

Ecocritical Analysis of “Tintern Abbey” “To A Skylark”, and “Lispeth”: Impact of Nature on Human Mind and Physique

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Abstract

Eco-critical literary writing is a fairly new trend in the world. However, even before the concept of ecocriticism began to develop, famous Western poets and writers started producing their works that dealt with the issues of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism sheds light on the relationship of humans with the natural world and the animal world and discusses issues related to this relationship. In this study, William Wordsworth's poem “Tintern Abbey,” Percy Bysshe Shelley's “To a Skylark,” and Rudyard Kipling's short story “Lispeth” have been taken into consideration for an eco-critical analysis. This study has tried to investigate how nature can impact the physique and soul of human beings and how ecocritical literature projects the impact and delineates nature's relation with humans. To conduct the study, the concept of ecocriticism and its development have been discussed initially. Eventually, the texts chosen for this study are analyzed and discussed to examine and determine the impact of nature on the human physique and mind. Besides the textual analysis, some empirical research findings of the related field wherein nature's impact on humans is studied have been shown and discussed at different stages of this study to justify whether the poet and writers' claim of the positive effect of nature on humans is true.

Keywords: *ecocriticism, human, nature, body, mind*

Introduction

For the biophilic aspect, humans tend to connect with nature and other living creatures of nature. This tendency of humans is innate, which humans show for their interest and survival. “Beyond its physical and material offerings, the natural world possesses a remarkable influence on human psychology, shaping emotions, perceptions, and even personalities.” (Guo, 2024, p. 747). The tranquility and beauty of nature, from verdant forests and placid lakeshores to expansive mountain ranges and colorful meadows, continue to captivate us even as urbanization and technological advancements continue to impact our day-to-day existence.

Though the advancement of contemporary technology has made people's lives easier by enabling them to use the Internet to meet their everyday requirements and accomplish the goal of staying at home, there are drawbacks as well. People's daily exercise requirements are declining even as they benefit from the convenience of technology. Parks, forests, and outdoor playgrounds are examples of natural settings that offer special chances for physical exercise, sensory stimulation, and new experiences. Additionally, stress reduction, greater happiness and life satisfaction, and psychiatric recovery have all been connected to exposure to nature.

People nowadays are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other psychological issues as a result of the competitiveness and stress of urban life and employment, which accumulates over time as they live in increasingly separated habitats from nature. “Natural environments not only have a positive impact on mental health and human emotions but also increase life satisfaction and happiness.” (Guo, p. 749). In particular, the clinical treatment of individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by modifying their natural surroundings to reduce their symptoms is one of the most notable real-world uses of studies looking at how the environment affects mental health.

Human personality traits are positively influenced by the natural environment, and positive personality qualities can also positively influence the natural environment. The natural environment fosters the growth of positive

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personality traits, including curiosity, independence, empathy, and social responsibility, by offering chances for learning, exploration, and time spent close to nature. As a result, fostering children's engagement with and exploration of nature in their home and school settings can lay a solid basis for their future social relationships and general well-being.

There are currently two types of eco-critical literary writings: one that is created without taking the concept of ecocriticism into consideration, and the other stream of eco-critical writing is a serious and conscious endeavor of the writers who consciously create literary works that address the issue of ecocriticism and are influenced by the concept of ecocriticism. The first category of eco-critical writing includes the works chosen for this study.

In this study, it has been made to determine whether there are positive effects of nature on the human mind and body as it is delineated in some chosen literary writings. To conduct the study, poems by British Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley and a short story by Rudyard Kipling have been selected. In the course of the study, Wordsworth's (2003) poem "Tintern Abbey," Shelley's (1820) "To a Skylark," and Kipling's (2018) short story "Lispeth" are analyzed. This study also endeavors to examine how eco-critical literature projects the human-nature relationship and how addressing and delineating issues of nature in literature helps us to be aware of the human-nature relationship and the positive effects of nature on the human physique and soul.

Research Problem

The research problem of this study is to examine and determine whether the effect of nature on the human body and soul is factual and whether the selected texts of eco-critical literature successfully reflect that nature has certain positive physical and psychological effects on humans.

Ecocriticism Explained

The term "eco-criticism" was originally used by William Rueckert in 1978. The idea was initially presented at a Western Literature Association (WLA) meeting in the late 1970s, and it started to take shape in the 1990s.

Even when nature is at the center of our conversation, ecocriticism—an essentially postmodern approach to literary texts—intersects with political criticism. Ecocriticism is a critical approach to literature and culture that places an emphasis on how humans interact with the natural environment. It began in the 1990s as concerns over environmental degradation and the impact of human activity on the planet grew. (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

The definition of ecocriticism given by Lawrence Buell (1995) is "the study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis." (p. 138) The relationship between literature and the environment, as well as the part that nature plays in the creation of literature that focuses on environmental preservation and highlights its significance to humankind, are given top priority in Lawrence's concept of ecocriticism. Again, Rueckert defines the concept of ecocriticism in the following manner: "the application of ecology and ecological principles to the scholarly study of literary works" (Rueckert, 1978, as cited in Jimmy, 2015, p. 370).

