

Eco-criticism and Nature Writing .The Trails of the American Approaches

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Abstract

Ecocritical attention has primarily focused on nineteenth– and twentieth-century British and American texts, predominantly non-fiction nature writing, and also nature-conscious fiction and poetry. The paper attempts to shed light to a series of puzzling but response-inciting questions regarding the American gendered approaches to nature, and the niche that Ecocriticism occupies in mainstream American Literature. The study is conceived as a merging of theoretical arguments and textual study. The theoretical part attempts to shed light on such issues as: Ecocritical traits and approaches; European vs. American approaches to nature; and Nature and Women's writing .The focus of the textual study are 10 American Nature Writing non-fiction classics and illustrated considerations of the main topics handled in these works. The study seeks to show that though ecocriticism is attempting to break new trails by going through the untrammelled nature-centered works, humans are failing to go within the uncharted depths of their spirit and consciousness. In terms of distinguishing in between the male gendered nature narrative and the female gendered nature narrative, the paper comes to the conclusion that there is a close connection between the systematic undervaluing of women's writing and the exploitation and abuse of the earth. While male nature writers mostly develop themes such as: the austerity of nature and the wish to explore and alter landscapes to suit the "human design"; the idea of hunting for a "trophy"; grandfather wisdom; wilderness and governmental institutions; earth as a religion, female-centered approaches to nature are marked by the occurrence of such themes as: moral –considerability of non-human beings; disapproval of economism; the bond to the land; anthropogenic destructive tendencies; nature/self consciousness. Nevertheless, although male writers fall into the snares of economism and exploring as a way of controlling, they still implicitly share women's consideration of the unbreakable bond to the earth and their awareness of the impactive immediacy to humankind.

Keywords: ecofeminism, nature writing, female approaches to nature, consciousness.

Introduction

Ecocritical attention has primarily focused on nineteenth– and twentieth-century British and American texts, predominantly non-fiction nature writing, and also nature-conscious fiction and poetry. While first coming to grips with this topic, a series of puzzling but response-inciting questions came into my mind: What is ecocriticism; How can we grapple the interweaving of ecocriticism and nature writing; Are nature and culture interlaced or just separate sides of a dualistic construct; Can we highlight any topical similarities existent in American Nature Writing ; Is women's sensibility to nature just a social/gender construct or a justification emanating out of the tormented female spirit ? Through this paper I will modestly try to provide answers to some of these questions.

My approach to this topic was intended to be impartial and objective. The paper is conceived as a merging of theoretical arguments and textual study. The theoretical part attempts to shed light on such issues as: Ecocritical traits and approaches; European vs. American approaches to nature; and Nature and Women's writing .The focus of the textual study have been 10 American Nature Writing non-fiction classics and illustrated considerations of the main topics handled in these works. While writing about the approach to the topic I purposefully used the word "intended impartial" to refer to my attitude. After a thorough analysis of the classics I almost confidently (but subjectively you may say)came to the conclusion that females (writers or not) have historically been more nature –sensible and environment –conscious.

Ecocriticism –definitions, traits and approaches

The word "ecocriticism", traces back to William Rucker's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" and apparently lay dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting, when Cheryl Glotfelty revived the term and urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that 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 in his Past President's speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism."

On the last day of the 1993 WLA conference in Wichita, at the end of a session entitled, "Ecocriticism: Reimagining the Way We Write about the West", as people were streaming toward the doors, an older gentleman, clearly befuddled, tried to raise his voice above the haste: "But what IS ecocriticism?" It seems that few people heard him but those who did, recognized a voice crying out in the wilderness. O'Grady and Branch immediately exchanged looks of: "Hey, that fellow deserves an answer—we all do!" This gave space to several polemics focusing on a proper definition of ecocriticism and the consideration of its interdisciplinarity.

Simply defined,

ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty, 1996).

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

Quite puzzling definitions of ecocriticism came even through the daring anthologies of the time. In the same year of Cheryl Glotfelty's *Ecocriticism Reader*, Lawrence Buell published *The Environmental Imagination*, where he defines "ecocriticism" as "[a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis." (Buell, 1995:430). According to a much simpler but inclusive definition ecocriticism is "the work of scholars who "would rather be hiking." It speaks for nature, wildness, and the West, while conflating these terms." (Thoreau, 1906).

