

Received Date: January 2021

Revised: March 2021

Accepted: June 2021

The Conflict between Mechanical World and Natural World in “Travelling through the Dark” and “Woodchucks”: An Ecological Study

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Abstract

Eco-criticism examines the conflicting relationship between man and nature. Human beings encroach nature for their comfort and material prosperity. Nature is silent but it may crush us if we go against it crossing the limit. It is the 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. This paper examines how so called mechanical world i.e. physical world comes into tussle with the natural world in the poems-“Travelling through the Dark” and “Woodchucks”. This mundane world is the world of scientific inventions and machines. Human beings have become the slaves of machines and tools. They heavily depend on machinery objects to ease and comfort their life. But sometimes they misuse the machines and damage the natural objects posing threat to natural ecosystem. In ecosystem, all living beings- plants and animals are equally important as they are interdependent for their existence. If one of the animals is exterminated, other living beings in an ecosystem will be badly affected. This paper examines how the conflict between nature and modern technology occurs in the poems: “Travelling through the Dark” by William Stafford and “Woodchucks” by Maxine Kumin. This paper uses eco-criticism as a theoretical frame work for the research study. It compares and contrasts between two poems in terms of the nature of conflict between nature and modern technology. It answers the questions: How do human beings misuse the objects of the mechanical world at the risk of the natural world? Since natural eco-system is an integral part of our life, we need to conserve it for the safety of our own existence.

Key words: Conflict, eco-system, eco-criticism, degradation, abiotic & encroachment.

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Introduction

The interconnection between human beings and nature is undeniable. No living beings can exist and sustain their lives without nature and its components. Since human being is the part and parcel of nature, he/she cannot survive even for seconds without the support of nature. Human beings exploit natural components so as to facilitate their life and enhance material prosperity. Only the sustainable use of natural resources strikes a balance in the environment. The excessive use or the rampant encroachment of natural components exacerbate imbalance in the nature, thereby pose a threat to the existence of living beings. The eco-system is degraded in the world due to the overexploitation of natural resources. Therefore, eco-criticism basically concentrates on the issues of environmental degradation and its impact in the world. William Hogarth states:

Eco-criticism is a name that implies more ecological literacy than its advocates now possess, unless they know what an embattled course ecology has run during its history [...] writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers and reversing their harm through political action. (69)

Eco-criticism deals with the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. It focuses on the interdisciplinary point of view where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subjects of nature. It emphasizes the relationship among humans, culture and nature.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to illustrate the conflicting relationship between man and nature on account of the scientific and technological developments. It aims at inculcating people about the need of the conservation of ecosystem and its biodiversity so that the future life of mankind will be safe and worth living.

Methodology

This paper employs eco-criticism as a theoretical frame work for the study. It compares and contrasts between two poems in terms of the nature of conflict between nature and modern technology. Drawing references from library sources and field study, this study focuses on the encroachments of man upon nature and its dire consequences.

Nature versus Technology

Human beings are particularly controlled by information, machines and modern technology. They totally depend on the machines and tools for each work. They have become slaves to the machines and technology driven tools, gadgets, machines etc. In fact, modern inventions have brought a revolutionary change to the lives of people. Because of modern inventions, life has become longer, sager and more comfortable. But, people use modern machines at the cost of nature and natural objects. It creates a tension between nature and so called mechanical world. Harol From views that modern men are so mechanical that they no longer have reverence towards nature. They are surrounded by modern technologies in every step of their life that make forget what nature is. He remarks: “ ... how the industrial revolution affected humanity’s conception of its relationship to nature, allowing us to forget that our unconquerable minds are vitally dependent upon natural supports systems”(qtd. in Sah 103).

Nature does not behave with any of the creatures in biased manners. The land is impartial and voluntarily serves all living things and survives even their mischievous behaviors. There is no hierarchy among human or between humans and animals. The technology and economic forces do not rein the world of nature. It remains autonomous. However the overambition and arrogance of humans turn hostile and finally turn peace into anarchy and degradation. Greta Gaard argues:

In their analyses of oppression, socialists, animal liberationists, ecologists, and feminists each distinguish between privileged and oppressed groups, where the privileged are upper or middle class, human, technologically and industrially

developed, male and the oppressed are poor or working class, nonhuman animals undeveloped nature and female , respectively. (1-2)

The connection between feminism, animal emancipation and conservation of biosphere is much deep and integrated. The presence of birds, animals and plants – exotic natural flora and fauna really beautifies the ecosystem. Nevertheless, human careless activities like deforestation, poaching, pollutions, reckless use of modern machines, tools and harmful substances, over exploitation natural resources etc. really pose threats to the living organisms. William Rueckert asserts: “All the creative processes of the biosphere, including the human ones, may well come to an end if we cannot find a way to determine the limits of human destruction and intrusion which the biosphere and tolerate, and learn how to creatively manage the biosphere” (qtd. in Sah 102) . Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. The poem, *Travelling through the Dark*, presents a great tension between two realities, two systems of life. While diving through the Wilson river road, the poet finds a dead doe lying dead on the edge. The poet stops his car and comes out to see the doe. He comes to know that it is pregnant and its fawn is still alive waiting to be born. The poet depicts an innocent doe killed mercilessly by a previous car ahead of him:

Travelling through the dark I found a deer
Dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.
By glow f 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. (1-8)

“*Travelling through the Dark*”, on the one hand, depicts the internal conflict between the mind, a sense of responsibility, and heart, the compassion, of the narrator, and the external conflict between nature and human technology on the other. Through the

symbolic “Dark” of the title, the poet portrays that the growing affinity of human with machine is tempting human beings to collide with the nature, a collision which will be threatening for all the living species on the planet, not only a doe. The car becomes a being, with red lights and exhaust, like a demonic breath, the driver turning red as he decides what to do:

