

## **Ecoconsciousness Versus Egoconsciousness: An Ecocritical Reading of GM Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur” and William Stafford’s “Travelling through the Dark”**

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores how the poets G M Hopkins and William Stafford attempt to present the conflict between egoconsciousness and ecoconsciousness in their poems “God’s Grandeur” and “Travelling through the Dark” respectively. It also endeavours to find out their strategy and mission of exposing the superiority complex of the humans guided by anthropocentrism and highlighting the significance of ecocentrism necessary for creating balance in ecosystem and human lives. This paper assertively justifies that the poets, through their poems, depict the humans as problems and nature as solution of all problems due to its opposite qualities and the quality of timelessness and spacelessness. To justify the argument, ideas and notions of ecocritics Timothy Clark, Bill Devall and Stan Rowe have been brought as references. Mainly, this research work attempts to excavate and publicize how the writers make ecocritical discourse in demolishing, transforming and raising ecoconsciousness within the people (readers) for environmental preservation and conservation of lives. It is found that the poets effort to transform human minds, attitudes and behavioural practices from egocentric to ecocentric.*

*Keywords:* ecoconsciousness, egoconsciousness, conflict, discourse, nature

### **Introduction**

Ego refers to the self and egoconsciousness the consciousness of the self. It is also the state of awareness of oneself and the others. Robert Haralick (2014) in *God Consciousness* asserts: “Consciousness can mean sentience: the capability of sensing and responding to the world. It can mean sapience: the ability to perceive the relationship between oneself and one’s environment” (p.15). But the self of the humans today is self-centric which suffers from superiority and inferiority complexes. Humans

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attempt to promote and pacify their tormented and fragmented self today but never think about others nor the surrounding they live in. Rather, they consider themselves as rational Supreme Being among all. So, they have a false belief of having authority and power to control even nature. Though they are conscious that they are a small part of nature, they think they can get mastery over nature. It is their false consciousness or egocentrism that blinds them preventing ecoconsciousness. When we are self-centric, we lose our consciousness of the external world. We get lost within ourselves being too much limited. It is egoconsciousness which gives our identity but at the same time egoconsciousness blocks our mind and so we become selfish. We calculate the benefits from things and develop consciousness from the same attitude.

Ecoconsciousness refers to the consciousness or awareness of the aspects related to environment. It refers to the understanding of the interrelationship between humans and non-humans, importance of environment to the living beings, balance of ecosystem for continuity, human irrationality upon nature, and the preservation and conservation of environment. All human consciousnesses related to the environment come under ecoconsciousness. This term is mainly emphasized by ecocritics. The terms ecopoetics, ecology, ecosphere, deep ecology, environmentalism, ecosophy, ecocide, oikopoeitics, ecopolitics, ecocentrism, anthropocentrism, landcentrism, nature and ecosystem are, directly or indirectly, related to ecoconsciousness.

Conflict between ego and eco is the central issue in today's world due to human egocentrism. Nature is manifestation of divinity and source of all lives and so it is almighty. However, humans, through their so-called incredibly supreme mind, attempt to get victory over nature and keep it under them. In competition of getting rich and being super power, humans have invented so many technologies challenging nature which certainly satisfies their ego but surely affects the eco. To satiate their thirst for knowledge and lust for power, humans forget their fundamental ground and hit upon itself destroying themselves. Contrarily, nature also shows its anger and power upon humans through earthquakes, storms, draught, flood, landslides and pandemic. Though environment-destroying ego is dominant, environment-preserving and nature-worshipping egoless minds are also emerging which is a transformative journey of the humans from egocentrism to ecocentrism. But it is very much difficult. Gilbert Ross (n.d.) claims: "The shift from ego-based consciousness to an eco-based consciousness is also a naturally painful one" (p.2).

As promotion of ecoconsciousness is an urgent need today, the campaign for mass awareness about environment is necessary in which the ecocritical writers can