Through ecocriticism we do not just analyze nature in literature; we move toward a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans' conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment. Topical considerations of gender, race, class, and ethnicity have fixed themselves as positions within ecocriticism's inherited cultural construction. So ecocriticism is may also certainly be considered a part of cultural studies, since it focuses on literary expression of human experience primarily in a naturally and consequently in a culturally shaped world: the joys of abundance, sorrows of deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence, and fears of loss and disaster.

Ecocritics and theorists try to provide answers to questions like the following: Is "literature and environment" a sub-discipline of literary studies, or an extension out of literary studies into environmental sciences?; In what ways has literacy affected humankind's relationship to the natural world?; How has the concept of wilderness changed over time?; To what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?; What role does the physical setting play a work etc.

Ecocriticism has mainly been practiced in Anglophone tradition of literary criticism. Chief among the British ecocritics is Jonathan Bate. In his book *Romantic Ecology*, he firstly argued that writing about nature was important in its own right and that nature could be considered political in a broader sense. Since 1991, Bate has refined his thesis, stressing now not so much the red-green conflict as the need for texts to refer to something "out there", to the otherness of the natural world which fills us with humanity. In America the "backpacking school of criticism", appealed to the instinctive American love of the frontier and the wild west. Native American writers were thought to be in touch with their surroundings and served as touchstones for library-bound academics.

Ecocriticism is confronted from the start with a spectrum of different and not always compatible approaches to the environment: the "discursive construction", which foregrounds the extent to which the very distinction of nature and culture is itself dependent on specific cultural values; the "aesthetic construction", which places value on nature for its

beauty, complexity, or wildness; the “political construction”, which emphasizes the power interests that inform any valuation or devaluation of nature; and the “scientific construction”, which aims at the description of the functioning of natural systems. Within ecocriticism itself we face a distinction between “social ecology” and “deep ecology”. According to the former it is ultimately human needs and societal well-being which must determine our approach to nature, whereas according to the latter, nature has value in and of itself, independently of its functions for human society .

Ecocriticism has currency within The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), established in 1992 at a special session of a Western Literature Association conference in Reno, Nevada. ASLE publishes ASLE News (biannually) and, since 1993, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE), the official biannual journal.

Initially, ecocritics focused on “nature writing” in specifically “environmental texts”. But Lawrence Buell set an interest in an “environmentally oriented work”. At bottom, ecocriticism needs to import scientific authority in order to combat two positions 1) that culture can be a refuge from nature, and 2) that nature is merely a cultural construction.

As already mentioned in the first part, ecocriticism analyzes the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, how the concept of “nature” is defined, what values are assigned to it and why, and the way in which the relationship between humans and nature is envisioned. An important issue of ecocritical focus is representation. There are several models of representation in ecocritical essays. The three main ones are: the “narrative scholarship” model, the “stewardship outlook” and the “conversion narrative model”.

Ecocritics believe that part of the trouble with wilderness, is a result of language and rhetoric. There may or may not be such a thing as wilderness, but it is certainly constructed with words in essays remaining within the “prison house of language”, by failing to go to the grounds. Several established ecocritics like John Elder or Glen Love have moved away from the preservationist outlook, toward an outlook often portrayed as “stewardship” (Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 1996), shifting away from an “aggressive anti-anthropocentrism” towards an exploration of “what it means to be human”. The practice of taking established nature writers to be reliable theorists on nature writing, and of importing their language into the critical vocabulary, is referred to as the “conversion narrative model.” The main controversy still running in ecocritical circles is one between the “anthropocentric” and “ecocentric” theories of representation. The first one conceives everything in the universe in terms of human values while the second assumes that only by protecting the environment, can we make it useful to human beings.

Ecocriticism as a research seems at first sight to lend itself to the construction of interdisciplinary bridges between science and literary or cultural criticism. Nonetheless some sectors of the green movement consider themselves as antagonistic to science, in perceiving it one of the root causes of current ecosystem degradation in its historical conjunction with technology, industrialism, and urbanization. The interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism and its influence have gone so far as to apply environmental terminology to literary texts in highly metaphorical ways. Notions such as ecology, energy, resources, and scarcity have been transferred to texts to the point that literary and environmental ones almost blur their borderlines. Such is the case in William Rueckert’s characterization of green plants as “nature’s poets” and poems as “green plants” among us. Another dimension of the interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism is the historical one.

