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## Human-Nature Relationship in Selected Poems of Cowper, Hopkins, and Lawrence and its Contemporary Relevance

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### Abstract

"For in the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every green tree is far more glorious than if it were made of gold and silver."

—Martin Luther King Jr.

We rely on nature for numerous goods and services. Our happiness, health depends upon what we call, 'Natural Capital'. For ages, we have seen a relationship between humans and nature, a relationship of give and take. All we needed to do is to take care of the environment around us and judiciously utilize its fruits, but, instead, we became the reason, directly or indirectly, to harm and disrupt the balance of nature. As the native American proverb goes, 'We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children', we are indebted to the coming generation and it is our responsibility to pass on the resources without harm to them. There are many articles and resources available on the ecological imbalance created and the need for sustainable development. These are based on scientific reasoning and tell us the methods we can employ to protect our environment. An interesting point to highlight is the dynamic amalgamation of science with Literature. Literary works that are focused on Nature sensitize an individual towards the beauty of nature, and prompt and motivate one to protect the environment. There are many literary works written on Nature and Human Relationships throughout the varied Eras of English Literature but, in 1978, William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" coined the term, 'Ecocriticism'. Ecocriticism takes into consideration literary works in the context of environmental issues and nature. This paper takes into account selected poetry from the Romantic Era to the Modern Era. In this paper, we will deal with the loss and destruction of Nature and its psychological impacts on humans as discussed in 'Poplar Fields' by William Cowper. We will also have a look at the unreasonable harm we inflict on animals as highlighted in 'Snake' by 'D H Lawrence'. We will also consider the scene in which the loss of a particular component of nature impacts its counterparts and natural beauty as we see in 'Binsey Poplars' by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Finally, we will compare and contrast the poems

discussed and discuss the various nature-related themes highlighted in these poems. We will have an ecocritical approach towards the selected Literature and establish a relationship with the contemporary scenario of the degradation of nature.

**Keywords:** Nature, Environment, Ecocriticism, Ecological Imbalance, Human – Nature Relationship

### Introduction

Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment; it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them. Ecology also provides information about the benefits of ecosystems and how we can use Earth's resources in ways that leave the environment healthy for future generations.

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyse the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works, both published in the mid-1990s: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell (Mambrol).

One of the major threats that the world is facing today is the loss of biodiversity. There are various methods through which one can spread awareness to conserve our biodiversity. It is well understood that the problem that we are facing today is not something new but rather something that has prevailed over decades even for centuries. Literature is indeed an instrument used by writers and poets to spread awareness among the population of the world to save biodiversity.

The amalgamation of science and literature has definitely made a dynamic impact on readers and even budding writers. The science which follows reasoning and logic when intertwined with literature which exhibits the passion and emotions of humans has definitely left the readers in awe. Over centuries, poets through their poetry have emphasised the importance of nature and how industrialization and urbanization have impacted it. Be it Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Cowper, Lawrence, and Hopkins or even the contemporary writers, ecocriticism still is one of the major subjects highlighted. These works not only help us to experience nature in a surreal way but also somehow manages to make us realize that if humans keep on meddling with nature, it is going to revolt against the entire human race.

The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade  
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,  
The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,  
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

- Poplar Field by William Cowper

The poem 'Poplar Field' was written by 'William Cowper', (born November 26, 1731, Great Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire, England—died April 25, 1800, East Dereham, Norfolk), one of the most widely read English poets of his day, whose most characteristic work, as in *The Task* or the melodious short lyric "The Poplar Trees," brought a new directness to 18th-century nature poetry. Cowper wrote of the joys and sorrows of everyday life and was content to describe the minutiae of the countryside. In his sympathy with rural life, his concern for the poor and downtrodden, and his comparative simplicity of language, he may be seen as one in revolt against much 18th-century verse.