play a vital role. Talking about eco-critical writers. Sarita Devi (2019) writes: “These writers have big responsibility to give wake-up call to their readers through their fictional and non-fictional writings and make the masses ecoconscious” (p. 22). It is the duty of the writers today to inform and educate the masses for developing ecoconsciousness minimizing the superior egoconsciousness. About ecoconsciousness, Peter White (2009) depicts: “Ecological consciousness development seeks to include and go beyond perception and cognitive understanding to deepen and raise the state and level of an individual’s consciousness, their level of psychological development” (p. 256). Ecoconsciousness is deeper and broader than just cognition and awareness as it includes all aspects. On the same matter, Harry Hunt (1995) also argues that “consciousness is not intrinsically private but was once recognized as being primarily inter-subjective based with human and nonhuman beings” (as cited in White, p. 257). The structured exercises with nonhuman nature challenged this private orientation to consciousness by emphasizing the intersubjective interiority of heightened eco-consciousness. Peter White writes: “eco-consciousness, with this orientation towards consciousness, may be a useful approach for ‘knowing with other’” (p. 258). Egoconsciousness attempts to center on oneself whereas ecoconsciousness moves to understanding the other essential for creating balance. Regarding ecoconsciousness, Michael Christopher (1999) acclaims: “ecological consciousness is a biological, psychological and sociological process. Ecological consciousness is one attempt to respond to massive sociocultural change and a degrading physical environment” (p. 396, as cited in White, p. 263). It shows that ecoconsciousness is a holistic aspect.

Environmental theories mainly focus on value of environment and necessity of balanced relationship between humans and nature. Their motto is to challenge anthropocentrism and to promote econentrism exposing human superiority complexes and glorifying grandeur of nature. In the same spotlight, this paper explores how G M Hopkins and William Stafford, through their poems, dramatize the clash between egoconsciousness and ecoconsciousness and attempt to promote the latter and minimize the former for creating environmental balance.

## **Objective**

The objective of the study is to explore Hopkins’s and Stafford’s efforts to promote ecoconscious human behaviours for environmental conservation and conservation and to minimize deeply-rooted anthropocentric principles thereby presenting the divergence between egoconsciousness and ecoconsciousness in their poems “God’s Grandeur” and “Travelling through the Dark” respectively.

## **Methodology**

This study is a library-based literary research and therefore, textual analysis method has been used here. “God’s Grandeur” by G. M. Hopkins and “Travelling through the Dark” by William Stafford are the basic texts for analysis. Both texts attempt to expose humans’ egoconsciousness and glorify ecoconsciousness with the motive of establishing eco-poetical discourse by minimizing human encroachment upon nature and moving for preservation and conservation of nature. Such discourses make people aware of environmental essentialism and human responsibility to establish and continue part-whole relationship between human and environment.

## **Theoretical Background**

As the issue of the research paper is to explore the conflict between egoconsciousness and ecoconsciousness in G M Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur” and William Stafford’s poem “Travelling through the Dark”, the ideas and notions of ecocritics have been brought as references. Anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology and eco-poetics are the major concepts to be used. Regarding anthropocentrism, Timothy Clark (2011) in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* states:

Anthropocentric is the world view where human beings are given the central position and all other entities are pushed to the margin. [...] An ‘anthropocentric’ view of the natural world thus sees it entirely in relation to the human, for instance as a resource for economic use, or as the expression of certain social or cultural values –so even an aesthetics of landscape appreciation can be anthropocentric. (p. 3)

Anthropocentrism, which literally means “human-centered,” is the view that all environmental responsibility is derived from human interests alone. Anthropocentrism places primary value on human beings and nature is attributed with instrumental and utilitarian value. The humans are seen separate from nature and nature as object of study. Anthropocentrism is that point of view which promotes human interests even at the expense of basic interests of members of other non-human species, or of the environment in general but all living entities, including non-human animals, plants, etc.

Eco-centrism is that holistic environmental theory, according to which not only living beings, but the whole ecosystem, including the biotic part of nature, is worthy of moral consideration. Stan Rowe (1994) affirms eco-centrism as helping to solve the environmental crisis:

It seems to me that the only promising universal belief-system is Eco-centrism, defined as a value-shift from Homo sapiens to planet earth: Ecosphere. Thus Earth, not organism, is the metaphor for Life. Earth not humanity is the Life-center, the creativity-center. Earth is the whole of which we are subservient parts. Such a fundamental philosophy gives ecological awareness and sensitivity an enfolding, material focus. (p.106)

The advocates of eco-centrism tend to resist the bio-centrist's exclusive concern for individual living organisms. Eco-centrism maintains that an adequate eco-ethics must take into account our relations with ecological systems, processes, along with non-living natural objects. The environmentalists who subscribe to eco-centrism contend that it is the key pathway to solve environmental crisis.

Deep ecology proposes new norms of human responsibility to change the human exploitation of nature into co-participation with nature. It believes in the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features. It believes that anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and caused them to exploit it. According to Bill Devall (1985), "Deep Ecological sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world." (p.67) Deep Ecologists believe that nature possesses the same moral standing and natural rights as human beings.