The real traits of ecocriticism come into view by further distinguishing it from the other critical approaches and disciplines. So, if in the literary theory “the world” is synonymous with society—the social sphere, ecocriticism expands the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere. If science delivers value-neutral descriptions of nature, ecocriticism merges interest in the aesthetic artifacts with criticism toward the ideologically, politically and economically-framed values. According to Michael Cohen the future of ecocriticism will rely on a more analytical method in three ways :1) it will focus on place and region, 2) it will adduce science, 3) and it will include critique of global paradigms scientific and cultural.

Nature writing

A seemingly straightforward question which has been drawing the attention of literary critics, ecocritics and naturalists for several decades is: “What is nature?” In the Encyclopedia Britannica¹ the concept of nature merges its “creative and controlling force” with “the original simplified mode of life. While Encarta Encyclopedia Deluxe stresses the fact

¹ Nature -1: the inherent character or basic constitution of a person or thing : essence, 2: a creative and controlling force in the universe 7: humankind’s original or natural condition b : a simplified mode of life resembling this condition, 9 : natural scenery. Encyclopedia Britannica 2004, Deluxe ed. 2004

that “nature controls the phenomena of the physical world independently of human volition or intervention” and intertwines it with the consideration of nature as “a basic state of existence untouched or uninfluenced by civilization.”¹ Shaped through a series of encounters with the natural world, nature has been the focus of a seemingly late developing genre “nature writing”.

According to the American ecocriticist, Thomas J. Lyon, nature writing as a genre “includes virtually all instances of texts that contain the potential of merging scientifically correct information with a literary design, enabling the rise of a new, subjective interpretation of “hard facts” (Lyon T., 1989:7). The most recent definition coming through the articles of Ecocriticism Reader is one of nature writing as “literary ecocriticism, which embraces both literature and environmental consciousness.” In a presentation at the 1995 ASLE conference, John Elder summed up traditionally defined nature writing as “a form of the personal, reflective essay grounded in attentiveness to the natural world and an appreciation of science but also open to the spiritual meaning and intrinsic value of nature.” (Armbruster, K, 2001)

Nature writing as a genre, developed in the last two centuries in Europe and the United States as an unintended by-product of the Industrial Age. This genre emerged at a time when “the autonomous life world was reduced to mechanical models of physical reality as exemplified in the popular metaphors such as “spaceship earth” or “man the machine.” (Flynn, 1994)

The fact that this kind of writing has received critical attention only recently, may lead us to assume that it is a relatively new kind of genre. In fact writing that takes into account the impact nature and place have on culture, is one of the oldest and perhaps most singular threads in American writing. Melville with *Moby Dick*, Thoreau and novelists such as Willa Cather, John Steinbeck and William Faulkner, may come quickly to our minds. What we can confidently state is that the Native Americans were the major contributors to the development of “nature writing”. They respected and revered the land, the environment and the human interrelatedness to that environment in ways foreign to the European immigrants.

A text falls under the category of “nature writing” if:

- ❖ it is based on immediate, scientifically apt observations of nature.
- ❖ the first persona narrator is at the same time the actual observer in natural environment.
- ❖ it directs the reader towards aesthetic appreciation of nature.
- ❖ it is a non-fiction work that is lyrical, informational and apolitical.
- ❖ it has rural, wilderness areas or quasi-wild borders as the usual subject.
- ❖ it is exploratory and reflective (it learns about and from nature).
- ❖ it is relational (about the interconnections and interrelationships that form our world).
- ❖ it is positive (Despite the challenges, difficulties and tragedies in the world, there is inherent hope for changes).
- ❖ considers the fate of humanity and nature as inseparable.

According to an American ecocriticist, Thomas J. Lyon “nature writing must have three main dimensions to it: natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature.” (Lyon, T., 1989). Patrick D. Murphy has offered another taxonomy which suggests a broader category of “nature-oriented literature” that includes Lyon’s nature writing as well as much more. To Murphy the category of “nature writing” is only one of four “modes” of nature-oriented literature. Other modes are “nature literature,” environmental writing and environmental literature. Nowadays, nature writing is mistakenly being considered as a hybrid of the conservationist writing voicing an unrecoverable destruction of nature and of humanity and the alienation of man in the society. Central themes of “nature writing” include: landscape, animal and plant life, taxonomies of natural objects, reflections of pastoral or agrarian life, fantasies of the Golden Age or Eden.

Women’s nature writing and ecofeminism

Before the current renaissance and blossoming of women’s “nature writing”, the genre was understood to be largely the province of men. In any collection of nature writing published before the early ‘90’s, male authors outnumbered

¹ Encarta Encyclopedia Deluxe. Microsoft, 2002

the female ones: Great American Nature Writing(1950) five to twenty-seven, Our Natural World (1969),ten to eighty –nine, The Norton Book of Nature Writing(1990) fifteen to ninety-four.