Fawarah et al. (2023) quote Singh, who explains the concept of ecocriticism in the following manner:

Ecocriticism delineates nature and human behavior toward it at a certain time in the history of literature. The study of the link between literary and physical settings is known as ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a literary approach that focuses on the environment. Through literary works, ecocriticism tries to bring attention to the need to reassess man's connection with his environment. (Singh, 2019, as cited in Fawarah et al., 2023, p. 784).

Ecocritics study how the natural world is portrayed and interacted with in literature and other cultural forms. In addition to thinking about how literature might be utilized to promote sustainability and ecological consciousness, they are interested in examining how environmental challenges and concerns are mirrored in literary works. To enhance literary analysis, ecocriticism also highlights the value of interdisciplinary approaches, referencing disciplines like biology, ecology, and environmental studies. It aims to investigate the intricate and ever-changing interactions that exist between people and the natural world, as well as how social, cultural, and historical elements influence these interactions.

The significance of environmental justice is one of ecocriticism's central tenets. Ecocritics are concerned with how underprivileged people are disproportionately affected by environmental challenges and concerns, as well as how literature may be used to advance environmental and social justice.

Numerous disciplines, such as literature, cultural studies, and environmental studies, have benefited from ecocriticism. It has been adapted to various cultural forms like film and art and utilized to study a wide variety of literary works, from modern eco-fiction to classic literature.

Discussion

It is clear from the analysis of the selected portion of Wordsworth's (2003) poem "Tintern Abbey" below that Wordsworth is an avid admirer and connoisseur of nature. He also views nature as his mentor, protector, and nurse. The poet acknowledges the influence of nature on his authentic and pure thoughts. The poet's affinity with nature is reflected in the poem's subsequent words, which also demonstrate his convictions and beliefs regarding this relationship:

Therefore, am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (Wordsworth, 2003, Lines, 104-113)

The following lines of the poem "Tintern Abbey" allow the readers to understand how nature shapes the mind of the poet and helps the poet develop his intellectual state of mind and a mature understanding of human civilization and the world around him:

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.—And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (Wordsworth, 2003, lines 90-104)

When the researchers of the concerned field are consulted, the positive impact of nature on the human mind and thought is found. "Experimental studies have shown that spending time in nature improves memory function, directs attention, increases neural activity associated with deep meditative states and daydreaming, improves child development, increases intelligence and academic performance, and lowers levels of arousal and frustration." (Christiana et al., 2023, p. 159).

Once again, the lines below in "Tintern Abbey" make it obvious that the poet views nature as the source of sustenance for his mind and soul:

The picture of the mind revives again:
While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. (Wordsworth, 2003, lines 63-67)

The poem "Tintern Abbey" lets readers know and realize nature's deep and long-lasting influence on the poet. The positive, beneficial, and sweet impact of nature on the poet's physique and soul is distinct and worthy of note, especially in the poet's bad times. The poet also liberally declares the debt he owes to nature, as is seen in the following lines:

Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt In the blood, and felt along the heart; (Wordsworth, 2003, lines, 24-29)

The authenticity of the statement of the poet given through the above lines of the poem is justified and supported by real-life research of researchers that is to be noted in the following quotation: “Exposure to nature-based components and PA has long been associated with improved mental and emotional well-being, including increases in positive engagement, revitalization, relaxation, self-esteem, body image, energy, affective response, self-reported health, and health-related quality of life.” (Christiana et al., p. 159). A further quotation from the just-mentioned same group of researchers seems relevant as regards nature’s impact on the human body, “Nature and nature-based PA is associated with decreased heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, body mass index (BMI), and improved heart rate variability.” (Christiana et al., p. 159).

Additionally, in “Tintern Abbey” the poet reveals another aspect of nature’s influence on him, which is more sublime and serene. This special influence is on the poet's spirit and soul, which creates ‘a blessed mood’ that justifies and rationalizes his mundane and harsh life on earth and lets the poet live his life by neutralizing the mental and physical pain and agony. The part of the poem mentioned below successfully tells about the special effect of nature on the poet:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (Wordsworth, 2003, lines, 36-50)

The following quotation of researchers regarding experimental research hypotheses can be taken into consideration to justify what Wordsworth says in the above-mentioned part of his poem regarding nature’s positive effect on him: “Hypotheses posit that engaging with nature improves mental and physical health via psychobiological pathways associated with changes in neuroendocrine, immune, and autonomic nervous system functions.” (Cristiana et al., p. 155)

P. B. Shelley (1820), in his poem “To a Skylark” shows that a small skylark's contribution to the poet's creation and creativity is significant and praiseworthy. The lines of the poem quoted below tell about the contribution of the bird, skylark:

