

**An Analysis of Eco-criticism and Literature with special
reference to the works of Hardy and Dickens**

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Abstract: The task of ecocriticism, is to formulate a conceptual foundation for the study of interconnections between literature and the environment. Literature can be perceived as an aesthetically and culturally constructed part of the environment, since it directly addresses the questions of human constructions, such as meaning, value, language, and imagination, which can, then, be linked to the problem of ecological consciousness that humans need to attain. Within this framework, eco-critics are mainly concerned with how literature transmits certain values contributing to ecological thinking. Environmental crisis is a question that cannot be overlooked in literary studies. Consciousness raising in environmental thinking, and the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the global ecological crisis, force literary scholars to recognize the important role literature and criticism play in understanding man's position in the ecosphere. Literature can be usefully examined as having some bearing on man and his practical relation to the natural world. Novels of Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy dealing with London in the age of Industrial Revolution served as an agency of awareness. They can be publicized to help advance the cause of natural environment. In the Return of the Native, Clym Yeobright comes back to his native environment leaving the glamorous city life of Paris. In his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (1996:107). In this context the possible relations between literature and nature are examined in terms of

ecological concepts. Ecocriticism, then, attempts to find a common ground between the human and the nonhuman to show how they can coexist in various ways, because the environmental issues have become an integral part of our existence. This is one problem that ecocriticism addresses in its attempt to find a more environmentally conscious position in literary studies. Ecology is found in classic literature of all sorts. Charles Dickens, for example, touched on the ethical questions of human population growth and density in many of his novels. One of Dickens' most famous characters, Ebenezer Scrooge, said in response to a request to help the poor who "would rather die" than go to the workhouses, "if they'd rather die, then they had better do it and decrease the surplus population." This idea of a "surplus population" was not an uncommon belief in England during the 19th century, though Dickens himself deplored it. Ebenezer Scrooge is the focal character of Charles Dickens' 1843 novella, *A Christmas Carol*. At the beginning of the novella, Scrooge is a cold-hearted miser who despises Christmas. Dickens describes him thus: "The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice...". Throughout *A Christmas Carol* the personality of Ebenezer Scrooge shifts from a man who only cares about himself and his wealth to a man who cares about others.

Although ecocriticism can- and indeed should- explore the ways in which literature and ecology interact, it should not do so at the expense of a naive reduction of literary texts into mere transcriptions of the physical world, and by politicization of literature itself. It is important to note that literature should not be used as a pretext for examining the ecological issues. In other words, the task of putting literature in question in order to save nature implies a reductionist approach. Since poststructuralist theory "has sharpened the focus on textual and intertextual issues" (Strehle 1992:2), the eco critical reader cannot go back into perceiving literary texts as transparent mediums that unproblematically reflect phenomenal reality.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Hardy, Dickens, Man and Nature, Victorian age , Novel, Industrial Revolution, Literature

Main Paper

The word "ecocriticism" traces back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" and apparently lay dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting (in Coeur d'Alene), when Cheryll

Glotfelty (at the time a graduate student at Cornell, now Assistant Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno) not only revived the term but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that heretofore had been known as "the study of nature writing." Cheryll's call for an "ecocriticism" was immediately seconded at that same WLA meeting by Glen Love (Professor of English at the University of Oregon) in his Past President's speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism." Since that meeting in 1989, the term "ecocriticism" has bloomed in usage, so that now one finds it appearing with some frequency in calls for papers, critical articles, and indeed academic job descriptions. To reread Dickens and Hardy in the light of modern concept of ecocriticism seems to be a little challenging because both of them belonged to a period when ecocriticism was not at all known as a theory. But the Victorian age in its later half was a little perturbed by Darwinism and the theory of Evolution and Determinism. Hardy's novels were always a study of man and nature. But Dickens was much less interested in Nature as he was the chronicler of the city of London. He loves to focus on human values and less acquainted with those scientific developments – evolutionary biology and energy physics – that would converge, in the nineteenth century, to form ecological science. Arguing that Dickens then applied his interest in science, and his own conception of a 'poetic science' towards an analysis of society, the paper considers his examination of industry, technology, and the physical shape that these bequeathed to the Victorian city in the light of contemporary *social ecology*. We may argue that Dickens's double-edged understanding of technology and the city allows us to understand his writing as an example of what John Clark has called a 'social ecology of the imagination' and, more generally, of a reconstructive quality shared with social ecology.'