An extreme case of gender discriminations was that of Mabel Osgood Wright. The most influential woman in the Bird Conservation Movement, and the first to create a bird sanctuary owned by the State Audubon Society she was the author of a book *The Friendship of Nature* which was out of print for half a century. It was not until the last two decades of the 20th century that scholars began to recover and draw attention to women's writing as distinct from men's.

Some of the main traits of women's nature writing include:

Homecentredness. It is one of the main traits of women's "nature writing". In women's nature writing we find a tradition that "sees the natural world as an integral part of everyday existence, where the garden outside the front door supplies an experience as immediate and direct as the mountains in the distance"(Edwards, Wolfe, eds.2001).The basic thread running through women's nature writing is the act of "homing in one spot, living with it through the seasons until the rocks, flowers, trees, insects, birds, deer and coyote are family."(Anderson et.al, 2002). These arguments are proved through the frequent occurrence of the word "home" in nature writing books :Homing with the birds(Gene Stratton Porter 1991) Home to wilderness(Sally Carrigar 1973), Island, the Universe, Home(Gretel Ehrlich '91), Always coming home(Ursula K. Le Guin, 1985)

Freedom in Nature .To women nature writers, nature meant freedom from the domestic sphere, expansion of the concept of home to encompass the wider world, and being away from a setting where their roles have been so narrowly defined. Terry Tempest Williams was arrested for trespassing on military property while entering the Nevada Test Site to protest against the nuclear testing leading to the cancer deaths of many women. She was put on a bus with other arrested protestors and was let out short of the nearest town. In "The Clan of One-Breasted Women" epilogue to her 1991 book *Refuge* she writes: "The officials thought it were a cruel joke to leave us stranded in the desert with no way to get home. What they didn't realize was that we were home, soul-centered and strong, women who recognized the sweet smell of sage as fuel for our spirits."(Williams, 1991).

Irrational Writing .This trait emphasizes reliance on modes of knowing the world that are centered in relationships, in the body, in intuition, mysticism, the heart as much as in the rational."Women are considered as writing too personally, as being sentimental and as anthropomorphizing their subjects."(Edwards et al.,2002)

Capacity for Intuitive Judgment: Women nature writers are to be praised not for seeing the world in the way men see it, but for their capacity to see it differently and bring to this new undertaking their intuitive judgment which runs against the reductionist view of the world. They have cultivated a feminine voice, bringing together the qualities of receptivity, gentleness, appreciation for beauty, relationality and reverence for life.

Observing women's nature writing in sequence through time, we can discern some trends suggestive of the way their awareness has developed along with the world they live in .The first awareness is the progressive depletion and impoverishment of the natural world. Caroline Kirkland records "the clearing" at the Michigan frontier in the 1840's and Gene Stratton Porter laments the destruction of trees and game populations during the 1860's.

The second one is the growing identification with the earth itself. The earliest women writers described nature as existing "out there" separate from themselves. A subtle change occurred around the end of the 19th century and this was in the works of Gene Stratton Porter, Sally Carrigar etc. The former, voices her closeness to nature and considers the birds she grew up with as kin, the latter finds a real family in the wild creatures that came to her cabin in Sequoia National Park.

The concept of seeing nature as kin soon developed into 3)seeing it as "self". In her story "The Land", Mary Austin writes : "If the desert were a woman, I know well what like she would be: deep breasted, broad in the hips, tawny, with tawny hair."(Austin, 1987).Terry Tempest Williams similarly writes in *Refuge*: "There is musculature in dunes. And they are female. Sensuous curves. ..Breasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis. They are the natural shapes of Earth. Let me lie naked and disappear."(30)

The awareness that women's oppression is related to the earth's is known as Ecofeminism. It was the French scholar Francois d'Eaubonne to coin the term in 1974, but in the early twentieth century it was Mary Austin to make the connection between patriarchal oppression of women and that of nature by arguing that liberating women would also free nature. Susan Griffin exposed to the light in 1978 a world hierarchy of domination and control with men at the top, women and nature at the bottom. So there is a close connection between the systematic undervaluing of women's writing and the exploitation and abuse of the earth.