### **Textual Analysis**

"God's Grandeur" and "Travelling through the Dark" present the tussle between egoconsciousness and econsciousness. These poems depict the reality of both the humans and nature. The former exposes the naked picture of the result of human egocentric achievements where humans have deteriorated nature in the name of scientific advancement, civilization, industrialization and economic development and thereby destroying themselves. This poem displays nature as the ultimate solution as it holds all the capacities and continuously does its duty without caring human tyranny and problem-causing wrong deeds. The latter reveals the unchanging nature of humans in case of nature and environment as the traveller firstly seems to show love and kindness to the dead doe with alive fawn inside but ultimately shows real human nature of selfishness throwing the doe into the canyon and continuing his mission. The former presents the humans as problem and nature as solution, but the latter ironically brings out the unchanging human ego which overcomes the humans ultimately.

God's Grandeur glorifies the magnificence and greatness of nature which is manifestation of god himself. Nature holds divinity as it is always charged by "grandeur of divine power" (1). It is full of all kinds of energies- creative and destructive. The fastest quality like that of the "flame" (2) and the current and the lowest quality of the "oozing oil" (3) magnify nature. Nature is the source of all things that humans and other living beings need. Moreover, humans can learn having the opposite qualities from nature as life itself is the combination of opposites without which life can't exist and run. Utilizing the energies from nature humans have made miraculous achievements. Yet, they strive to move ahead for their ego gratification through exploitation of nature forgetting their duties and responsibilities towards the environment.

Anthropocentrism strives to overshadow ecocentrism in today's capitalistic world of calculative minds and selfish hearts. "An 'anthropocentric' view of the natural world thus sees it entirely in relation to the human" (Clark, p. 3). Keeping ourselves at the center, human beings effort to keep nature under own control for their ego satisfaction. Their egoconsciousness is dominant over the ecoconsciousness. Due to uncontrollable over population, nature has been flattened and deteriorated. Moreover, it is on the verge of existence and collapse. The poet exclaims: "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;/ And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell" (5-6). Many generations have come and gone but they always think about fulfilment of their self-interests, not the environmental concerns. They randomly exploit the environment for their benefits. Humans have initiated industrialization and urbanization in the name of civilization resulting into degradation of nature. Their activities have destroyed the beauty of nature as it has become full of human smudge and smell which we can see in rivers. The rivers have become the dumping sides and the sewerages. Due to human dirty spots, ugliness has been scrubbed upon beautiful face of nature. The bright and shining appearance of nature has been deemed and dirtied through dirt of human ego. All the real and original smells, tastes, sounds, sights and feelings of nature have been collapsed by egocentric movements of the humans.

However, humans have no feeling of regret and responsibility even in such a dire and dreadful situation. Environment has been deteriorated and though the soil is bare due to deforestation for self-benefits, humans can't feel it. They seem to be unaware of the necessity of harmony between humans and the nonhumans, the claim of deep ecologists. "Deep Ecological sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world"

(Devall, p. 67). They have lost their feelingful mind because of their egocentrism. The poet metaphorically acclaims: "...The soil /Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod" (6-7). Only the feelingful life is meaningful. However, the humans in the era of science, technology, trade and business do not feel the soil (metaphorically nature) as they have worn the shoes (metaphorically technologies). It is the technology that prevents us from feeling, realizing and understanding the real natural nature. Humans, in era of science and technology, therefore, live not the real life but the false and duplicate life. Such reality is also not realized by humans as they are engulfed by anthropocentric egoistic heart and mind. It shows that the destination of dominant egoconsciousness sidelining ecoconsciousness is surely the collapse of earth and the beings.

The poem magnifies the immortality or continuity of nature belittling the temporary human lives. Though humans show their heartlessness and mindlessness forgetting their own responsibility, identity and existence, nature never forgets its duties and responsibilities. What happens if the air, water, sun and soil become lazy, forget their duty and be selfish like humans? The result is beyond imagination. Nevertheless, nature never leaves its responsibility unfulfilled. The poet asserts: "And for all this, nature is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;" (8-9). Even though nature is exploited, deemed and dirtied by humans, it is never spent. It shows the timelessness and spacelessness of nature. For example, the things dried, dimmed and dead in the winter get restored and revived in the spring with new vigor and life. And, therefore, life continues in all ordeals, hurdles and joys. This is the great difference between the nature and the humans that there is dearest freshness deep down the things in nature whereas there is selfish ego deep down the heart and mind of the humans. Here, the poet stands in favor of eco-consciousness dismantling the ego-consciousness of the people.