Dickens and Hardy both displayed an environmental sensibility because of the Victorian inheritance of a romanticism comprised, partially, in Paul de Man's words, of 'a return to a certain form of naturalism after the forced abstraction of the Enlightenment'.(Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 1989) He was, though, somewhat removed from the conventionalised romantic love of nature, as Andrew Sanders notes: The more placid rhythms of rural life elude him as much as does an ability to observe and record the delicacies of a flower or the contours of a working landscape. Although he readily recognised the Romantic conventions of seeing nature as the inspirer and the regenerator, few of Nature's voices echo directly in his novels. As a writer of fiction, Dickens generally remained distinctly unawed by its phenomena. (Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens*, 2003) Ecocriticism has generally turned towards Romanticism which, in having 'inaugurated a radically new conception of humankind's relationship to the natural world' (James C. Mc

Kusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* 2000) appears as the most fruitful reference point for nourishing the act of ‘recuperation’. This prevailing ‘romantic ecology’ has also generated specific arguments, most clearly articulated in Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth*, as to how best literature might serve ecological thinking Dickens applies precise, sensitive description to an urban rather than rural environment: It was, nevertheless, the combination of these two things – urban environmental description and human interest – that set the template for Dickens’s later writing. An example is his description of the Seven Dials district, that archetypal Victorian symbol of poverty, danger and filth, depicted also in Disraeli’s *Sybil* (1845). The streets and courts dart in all directions, until they are lost in the unwholesome vapour which hangs over the house-tops, and renders the dirty perspective uncertain and confined; and lounging at every corner, as if they came there to take a few gasps of such fresh air as has found its way so far, but is too much exhausted already, to be enabled to force itself into the narrow alleys around, are groups of people, whose appearance and dwellings would fill any mind but a regular Londoner’s with astonishment. (*SB*, 92)

This sense, that a degraded physical environment equates to a hazardous human one – a Victorian ‘risk society’ – is, specifically, ecological and it is that point, the extent to which Dickens foreshadowed contemporary ecological thinking, that I will explore in this article. However, to propose Dickens as an ecological writer is to adopt a somewhat different position from that usually taken in the theoretical field – ecocriticism – that is concerned with the relationship between literary texts and ecological ideas.

The first respect in which social ecology differs from deep ecology is that rather than merely recuperate an idealised ‘nature’ it emphasises what the philosopher Murray Bookchin, who has remained the central presence in social ecology, has called a ‘deep-seated continuity between nature and society’.(Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* , 2004). It is, therefore, interested in the concepts (not least, scientific concepts) by which human beings construct their understanding of, and practice towards, (nonhuman) nature. Consequently, social ecology also cultivates a pragmatic belief that we can and should intervene in the world. The prevailing (deep) ecocriticism is so largely founded upon Romanticism, the (post-Romantic) Victorian period has remained somewhat neglected and for that reason alone it seems logical to explore this in seeking out the possibility of a countervailing (social) ecocriticism. Positioning Dickens as central to a Victorian literary culture that responded ambivalently, as indicated above, to Romanticism, there are two main arguments, to be explored in this article, for regarding him as a prototypical social-ecological thinker. The first of these arguments is that the intimations of ecology in his writing are substantiated by Dickens’s interest in science as a means of understanding both the natural world and the human place within it. Dickens is significant in

this context because of what has already been uncovered by the existing work on Victorian literature and science – an interest in those scientific ideas, evolutionary theory and energy physics, that converged to form scientific ecology once the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel had first coined the word ‘ecology’ in 1866.