Nature writing classics

Nature writing is a genre of literature that has developed out of close observation and respect for the natural world. Generally, writing in this genre tends toward experiential expressions of the author, narrator's encounters with his/her environment. Having its beginnings in the reflective natural history essay, the genre has broadened to encompass other works that take the environment as a central concern but may not stem from field experiences in the wild, or from reflections on nature. These works are more often referred to as literature of the environment. Two key authors are recognized as the grandfathers of nature writing in the United States: Henry David Thoreau who lived on the East Coast and John Muir who lived on the West Coast.

III.I Henry David Thoreau-Walden, or Life in the Woods

In 1854 Thoreau published the book, *Walden or Life in the Woods*, the wellspring of American nature writing and a core text of the conservation movement. Arguing that the divine exists in all people, but can be perceived in all of nature, Thoreau considered the environment as the pleasantest of companions. Thoreau was not influenced by Darwin, or such conception as the struggle for existence: "Nature to him was not red in tooth and claw with raving; it was a gentle, friendly, peaceful, alternative to the mean greed and futile toil of man." (UU World, 2004). He wrote in a journalistic style, his descriptive prose gliding into a narrative. Considered today as a spiritual autobiography, *Walden* addresses our condition by its complex interiority, sensory perception and reportage on the natural world.

The themes unfolding through this work are:

1. Man as Part of Nature - Thoreau counters the separation of man from society by conceiving of man as a part of nature. The animals give him companionship and accept him as a familiar part of their environment to the point that he reverses the historically set traditions of man dominating over nature and considers himself as "caged by the birds, by the charm of nature.", "An abode without birds is like meat without seasoning Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds, not by having imprisoned one, but by having caged myself near them." (Thoreau, 2004). Through his life in the woods, and deriving intellectual stimulation from plants and animals, Thoreau demonstrates that man can live successfully only in the midst of nature: "What is man, but a mass of thawing clay?" (Thoreau, 2004: 246)

Nature is empathetic to him, waiting to blow its coldest winds after Thoreau builds his chimney and plasters his walls. In the cradle of nature he does not feel solitary and enjoys companionship more than ever

This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star...What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds nearer. (Thoreau, 2004:130).

The Walden Pond is described as mirror. Thoreau's period of melancholy and doubt occurs during the winter when the pond is frozen and nature is silenced, and his joy and exultation is reflected in the thawing of the lake and the growth of new life in spring.

2. Spiritual Rebirth Reflected in Nature and the Seasons –This theme develops along its literal and metaphorical course. Literally speaking the author represents the ever-going and ever-regenerating cycle of life, winter leaves its space to spring, the storm to the sun. Metaphorically speaking the author refers to the slumbering of mankind and the need for a spiritual awakening.

1)The metaphor of rebirth is the author's means of convincing his readers to seek new perspectives on themselves and the world. The cycle of the seasons, with the rebirth of the winter-dormant pond, animals and plants in the spring, functions as the promise of an eventual spiritual birth of humans. Morning is also considered as the time of great self-awareness:

"When the wild river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked a dead, if they had been slumbering in their graves, as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality. All things must live in such a light."(252)

2) Thoreau compares human self to a fathomless pond, to be explored only by the side of nature: "There might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life who take their own view always; who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and muddy."(141-142) Describing the bug which hatched out of a wooden table after decades, he hopes that someday, even if not immediately such a rebirth will occur within human society.

3. The Destructive Force of Industrial Progress- Thoreau began his life at Walden when the Industrial Revolution was in full force. Choosing to transfer there on Independence Day voiced the fact that he was in search of the real independence, in search of the real self. The impact of the Industrial Revolution upon life is best illustrated in Walden by the locomotive which passes daily by the pond, its whistles and rumbling contrasting with the natural sounds of the birds. People are beginning to be governed by their self-made instruments: "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us"(90) "But lo! Men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry, is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper."(85)

According to Thoreau wilderness is the preservation of the world, man is superior in destruction terms, and spiritual tranquility goes through non-interference on nature and natural freedom: "An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard, wood-lot, and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door . . .; and then I let it lie, fallow, perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone(76). Dealings with nature should be based on "enjoyment and relaxation "basis rather than on forced nature work." . . . Live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or a county jail. "(87)

4. Discovery of the Essential Through a Life of Simplicity - In his first chapter "Economy", Thoreau says that he went to the woods to describe what is really necessary in life, to live deliberately so that when he died he would not find that he had never really lived. He discovers that, like the petty states of the German Confederacy with the forever fluctuating boundaries, we will always end up in alienation, ruined by luxury and heedless expense if we do not rely on a "rigid economy", simplicity of life and an "elevation of purpose." The pleasing vista southward across the pond, the wide indentation in the hills, the peaks of the bluer distant mountain ranges, "those true-blue coins from heavens own mint "were much more valuable to Thoreau than "the false skin"(fashionable clothing), "elaborate traps to man "(modern buildings), "being needlessly poor"(material wealth), and a rich person's house.(85)

He concludes his book by stating that though natural dreams may seem like castles built in the air, they are yet achievable, it is up to us to make them real: "In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex. "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that's where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."(257) It is up to us not to feel part of the desperate majority "the mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation."(42) and to "suck out all the marrow of a life." (69), frittered away by detail.