The poet highlights upon eco-consciousness glorifying both fatherly and motherly qualities that the nature possesses. Breast feeding and letting life live is the quality of a mother whereas providing shelter and protection is the quality of a father. It is the nature which possesses both that are necessary for continuation of life. Hopkins acclaims: "...over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings" (13-14). He metaphorically compares nature with the bird, humans with nestlings and the protective measures with the wings. As the bird covers and protects its nestlings with its wings, nature protects us with various measures providing warmth, coolness, edibles and medicines. Without showing any kind of envy and laziness, nature continuously provides support to the humans. The lines: "And though the last

lights off the black West went/Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —” (11-12) show that though the sun sets in the west in the evening, it rises in the east next morning with same zest and zeal. It symbolically means nature is always active and fresh in service to the beings in the earth though humans are continuously attacking upon nature and weakening it. The poet, here, highlights on greatness of nature which balances the ecosystem whatever humans do against it.

Similarly, William Stafford’s poem “Travelling through the Dark” portrays the darkness off ego-consciousness through the title itself as the traveler is travelling in the dark which may represent the physical darkness of the night, but the darkness is of ego of humankind who is lost in self-claimed superiority upon all the living species. Here, the main concern is traveler’s act of swerving from egoconsciousness to ecoconsciousness and finally the victory of ego-consciousness upon the later. Thus, the act of swerving to eco-consciousness becomes ironical as the speaker decides to be the slave of his ego rather than the server of the eco. Yet, the motive of the writer is to promote ecoconsciousness not egoconsciousness.

It’s well-known fact that nature and human exist in collision. Humans are wrapped in ego of being the wisest creatures in this universe having right to do everything for their luxury and comfort. And, in this process, they have done uncoverable damage to the environment. Same thing is portrayed in the very first line of the poem which shows how humans are trapped in their ego and do not feel sorry even if they kill the living being, the part of nature. The poet states: “Travelling through the dark I found a deer/dead on the edge of Wilson River road” (1-2). The speaker is travelling in the dark in a country road enjoying natural beauty; however, he happens to see the dead deer on the edge of road which seems to have been killed by one of the travelers like him. The traveler seems to be so much consumed by his self-ego that he does not even bother to look at what he has hit. The deer is lying dead on the edge of the road. For the traveler, it is simply an animal whose life means nothing to the human at all. So, the act of killing sounds more like trifles to humans which is the result of his ego consciousness.

Humans are so much absorbed for their well-being and survival which may sound natural as every living creature tries to survive. However, the persona in the poem is concerned to save life of other humans which shows he is filled with self-ego. So, he decides to roll the dead deer into the canyon: “It is usually best to roll them in the canyon:/that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead” (3-4). The persona’s act of swerving seems to be his movement from ego consciousness to



eco-consciousness because he cares about life of other human beings if not animals. His logical conscience sounds great, and his swerving is also meaningful as he thinks for others not for his personal welfare.

Human consciousness makes humans different from rest of the living organism in the earth and the speaker of the poem also articulates the same which makes him more humane than the person who mercilessly kills the deer in the middle of the road. However, he does not think about the survival of animals as his point is to save lives of humans. The speaker starts thinking with his heart and gets out of the car to see the dead doe. But his act of looking upon the scene depends on the light of his car: “By the glow of the tail-light” (5). It shows the result of human’s dependency on technology, the result of ego-consciousness. The tragedy is he has become ‘the cog of the machine’. It proves that human ego centrism has made him depend on the things he made for his comfort.

Ego consciousness is the result of human selfishness, self-centrism, superiority complex and lust of power, and the persona of the poem is also guided by the same. However, his emotion moves from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness as soon as he realizes that the doe has been killed recently and is large in the belly:

By the glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car  
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;  
she had stiffened already, almost cold.  
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly. (5-7)

The speaker decides to move the deer to the canyon; however, he is compelled to think that she is the product of the recent killing and is large in her belly. At this point, the speaker seems to compare the life of the doe with the life of normal human woman who is pregnant. He is forced to realize the importance of life of the baby doe and its mother which would have shared this earth with him. So, this time the narrator has ego-consciousness which forces him to see life matter either it is of human or animal.