Unlike his other stories Dickens’s novel *A Christmas Carol* is not a work of fiction as it covers the shameful environmental disregard of the past, the woeful inaction of the present and the hopelessness of a future in which we fail to act. This is a story of environmental neglect inspired by *A Christmas Carol*, the famous tale written by Charles Dickens and published in 1843 at the height of industrial revolution. The Industrial Revolution took place from 1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840. During this period, western societies underwent great changes as new forms of manufacturing began to take over traditional economic activities. This shifted economic production from homes and small shops to the creation of many large factories. This transition included the adoption of machines, new chemical manufacturing and iron production processes. *The Return of the Native* is the typical representation of this kind. Hardy's ecological consciousness is embodied in his view on Nature from the description of the landscape in *The Return of the Native*. If we employ a new critical approach eco-criticism to interpret the novel, then it is particularly appropriate to an examination of literature in the context of globally environmental predicament and arouse the modern people's consciousness. Through this analysis, the conflicts between man and man, man and nature, and man and society became terrible by the invasion of the industrial civilization which reflects Hardy's consideration of the relationship among nature, life and society. Besides, it provides us with useful enlightenment on how to handle the relationship between man and nature, at the same time arouse the reader's ecological consciousness. In a world much burdened with the wide spread ecological crisis the emergence of ecocriticism had signalled a new and promising hermeneutical horizon in our interpretations and understandings of the natural world and literature. Since 1990s the issue of ecocriticism is given a theoretical ground and there is an interest in expanding the purview of ecocritical practice by widening the canon of texts for ecocritical investigation. Examining the possible relations between literature and nature, and linking ecological contexts with literary criticism produced a variety of scholarly work. Some critics have rightly emphasised the importance of promoting a biocentric worldview through ecocriticism which is an emerging methodology announcing for a cultural change. Unlike new historicist, postcolonial and cultural studies, which have evolved from a theoretically informed

rethinking of the discipline that has produced new scholarship new programmes and departments , and new courses , ecological criticism finds itself in a different evolution at this point in time.

In 1878, when *The Return of the Native* was first published, ambiguity was hardly understood to be the cornerstone of the novelistic edifice. Hardy focuses on the relation between Man and Nature and here Egdon Heath, is introduced as the first “character” in the book. The heath proves physically and psychologically important throughout the novel: characters are defined by their relation to the heath, and the weather patterns of the heath even reflect the inner dramas of the characters. Indeed, it almost seems as if the characters are formed by the heath itself: Diggory Venn, red from head to toe, is an actual embodiment of the muddy earth; Eustacia Vye seems to spring directly from the heath, a part of Rain barrow itself, when she is first introduced; Wildeve’s name might just as well refer to the wind-whipped heath itself. But, importantly, the heath manages to defy definition. It is, in chapter one, “a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature.” For Clym, the heath is beautiful; for Eustacia, it is hateful. The plot of the novel hinges around just this kind of difference in perception. Hardy shows how Clym Yeobright left the dazzle of city life of Paris and gladly undertook the challenge of teaching the Heath people as a school master. Many are busy with Hardy’s philosophical views and tragic predestination themes. But in this novel, Egdon Heath gives the total story a new ecocritical dimension. Clym and Diggory Venn finally remain to work for the amelioration of the Heath while Wildeve and Eustacia Vye who hate the Heath are dead. By creating distance from Nature and nourishing hate for Nature true happiness is not possible. This message is prevalent in *The Return of the Native*. We have seen in *The Christmas Carol* too the sufferings of the childhood of Dickens are at the root of all cravings for human values expressed in the novels of Dickens. In *Christmas Carol* these benevolent qualities are related to Nature and the focus on the harmony between man and nature is very clear. Hardy shows the tragic consequences of the disruption of such bonds between Man and Nature in his *The Return of the Native*.