5. Nature , the Self vs. the Divine -Though he was enthralled by the nature around him, Thoreau also went to the woods to consider himself. He believes that there are uncharted depths within us such as will continue to surprise and occupy anyone who explores within. And if this exploration is spoilt and impeded by the humdrum of modern ties and modern technology, we cannot expect to live in harmony with other human beings, and we must realize that we have lost it even within ourselves: "Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our genius, but by the mechanical nudging of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within. That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour that he has yet profaned, has despaired of life and is pursuing a descending and darkening way."(72)

For Thoreau the divine is most sublimely expressed in nature. We will be able to appreciate it only when we will have done away with the petty fears, trivial pleasure and shadows of the reality: "We are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us"(61). He seems to say that there is time left to arise from "half-frozen snake state" to a higher more ethereal life. But no pond is as deep as it seems no life as long as it looks: "Time is but the stream I go fishing in. I drink it, but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is."(64)

III.II Mary Austin –the Land of Little Rain

The Land of Little Rain was one of the early books of Mary Austin. In fourteen sketches, Austin's narrator records her observations of the land and its inhabitants, and traces her journeys through the desert regions of southern and south-eastern California. The book offers an invaluable picture of a "Lost West", a model for man's peaceful coexistence with nature and celebrates the Ute, Shoshone, Mojave and other tribes of the area. The story of The Land of Little Rain really begins with the four-year-old Mary Austin's mystical experience at the walnut tree, during which she recognized her ability to communicate with the spiritual world: "To this day I can recall the Swift inclusive awareness of each for the whole—I in them (plants and animals), and they in me and all of us enclosed in a warm, lucent bubble of livingness."(Byrd, www.snburd.com/bob/etymology/mary_austin).

Some of the main themes unfolding through the work are:

1.Precipitation and Vegetation -Austin paints a picture of rugged, eroded landscapes, punctuated with sparse, shrubby and spiny plants. Her graphic descriptions capture the nature of the vegetation and the central role of water in a region where it is scarce: "The desert begins with the creosote. This immortal shrub spreads down into Death Valley up to lower timberline. There is neither poverty of soil, nor species to account for the sparseness of desert growth, but simply that each plant requires more room. So much earth must be pre-empted to extract so much moisture. The real struggle for existence, the real brain of the plant, is underground; above there is room for a rounded perfect growth."(Austin 1903:12) Through these lines the author refers to the "real brain" of plants as being underground –i.e. in the roots and paints a picture of the dependence of plants on water. The scientists in this book write about "rooting strategies", evolutionary adaptations that enable plants to gain access to below ground resources. The author reports results of field studies in Sonoran and Chihuahan desert.

2.The Influence of Man -The book asks how terrestrial vegetation responds to varying precipitation regimes-both the "natural" range of variation that plants have experienced in the past and are adapted to, and the unusual new variation that is due to the activities of modern humans:"Anthropogenic climatic changes and other human impacts are altering species composition, vegetation structure, and ecosystem processes in terrestrial communities."(Weltzin www.uapress.arizona.edu).

3.The Desert -Traditionally the desert has been established as --a place where what is false is stripped away, where transformation is possible and hard lessons are learned. To Austin, the desert is a quality of consciousness and a law unto itself. As she reiterates, "not the law, but the land sets the limit". The immediacy of the earth, the absence of mediating systems and structures, the elemental nature of relationships and transactions, are central to Austin's idea of the value of the desert. She characterizes it as "A land of lost rivers, with little in it to love; yet a land that once visited must be come back to inevitably. If it were not so, there would be little told of it.(Austin, 2-3) Even the characters seem to suit to the demands of the desert, and take its traits. The "Walking Woman" has become over time, "twisted" like a Joshua tree in the wind, a very portrait of the desert in human form: "The desert had got him!"(Austin 1907:245), a phrase used to describe characters who have fully accommodated and submitted to the desert's demands.