In this poem, Cowper visits his beloved poplar field after twelve years and he realizes that everything has changed in that place. He reminisces about the time when he was young and full of energy. He tells us that he used to sit and play next to the river Ouse beneath the Poplar trees. Cool breeze used to blow whispering through these trees which once provided shade to the poet. But now everything has changed. The Poplar trees are now being cut and used to make benches to sit on them. Ironically, the trees under which the poet used to sit during his childhood are now the seat he is sitting on. The native birds have flown away to some other places like refugees to find shelter. Further, the poet compares his days of life to the eternity of nature. He realizes that soon he will be long gone from this world and will lay low in the ground and grass will grow on his tombstone, suggesting the transient nature of human life and the eternity of nature. In a way, the poet tells the readers that all the worldly pleasures of man will pass away in a blink of an eye but in contrast to it, nature will continue to flourish forever.

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,  
 Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun  
 All felled, felled, are all felled;

- Binsey Poplars by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The poem 'Binsey Poplars' was written by Gerard Manley Hopkins, (born July 28, 1844, Stratford, Essex, Eng.—died June 8, 1889, Dublin), English poet and Jesuit priest, one of the most individual of Victorian writers. His work was not published in collected form until 1918, but it influenced many leading 20th-century poets. His poetry celebrates the beauty of nature and the divine in creation, finding God's presence in every living thing. He also emphasizes the significance of individuality and uniqueness, valuing the distinctiveness of each person and creature. Moreover, his poetry reflects on the transience of life, prompting a deep appreciation for the fleeting moments that define existence. Hopkins' use of innovative

poetic techniques, such as "sprung rhythm," showcases his desire to revitalize language and create a powerful impact on his readers.

In this poem, Hopkins begins with the view that the Aspen trees once stood tall. The cool breeze blew through the trees and the golden light of the sun used to light up the leaves of the Aspens. Immediately the poet mentions that now these trees are cut down. He repeats the word, 'felled' thrice to emphasize the fact that the natural beauty of Aspens is no longer seen anymore. The poet compares the Aspens with soldiers standing in a straight line and he further mentions that not even a single tree is left. He recalls the time when he along with his friends used to play in the meadow right next to the river. In the second stanza, the poet mimics Christ on the cross as he calls to God his father, "Forgive them for they know not what they do". This again shows the strength of emotion Hopkins feels at the loss of these trees and reflects his strong religious convictions. He compares nature with the feminine being who is tender and slender. Further, he mentions that due to the advancements in science human beings are sacrificing Earth. The poet reiterates the fact that nature takes years to grow into beauty but humans take only a couple of minutes to destroy nature. The repetitive three final lines create a wistful tone, as though the poet's rage has subsided to a quiet sadness. The poet takes on a prayerful tone to tell humankind to treat Earth with respect and care.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords  
Of life.

And I have something to expiate:

A pettiness.

- Snake by David Herbert Lawrence

The poem 'Snake' was written by 'David Herbert Lawrence', (born September 11, 1885, Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, England—died March 2, 1930, Vence, France), English author of novels, short stories, poems, plays, essays, travel books, and letters. His literary oeuvre often revolves around the complexities of human relationships, exploring the raw and primal instincts that shape human behavior. Moreover, he frequently explores the dichotomy between civilization and nature, pondering the impact of industrialization and modernization on human connection to the natural world. His works serve as a powerful exploration of the human psyche, challenging conventional norms and advocating for a return to a more instinctual, genuine existence in harmony with the natural world.

In this poem, Lawrence tells the readers about the beauty of fauna by mentioning a snake he saw. He mentions that it was a hot summer day, and the poet in his pyjamas goes to the water trough to drink water but he sees a snake there. In a moment thousands of thoughts passed through his mind. He then describes the snake; it had a long slender body with yellow and brown colour like gemstones. The snake stood there

with his forked tongue out drinking the water dripping from the trough to quench his thirst. He compares the snake with the cattle drinking water. Further, he mentions that the snake looked like a God moving his head around. During this whole time, the poet was struggling with the thought of if he should kill the snake as it was venomous. He felt that if he didn't kill the snake, people might call him a coward. As the snake started to move back into the fissure it lived in, the poet, out of his impulsive thought, throws the pitcher into the water trough, though it doesn't hit the snake, but due to the noise, it rushes into the hole. Immediately, the poet realized his mistake and regretted his act. He considered his act a sin which he could never atone for. He thought that he missed his chance to meet one of the lords of nature due to his petty action.

