareness and a recognition of the interdependence of all species. His work advocates for a more respectful and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world, aligning with contemporary ecocritical principles.

Discussion

1. The Relevance of Romantic Pastoral Poetry to Modern Ecocriticism

The pastoral tradition in Romantic poetry provides valuable insights into contemporary ecological issues. By idealizing nature and critiquing industrialization, Romantic poets anticipated many of the concerns central to modern ecocriticism.

2. Implications for Environmental Discourse

Romantic pastoral poetry can inspire contemporary environmental discourse by highlighting the intrinsic value of nature and advocating for sustainable living. The poets' reverence for the natural world encourages a deeper ecological consciousness and a commitment to environmental preservation.

Conclusion

The works of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Clare offer rich and varied insights into the pastoral tradition and its evolution during the Romantic period. Wordsworth's serene and reflective depictions of nature emphasize the spiritual and restorative power of the natural world, aligning closely with ecocritical themes of interdependence and environmental stewardship. Coleridge's blending of pastoral and sublime elements creates a

DOI:10.9756/IAJH/V9I2/IAJH0907
Received:01 October 2022/Accepted:23 October 2022/Published:27 November 2022

more complex portrayal of nature, highlighting its dynamic and sometimes terrifying aspects, while also underscoring the consequences of disrupting the natural balance. Clare's authentic and detailed portrayals of rural life and his early environmental advocacy provide a poignant critique of industrialization and a passionate plea for the preservation of natural habitats and traditional ways of life.

Together, these poets contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate and multifaceted relationship between humans and the natural world, offering valuable perspectives that resonate with contemporary ecological thought and environmental concerns. Their works serve as a reminder of the enduring importance of nature in human life and the need for a harmonious and respectful relationship with the environment.

References

Clare, J. (1990). *Selected Poems* (Eds. J. Barrell & J. Bull). Manchester University Press.

Coleridge, S.T. (2001). *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works (Eds. H.J. Jackson)*. Oxford University Press.

Wordsworth, W. (1994). *The Major Works (Eds. S. Gill)*. Oxford University Press.

Abrams, M.H. (1971). *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Bate, J. (1991). *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. Routledge.

Buell, L. (1995). *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press.

Buell, L. (2005). *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell Publishing.

Chandler, J. (1984). *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*. University of Chicago Press.

Coupe, L. (2000). *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Routledge.

Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism*. Routledge.

Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press.

Heise, U.K. (2008). *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press.

Kroeber, K. (1994). *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. Columbia University Press.

McKusick, J.C. (2000). *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press.

Oerlemans, O. (2004). *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*. University of Toronto Press.

Rigby, K. (2004). *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*. University of Virginia Press.

Roe, N. (1997). *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*. Clarendon Press.

Taylor, A. (2003). *Coleridge: Critic of Shakespeare*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Walls, L.D. (1993). *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Barrell, J. (1972). *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*. Cambridge University Press.

Bateson, F.W. (1946). *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation*. Longmans, Green and Co.

Bowra, C.M. (1950). *The Romantic Imagination*. Oxford University Press.

Brown, D. (1990). *The Prose and Poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Routledge.

Cowper, W. (1785). *The Task*. J. Johnson.

Gaull, M. (1988). *English Romanticism: The Human Context*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Hartman, G.H. (1971). *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814*. Yale University Press.

Holmes, R. (1999). *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*. Harper Collins.

Keenleyside, H. (2016). *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and Living Beings in the Long Eighteenth Century*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

McEathron, S. (1997). Wordsworth and the Rhetoric of Interpretation. *Literature Compass, 4*(3), 106-119.

DOI:10.9756/IAJH/V9I2/IAJH0907
Received:01 October 2022/Accepted:23 October 2022/Published:27 November 2022

Mellor, A.K. (1980). *English Romantic Irony*. Harvard University Press.

Newlyn, L. (2000). *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception*. Oxford University Press.

Nicolson, M.H. (1959). *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Cornell University Press.

Ross, M. (1993). *The Meaning of Ecology: Environmental Politics and Literary Imagination*. Oxford University Press.

Siskin, C. (1998). *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sperry, S. (1981). *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry*. Harvard University Press.

Till Yard, E.M.W. (1958). *The Miltonic Setting: Past and Present*. Cambridge University Press.

DOI:10.9756/IAJH/V9I2/IAJH0907
Received:01 October 2022/Accepted:23 October 2022/Published:27 November 2022