4.Land and Culture -According to Austin, land breeds qualities such as hardiness, adaptability and frugality into the various animal and human, mineral and vegetable inhabitants of the region. She is interested in how natural patterns shape the culture, and so she directs attention to Euro-,Hispanic-and Native American communities, and likewise to representative individuals who mediate between their communities and the land.

III.III Rachel Carson –Silent Spring

Rachel Carson has been called the founder of the U.S. environmental movement, which some date plausibly, to the publication of Silent Spring in 1962.That best-selling book focused public attention on the problem of pesticide and other chemical pollution and led to such landmark legislation as the U.S.Clean Water Act and the banning of DDT in many countries through the world. Carson explains the title of her work by claiming that over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were furnished with the beauty of bird song. Carson emphasizes the relationship of mankind to nature .According to her

"Man, however much he may pretend the contrary, is part of nature," and "there is a great danger that the next generation will have no chance to know nature as we do. If I keep silent I could never again listen to a veer's song without overwhelming self-reproach." (Lear 1997:424).

Carson's *Silent Spring* rests on easy-to-establish facts. It is filled with short emphatic statements and arguments. Carson developed an environmental ethics with both non-anthropocentric and enlightened anthropocentric traits. Three premises crucial to her environmental ethics are restraint on the basis of human health considerations, the moral considerability of non-human beings, and the value of humans to preserve a wild nature and a diverse and varied landscape. *Silent Spring* factually rests on numerous scientific and anecdotal accounts of the use of pesticides, herbicides and other dangerous agricultural and industrial chemicals. Influenced by Schweitzer, Carson wrote of the need for a "Schweitzerian ethic that embraces decent consideration for all living creatures—a true reverence for life." (409)

Carson's *Silent Spring* develops around such themes and ethical arguments as:

1. Moral Considerability of Non-human Beings -In her novel, Carson recounts a massive dieldrin spraying program to eradicate Japanese beetles in and around Sheldon, Illinois. Robins, meadowlarks, pheasants and other birds were virtually wiped out, so were squirrels. She reflects:

The question is whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized... By their very existence, they and their fellows make his life more pleasant. Yet he rewards them with death that is not only sudden but horrible."¹ Observing the ghastly convulsions in poisoned birds at Sheldon, she concludes: "By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering to a living creature, who among us is not diminished as a human being." (93-96).

A true civilization does not dominate or destroy the non-human world, it protects and seeks to understand it.

2. Cohabitation of the Human and Non-human World -The interests of the human world largely coincide with those of the non-human world for two reasons: First we inhabit the same environment and we cannot poison other animals without poisoning ourselves. Second, preserving wild nature helps promote human happiness and flourishing. "To the bird catcher, the hunter, the fisherman or the explorer of wild region, anything that destroys the wildlife of an area for even a single year, has deprived him of pleasure to which he has a legitimate right." (84)

3. Disapproval of Economism -Carson criticized the age as one in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged. Corporations and individuals make insatiable demands on the land and nature is reduced to natural resources which humans may fully engross or utterly alter without remorse.

4. Needless "War on Nature"- Carson saw a reveling in power for its own sake and a will to simplify the landscape in order to control it. But the control of nature, "is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man." "[The] extraordinary capacities of life have been ignored by the practitioners of chemical control who have brought to their task... no humility before the vast forces with which they tamper." (261)

5. War to artificiality and simplification -Carson spoke out against artificiality and simplification anticipating our own contemporary concern for the preservation of biodiversity. She insists that all native species have a right to persist in their environments—not just the ones human beings find attractive or useful. And while "we must manage and change much of the landscape to suit our needs, some areas should be left wild, free from human artifice and control." (78) Her opponents countered that the increasing simplification and sterility of modern farm and suburban landscapes, was the cost of progress. These three critiques of economism, domination and artificialization come together in Carson's criticism of government efforts to wipe out sagebrush in the Western United States.

III.IV Edward Abbey -*Desert Solitaire, a Season in the Wilderness*

Edward Abbey became the sharp-tongued spokesman of the desert and canyonlands of the American West through his work *Desert Solitaire*. The book centers on Abbey's experience as a ranger in Arches National Park, but it also follows him on various jaunts in the surrounding canyons and mountains. The desert, an element of unifying force through the book, should remain unique, untouched by technology, "solitaire." The arguments in the work are presented as jeremiads, there

¹ Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York :Fawcett World Library, 1962(94)

is a use of detailed adjectival phrases, several listings of thoughts or objects of nature, unsparing employment of extended sentences and spontaneity.