### **Human vs Nature**

One of the major concerns and themes of the three poems mentioned in the paper is the Human-Nature relationship. In the poem, Poplar Field, by William Cowper, and Binsey Poplars, by Hopkins, we see that due to urbanization and industrialization, the poplar trees are being cut. This tells us the fact that humans, because of their selfish motives, are cutting down trees and destroying nature. Also, in the poem, Snake, by Lawrence, we see an internal struggle in the mind of the poet whether to kill the snake or not. We can understand it in terms of hunting and poaching done by humans again to fulfil their unnecessary needs and desires. Another major point highlighted in the poem is that nature is eternal whereas humans on the other hand are mere travellers on this planet, staying for a little while. All these poems try to make the readers understand that both human and nature are a part of each other. Destroying it would ultimately harm humans. Nature is not only important in terms of aesthetic pleasure but also the livelihood of many people depends upon it. Humans, rather than saving nature, are standing against nature causing a great deal of destruction. These poems try to sensitise the readers to save nature, therefore, save the life of humans on Earth.

### **Ecological Grief**

Ecological grief is a relatively new term for a form of climate-related loss and mourning that researchers are just beginning to study. However, some research has already attempted to map out this term and its related causes and psychological experiences. The perspective article published last year in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* defined ecological grief as the “grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.” (Hied et al.)

Eco-Grief can be seen in all three poems mentioned in this paper. We see that the poets are mourning the loss of Polar trees in 'Poplar Field' and 'Binsey Poplars'. The poets clearly mention in their poems that due

to change in natural setting the flora and fauna is affected by it. It is important to understand that nature has an emotional impact on human beings. Due to the loss of nature, the poets are grieving the change in the landscape and reminisce about the time of their childhood. Even in the poem, 'Snake' by Lawrence, he grieves because of the action he committed. The poem creates awareness among the readers by emphasising the psychological impact on humans by the loss of nature.

### **Eco-Anxiety**

Eco-anxiety is not considered a disease, at least not yet, but the heightened concern about the climate emergency we are experiencing can lead to psychological disorders. The American Psychology Association (APA) describes eco-anxiety as “the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one's future and that of next generations”. The APA, therefore, considers that the internalisation of the great environmental problems that affect our planet can have psychological consequences of varying seriousness in some people (Iberdrola).

In all the poetries mentioned in the paper, we can clearly see, Eco-Anxiety is the major psychological issue portrayed. The poets are concerned about the future. They see a bleak future ahead of us. They mention that people will come and die but the coming generations will have to face even more problems because of what the contemporary people are doing to nature. The poets like Cowper, Hopkins, and Lawrence write nature poems because they are worried about ecology and the ecosystem. As mentioned in the poems, cutting down the poplar trees affects the entire ecosystem. It is important to understand that if humans intervene with any one component of nature all the other components will be affected.

### **Eco-Guilt**

Eco-guilt represents the emotion when you feel you could have done something to help the environment or reduce the environmental threat, yet unable to. It is a feeling felt when people perceive they have failed to meet their own standard or social standard for pro-environmental behaviour. The eco-guilt felt is associated with perceived difficulty of rectifying one's action to prevent or reduce environmental damage. The relation between eco-guilt and engaging in pro-environmental behaviour follows a curvilinear relationship. When a person feels they should be engaging in pro-environmental behaviour and did so, the level of eco-guilt felt should be the lowest. Conversely, when a person feels they should be engaging in pro-environmental behaviour but failed to do so, eco-guilt is felt at its highest level (2019).

Another important perspective we can look at in the poetries taken up in this paper is Eco-Guilt. If we look at the 'Poplar Fields' by Cowper, we see the guilt in the poet's tone. When he mentions that the poplar trees are cut down and the birds have migrated to some other place. This sense of recalling his childhood

and realizing the fact that he cannot undo the changes humans have done gives us a suggestion of the concept of Eco-guilt. Apart from this, in the poem, 'Binsey Poplars' by Hopkins, he also states that the feminine part of nature is being destroyed by the human race and we are moving towards a dark future. Also, in the poem, 'Snake' by Lawrence, the concept of Eco-Guilt, is very clearly observed. After the poet threw the pitcher on the water-trough which scared the snake, he regrets doing it. He is filled with guilt for what he did. Overall, we look at these poetries and find that humans experience Eco-Guilt in one way or the other if they have the sense of protecting our nature.