Similarly, the life of all the living organisms of earth has not only been controlled but also been threatened by the self-centrism of the humans. The ego centric emotion of narrator seems to have moved completely after realizing the importance of the life of doe that could have given birth to the baby fawn which resembles the woman giving birth to her baby. The speaker, therefore, touches the side of doe which compels him to imagine the horrible destiny that awaits the baby. The poet asserts:

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—  
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,  
alive, still, never to be born.  
Beside that mountain road I hesitated. (9-12)

The speaker realizes that humans have been so much unreasonable to the life of other creatures and doe is just an example. The doe is fully pregnant, and her side is still warm which indicates that her baby is waiting to see this world. However, the baby is bound to die sooner or later as its outlet to the world has already become lifeless. At this point, the speaker seems to forget his ego consciousness and realize the importance of eco-consciousness as he appears to worry about the tragic destiny of the fawn. So, he hesitates to throw the doe in the canyon because he seems to feel the tragedy of both mother and her baby, never to be born. Symbolically, dead doe is the mother earth, and the awaiting fawn is the humans.

Ego-consciousness results from greatest scientific achievements and hiking of technocratic culture that has completely changed human's life. However, the tragic fact is humans are in the control of technology rather than controlling it. Each part of human life is affected by technology due to central priority on it. Technology has already become something without which humans cannot imagine their lives. The very idea is seen in the poem when the speaker's concern about the future of baby fawn evaporates within a second. When he remembers his car, he seems to forget everything:

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;  
under the hood purred the steady engine.  
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;  
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen. (13-16)

The persona in the poem who is lost in the tragic future of the dying fawn forgets it completely as soon as he starts observing his car. He realizes that the car's light is lowering, and the engine of the car has got exhausted and is about to die. He prioritizes the car and thinks about himself after he observes the car's condition. He realizes that he is left all alone and most probably his racing friends have already reached their destination. He thinks if the car's engine dies, it will be harder for him to start again and there is nobody to help him with his car's engines.

Harmony between nature and human is essential as humans are a part and nature a whole. "Deep Ecological sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world"

(Devall,p.67). But ignoring it, the persona of the poem ultimately takes the side of technology and he himself which shows the original image of the humankind is always guided by ego-consciousness. He decides to throw the dead doe and dying baby into the canyon because his car's engine is dying and he has lost the race among his friends. The poet acclaims: "I thought hard for us all-my only swerving-/then pushed her over the edge into the river" (17-18). The same speaker who hesitates to throw the mother and baby deer in the river getting sympathetic at the tragic destiny of the baby repeats his first decision ultimately. His decision to dispose the dead doe in the river shows he is merciless against deer, symbolically nature.

The major word that draws our attention is 'swerve'. The speaker in the poem swerves for two times. His both swervings are the result of his ego-consciousness as he wants to save himself and other humans. He moves emotionally realizing the baby of doe is waiting for its birth. This act makes the reader think that the speaker is moving forward to the eco-consciousness from ego-consciousness and can feel the importance of other creatures of earth too. At this point, he seems to have compassion for other living organisms too. He swerves for the final time when he realizes the car's engine is dying and he is left alone in the wilderness. Lastly, the speaker returns to his ego-consciousness giving priority to the technology he has got which reflects his lust for technology rather than for the life of the doe or its baby. He chooses technology and himself over the life of the baby fawn indicating that he is no different from other humans. So, he decides to throw the doe into the Canyon of Wilson River. Ultimately, he keeps his own existence at the top and throws the doe without mercy to the fawn. Like the previous rider who does not care the life, he, too, has killed the fawn indirectly. So, in both cases, his act of swerving is nothing but dogmatic and pompous which the poet ironically presents.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, both "God's Grandeur" by Hopkins and "Travelling through the Dark" by Stafford promote eco-poetical discourse presenting the conflict between ego-consciousness and eco-consciousness and thereby glorifying econsciousness and belittling ego-consciousness. Hopkins claims that though nature is permanent and source of all things, humans have become feelingless making their lives meaningless due to being engulfed in scientific and technological advancement. For him, anthropocentrism is the problem whereas ecocentrism is the solution for it. The so-called superior and problem-solving humans have been ironically proved the major causes of the problem in the earth. Likewise, Stafford attacks upon the so-called superior human ego-consciousness which temporarily seems to be transformed into eco-consciousness

but ultimately remains egocentric and self-centric. The traveler seems to be showing love and compassion to the dead doe with the alive fawn inside, which represents nature, but eventually shows his original selfish face throwing the doe into the canyon and moving ahead in his car.

Thus, the poets using irony and metaphor make blistering attack and derogatory comment on anthropocentric egocentrism and attempt to promote ecocentrism to establish a balanced life in the natural environment. Their effort can be worthwhile in preservation and conservation of nature transforming human consciousness from ego to eco.

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