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound,
Better than all treasures
That in books are found,
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground! (Lines, 96-100)

By asking the skylark to teach him and the world the secret of happiness and peace, the poet in “To a Skylark” asserts his view that the joy and harmony that the skylark possesses are something to be desired and healthy for the world:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then, as I am listening now. (Shelley, 1820, lines, 101-105)

In “To a Skylark” the poet’s praise for the heavenly light and its impact on the earth and thereby on humans is found in the lines below:

All the earth and air

With thy voice is loud,
As, when night is bare,
From one lonely cloud

The moon rains out her beams, and Heaven is overflow'd. (Shelley, 1820, lines, 26-30)

Now, as the short story "Lispeth" by Kipling (2018) is analyzed, the effect of nature on the human body and soul is evident. As the line of the story below is examined, it is seen that nature has a certain corporeal impact: "When a Hill girl grows lovely, she is worth traveling fifty miles over bad ground to look upon." (Kipling, p. 1)

Nature helps a person to be physically fit and strong. Lispeth's habit of walking long distances is found in the story of "Lispeth," which apprises the readers about the strength and physical fitness of Lispeth: "She did not walk in the manner of English ladies—a mile and a half out, and a ride back again. She covered between twenty and thirty miles in her little constitutionals, all about and about, between Kotgarth and Narkunda" (Kipling, p. 2).

As Lispeth grew up in the warm, simple, and pure lap and the bounty of nature, Lispeth's naivete and her simplicity are easily and concretely detected in the story of "Lispeth": "This is my husband. I found him on the Bagi Road. He has hurt himself. We will nurse him, and when he is well, your husband shall marry him to me." (Kipling, p. 2). The following quotation further proves Lispeth's simplicity and her conviction: "Being a savage by birth, she took no trouble to hide her feelings, and the Englishman was amused" (Kipling, p. 3).

The honesty and moral purity of Lispeth were beyond question. Lispeth's character is imbued with the purity and frankness of nature, and she was quite surprised and in a perplexed state when she discovered that both the Englishman and the chaplain's wife were lying to her. The following statement of Lispeth illustrates this fact: "How can what he and you said be untrue?" asked Lispeth (Kipling, p. 5).

The honesty, moral strength, and frankness of the people who grow up and live in the lap of nature are truly reflected in the statement of Lispeth: "I am going back to my people," said she. "You have killed Lispeth. There is only old Jadeh's daughter left—the daughter of a Pahari and the servant of Tarka Devi. You are all liars, you English." (Kipling, p. 5)

As regards the positive mental and physical development of the characters that have been analyzed and discussed in the texts of three world-famous and popular British poets and writers, the following quotation of health and nature researchers appears relevant and justifying: "Hypotheses posit that engaging with nature improves mental and physical health via psychobiological pathways associated with changes in neuroendocrine, immune, and autonomic nervous system functions." (Christiana et al., p. 155).

As social relationships impact our overall health status, and again, this social relationship is enhanced by our spending time in the lap of nature, we have to consider spending time in nature's touch. The following quotation should be noted.

Our social relationships play a major role in our overall health. Cross-sectional studies indicate that spending time in nature fosters social capital and social support that a person receives from others. This may be because time spent in nature provides opportunities and activities for socialization and formation of social networks. (Christiana et al., p. 159)

In fact, without a meaningful connection between humans and nature and humans' exposure to the natural world, a healthy life for humans is next to impossible. For this, even the writers like Edward Thomas and T.S. Eliot were vocal and were conscious about the human-nature relationship. "Both Edward Thomas and T. S. Eliot have shown deep anxiety over disruptive changes in the human-nature relationship, and Edward Thomas appeals to have meaningful contact with the natural world." (Habib, 2020, as cited in Fawareh et al., 2023, p. 784).

Conclusion

Finally, after the examination, debate, and discussions of the three works by two British poets and one storyteller, it can be deduced that nature benefits human bodies and minds. Wordsworth and Shelley, two British romantic poets, as well as Kipling, a writer of short stories, were able to effectively illustrate the positive effects of nature on people. The good benefits of nature on humanity that poets and authors portray in their works are consistent with the scientific research findings of certain empirical researchers. Wordsworth and Shelley apprise readers of their own experiences and relationships with nature, as well as the psychological and bodily effects that nature had on them. When Shelley had intense pleasure when interacting with the skylark and was rewarded with mental fulfillment and creative force, Wordsworth was physically and mentally nourished by nature. Wordsworth views nature as his close companion and savior during difficult times since it has a constant, calming, and majestic effect on him. Nature seems to be a friend, mentor, healer, and source of inspiration for both poets. Kipling uses Lispeth to illustrate the positive impacts of nature. Lispeth represented the best qualities of nature. In addition to growing up as a very attractive,

physically powerful, and robust person, Lispeth was endowed with all the positive qualities of nature, such as simplicity, naivety, honesty, and courage.

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