### **Nature as a Living Feminine Being**

Metaphorically, we might then say that English literature generally associated women with nature and landscape either as passive and nurturing, 'mother Earth,' or as a 'virgin beauty.' But new images of controlling and dominating nature emerged in Europe with explorations of new worlds and beginnings of colonialism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when white men began to plunder newly "discovered" lands and their resources, in the name of civilization. These "virgin" lands, as they called them, opened another view of nature (and the native woman) as passionate, wild and uncontrollable. Literature written during these times of colonial expansion often sexualized the conquered lands as feminine (Patel).

In the poem, 'Poplar Field' and 'Binsey Poplars', nature is treated as a feminine being. The poets rather than calling nature as some passive inanimate being, have compared them to a living being. They have compared Earth to a female, expressing the beauty it has. One major reason to treat nature as a living being apart from obvious reasons is to sensitize people not to ruthlessly eradicate nature. The poets want the readers to realize that we are alive today because of nature, if we keep on destroying it, one day we will perish from the face of Earth. It is necessary to understand that Nature is the provider to humans and not vice versa.

### **Nature and Capitalism**

Karl Marx analysed capitalism and argued that raw materials and capital were required prior to being used in production, they are a prerequisite if you like. However, it was not Marx himself who exposed the obvious contradiction between nature and capitalism, yet rather ecological Marxists, arguing that in order for production to begin and to expand, inputs into the system must be available (Foster, 2000). A movement known as the 'The red-green movement' links such environmental degradation by transnational corporations to economic oppression. They assert that the increase in capitalism and desire for more goods has externalizing costs that harm not only the environment but also public health (O'Connor, 1998). Commoner (1987) argues for 'ecological socialism', which is as a method of allowing

the society being affected by negative environmental impacts to have a say in the means of production, simultaneously eliminating unsustainable, environmentally destructive production practices and the exploitative mode of production (Klusener).

If we look at the historical context and background of the poems, 'Polar Field' and 'Binsey Poplars', we realize that these poems were written as a revolt against the ill effects on nature due to industrialization and urbanization. The Romantic and Victorian Era of English Literature was of rapid expansion of trade and industrialization. Due to this fact, people compromised the importance of nature. Even in recent times, its effects can be experienced. These poems tell us the reason for the destruction of Nature which is capitalism.

### **Cultural Ecology**

In 1962, anthropologist Charles O. Frake defined cultural ecology as "the study of the role of culture as a dynamic component of any ecosystem" and that's still a fairly accurate definition. Between one-third and one-half of the land surface of the earth has been transformed by human development. Cultural ecology argues that we humans were inextricably embedded in earth surface processes long before the invention of bulldozers and dynamite. Humans are part of the environment, not an outside force making impacts on it. Discussing cultural landscapes—people within their environment—attempts to address the world as a bio-culturally collaborative product (Hirst).

Lastly, Cultural Ecology is an important aspect of the poetries. We realize through these poetries that human beings and nature are a part of each other. It is better to say that humans need nature for their survival. Any action that a human does impacts nature in one way or the other. In the poems, 'Poplar Field' and 'Binsey Poplars', the Poplar trees are cut down and the fauna of that particular area is affected. Birds migrated to other places to find shelter. Secondly, the poem also mentions that the coming generations will not be able to look at the beauty of nature. In the poem, 'Snake', the poet's struggle whether to kill the snake or not fetches us to the fact of hunting and killing animals. As an aftermath, many species of animals have gone extinct and a lot more are endangered.

### **Conclusion**

This paper looked at the Human-Nature Relationship in Selected Poems of Cowper, Hopkins, and Lawrence and its Contemporary Relevance and it can be said that Nature has no replacement. One needs to understand that we are here because nature allows us to be here. It was also seen that Literature is one of the best mediums to convey the harsh realities of environmental degradation even in contemporary times. It helps to create awareness among the readers. If we continue to destroy nature at the current pace, soon we will face even more natural calamities and disasters than we are facing now. Therefore, it is time



that we look out for sustainable development. We should not exploit natural resources just because of our greed but use them judiciously keeping in mind the needs of the coming generations.

If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos.

- E. O. Wilson

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