In Hardy’s fiction, nature functions as a mysterious force. Sometimes it seems to help human beings, at others it seems to turn against them. Virginia Woolf (Wright1961:173) says, Hardy “feels in it a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain the indifferent spectator of human fortunes.” While talking about ‘The Return of the Native,’ John W. Cunliffe (1969:219) says, “It presents [Hardy’s] conception of Nature as a mysterious force, alien and often apparently hostile to man, without sympathy for his desires and ambitions, and without pity for his

weaknesses.” This study concerns itself with discussing the mysterious force of Nature in Hardy’s novel; *‘The Return of the Native’* where Man seems to be in conflict with Nature which becomes a form of fate having cruel, indifferent and sympathetic moods. Also, this study shows how the characters react differently towards nature, and the immense influence of nature on the relationships and circumstances of the characters and how nature is humanized. The destructive mood of nature is represented in Egdon heath which is formidably antagonistic to human beings. John Holloway (1962:266) observes that Hardy’s characters are “governed by and subdued to their environment.” The inhabitants of Egdon heath, according to Lance Butler (1978:33), “react individually with one another and directly with (it).” Nature shows her dark side and her hostility to Eustacia Vye. Eustacia who was born in the busy port town of Budmouth and transplanted to live in the Heath with her grandfather, despises it, and searches for a way to escape.

To Eustacia, Egdon Heath is an enemy especially in the scene of the storm where the heavy rain seems to wish to destroy her. While walking towards Rainbarrow, at the end of the novel, she stumbles “over twisted furze-roots, tufts of rushes, or oozing lumps of fleshy fungi, which at this season lay scattered about the heath like the rotten liver and lungs of some colossal animal” (Hardy1978:420). Eustacia’s stumbling is because the rain hides completely the light of the moon and stars. Walter Allen (1954:251) says, “[Hardy] is intent to show that the stars in their courses fight against the aspiring, the man or woman who would rise above the common lot through greatness of spirit, of ambition, or passion.” And when Eustacia pauses, brooding, at the top of the Rainbarrow the world around her and her mind is equal in their turbulence.

Clym Yeobright, the “Native” of the novel’s title, who worked as a diamond merchant in Paris, but comes home when he realizes that his ambition is not towards material wealth, is pursued by Eustacia, and eventually marries her, but their marriage turns sour when her desire to move to Paris opposes his plan to stay on the Heath and teach school. Clym is defeated by the Heath in the same way as Eustacia. It causes him to lose all his ambition for wealth and social advancement when he returns to it from abroad. Hillis Miller (1970:91-2) says, Clym “reaches a point of wise indifference in which he can be happy in the monotonous and conscious action of furze-cutting.” Nature’s cruelty appears when Clym is about to meet death in book five. Though he is not against nature, he feels unrest in it since it is indifferent. Rosemarie Morgan (1988:64) says, “Despite his affection for the heathlands that are barely visible to his increasingly failing sight, the placid Clym is patently incompatible with the

Titanic force and grandeur of Egdon's Atlantean presence. Or ... he is of no more account (to it) than an insect... a mere parasite of the heath."

Nature is also cruel to Mrs. Yeobright, a proper, class-conscious, proud woman and Clym's mother. She is left alone on the heath after her futile visit to the unhappy couple, Clym and Eustacia. Egdon Heath represents the blind forces of nature. It becomes the symbol of modern man's hopelessness. It prepares the reader for the tragedy that is to come when Hardy (1978:55) describes it as "a lonely face suggesting tragical possibilities." Clym's understanding of the heath enables him to see the grimness of the general human situation and makes him realize man's insignificance in comparison to Nature. Ernest Baker (1938:36) comments "The chief character ... is embodied this time in Egdon Heath, the dark, immemorial environment whose influences control obscurely the lives and destinies of those who dwell contentedly amid its gorsy wilderness or feel themselves cruelly out of their element. Egdon Heath symbolizes the whole cosmic order, in which man is but an insignificant particle." Referring to the role played by Egdon Heath, Walter Allen (1954:249) observes, "The heath is not just so much scenic backcloth to the action, it is ... an extended image of the nature of which man is part, in which he is caught, which conditions his very being, and which cares nothing for him. His life in relation to it is as ephemeral as the bonfires the peasants make of the heath furze."

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