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. (11-14)

The speaker has already decided that the deer will end up in the canyon as it is the local tradition. The color red suggests the blood of the deceased deer, and the car is symbolic of technology. This is all happening in the dark, a symbol of spiritual darkness. This may only be a small incident but the repercussions are vast. When he reaches near the deer, he observes its belly closely. He senses that the fawn inside it must be alive. But he also knows that it cannot be born. The tragic fate of the fawn makes him emotional. It is difficult for him to throw the body into the gorge because it might kill the baby instantly, “Beside the mountain road I hesitated (10-12)”. His dilemma and lack of action blocks the street. He hears the people getting restless as everybody is hurried to move ahead. They immediately want the road to be opened. The narrator thinks very deeply and concludes that it is not practical to leave the dead body of the doe on the street. It can make more accidents on the road, “I thought hard for us all – my only swerving -/then pushed her over the edge into the river (16-17)”. Therefore, he throws it into the gorge and chooses to perform his duty.

An unidentified driver ahead of the speaker kills the doe by hitting it. The car symbolizes the invention of modern technology whereas the doe, which is an integral part of the ecosystem, stands for the nature. Killing of the doe being hit by car represents the collision between nature and modern technology or the clash between the mechanical world and natural world. In the name of modernism and modern

technology, natural ecosystem is at risk. This paper explores how modern machines like car, belonging to the mechanical world, are used at the risk of Natural fauna, and how wild animals like deer are getting extinct resulting into the imbalance in eco-system.

The poem shows an ethical dilemma as well. It is concerned with either opening up the doe to bring a new fawn into the world, bearing a risk of the doe being hit by other cars or simply pushing the doe, the heap, down into the abyss. The driver listens to the wilderness *around his group*, which includes himself, the car, the doe and the fawn, and pushes the doe into the abyss to clear the road so that no other accidents may occur.

In the poem *Woodchucks*, the poet Maxine Kumin talks about a farmer who kills woodchucks to protect the garden. Kumin describes how the farmer was a pacifist, until he becomes serious because the woodchucks destroy his garden, “I, a lapsed pacifist fallen from grace”(Line 21). This shows that the farmer who is a pacifist has killed an innocent creature and has become corrupted. She also describes how the woodchucks appear again, “Next morning they turned up again, no worse / for the cyanide than we for our cigarettes”(Lines 7-8). It shows how the woodchucks reappear, and they are like the cyanides from cigarettes and cannot disappear.

In the next part of the poem the author shows the relation to the Holocaust. She talks about how the farmer kills the woodchucks:

There is one chuck left. Old wily fellow, he keeps
Me cocked and ready day after day after day.
All night I hunt his humped up form. I dream
I sight along the barrel in my sleep.
If only they had all consented to die unseen
Gassed underground the quiet Nazi way. (25-30)

The excerpt shows that the pacifist farmer has killed the woodchucks by shooting them and how they should have died underground by being gassed like how the Jews during the Holocaust were killed in gas chambers. A final example of how the author shows

relation to the Holocaust is when she is talking about snipers, “the murderer inside me rose up hard/the Hawkeye killer came on stage forthwith”(Lines 29-30). The author relates this quote to Nazi high ranking officers shooting poor innocent defenseless people for no reason from their big mansions or abandoned buildings. It depicts the pathetic scene of the second world war in which the world faced holocaust demolition and rampant killing of Jews by Nazi armies and police.

Maxine Kumin explains the real reason behind her poem. She is compelled to kill woodchucks to protect her garden from being eaten though her killing of woodchucks is merciless. But, the killing of woodchucks, which are also the parts of ecosystem, may create an imbalance in the nature. The extermination of any living beings either harmful or useful for human beings affects the natural ecosystem at large. In this poem, Gun shots and gas, which symbolize the products of modern technology, are used to kill the innocent woodchucks as the car hits the doe and kills it in the poem *Travelling through the Dark*. Though the killing of the doe and the woodchucks differs from each other in its nature, reason and purpose, it refers to a great collision and conflict between nature and modern technology. There is no reason and purpose behind killing the doe as it might be result of carelessness of the driver whereas there is a grand purpose behind killing the woodchucks i.e. for the protection of the garden. However, both killings go against natural ecosystem howsoever different in nature. In both poems, modern technology comes into clash with nature referring to the conflict between mechanical world and natural world.

Conclusion

It is because of modern technology and scientific advancement that human beings and natural world are on a collision course. The clash between nature and human beings occurs when human beings deliberately or recklessly inflict the natural flora and fauna. If not checked, it will be unable to sustain life in the world. Various human activities like deforestation, pollution, industrialization, excessive use of natural resources, developmental activities etc. damage natural ecosystem at large. Some people willingly

exterminate insects and harmful organisms from their farm land through the use of pesticides or any other means. It may be good for the crops but in the long run it affects the natural eco-system disturbing its balance. People are unaware of their activities which harm the eco-system overtly or covertly. Some people knowingly or unknowingly use the modern technologies at the risk of natural world and damage the nature. Either purposefully or purposelessly, knowingly or unknowingly people harm nature thereby creating a great imbalance in the environment and its eco-systems. Therefore, human beings as rational beings need to conserve the biodiversity and the pristine wilderness for the brighter prospect of all living beings on this earth. If not, we should prepare ourselves to face any calamities inevitable in the days to come.

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