Some of the arguments unfolding through the novel are:

1. The Cultural Relationship Between Nature, Wilderness and Technology - Abbey acknowledges that the autonomous life and wilderness are now cultural artifacts dependent on the polarities of politics, economics and technology as far as they exist in the minds of those educated in schools of management, forestry. For Abbey there is a reality which exists beyond the illusions of technocracy and this reality is the unsustainability of an elaborate techno-structure dependent for its being entirely upon human consciousness: "There is no lack of water here [in the American Southwest], unless you try to establish a city where no city should be." (Abbey, 1968:145).

2. Wilderness and the Dismantling of Governmental Institutions - For Edward Abbey, wilderness equals utopic anarchism and has a great value to human political freedom: "Government is a social machine whose function is coercion through monopoly of power... The purpose of anarchism is to dismantle such institutions and to prevent their reconstruction." (27)

3. The Loss of Wilderness and the Need for Wildlife Protection - Edward Abbey experiences the loss of wilderness with a blend of anger impertinence and sassiness: "We need more predators!" Abbey proclaims, "The sheepmen complain, it is true, that the coyotes eat some of their lambs. This is true, but do they eat enough? I mean, enough lambs to keep the coyotes sleek, healthy and well fed." (9) So, disputingly and absurdly enough wilderness in Abbey gains priority over mild nature.

III.V Annie Dillard-Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (1974) is a series of internal monologues and reflections spoken by an unnamed narrator. Over the course of a year, she walks alone through the land surrounding Tinker Creek, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia. As she observes the changing of the seasons and the corresponding behaviors of the plants and animals around her, she reflects on the nature of the world and of God who set it in motion. Through a celebratory language, Dillard crosses the customary categories and discriminations of a traditional Western thought. Seldom does she allow herself (or her reader) more than half a paragraph to recover from a bout with uncertainty. "Her reportages are disturbed by connections between customary facts and earlier upsetting experience such as epistemological dilemma, some fright or shadow of ecstasy." (Reader's Journal, 1974).

The themes unfolding through the book are:

1. Nature, Beauty and Austerity - Annie Dillard explores nature and describes her experiences completing her "pilgrimage on foot." Generally she writes her narrative with a segregation between the Creek and the Mountain. She considers the Creek, the busy place where everything happens, but it is the mountains where everything is absorbed. Nevertheless the intermingling of serene and "red in tooth and claw" images is remarkable.

Her activities include stalking muskrats at Tinker Creek, closely observing a monarch butterfly migration, taking a sample pond and investigating its contents in the microscope, observing flood take place and playing "King of the meadow" with grasshoppers in a field. Dragon flies seem to dip their tails into the water to see if it is really wet vs. a huge water bug grabbed the end of a frog, sucked out the inside and left only a limp greenness floating on the surface of the water: "It was the way that frog's eyes crumpled. His mouth was a gash of terror; the shining skin of his breast and shoulder shivered once and sagged, reduced to an empty purse; but oh those two snuffed eyes! They crinkled, the comprehension poured out of them as if sense and life had been a mere incidental addition to the idea of eyes, a filling like any jam in a jar that is soon and easily emptied; they flattened, lightless, opaque, and sank." (Dillard 1974:264).

Part of this theme are even the descriptions of unexpected sights. They explode before our eyes startling and amazing. We approach the Osage tree and from the stillness of its leaves, a hundred red-wing blackbirds take flight and disappear: "It was as if the leaves of the Osage orange had been freed from a spell in the form of red-winged blackbirds:

they flew from the tree, caught my eye in the sky, and vanished.”(17-18).When her old fighting tom cat would jump through her open window in the middle of the night upon her sleeping body, she would waken to find herself covered with bloody paw prints: “I looked as though I had been painted with roses.”(1)

2.Nature and Writing -Dillard compares the images of nature to her act of writing. Her words flash like lightning across the page and strike deep, like an Indian’s arrow plunging into the heart of game. She likens herself to such an arrow, its wooden shaft with “lightning marks”, fissures carved along the shaft to allow blood to drip from the wound to provide a trail to the wounded game: “I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood.”(12)

3.Nature and Religion - The theme of religion is firstly conveyed in Dillard through the idea of a son of the spirit wind that can live only for three years. This finds deep resonance in the biblical story of Jesus, who can only live for three years after being filled with the Christ spirit during his baptism in the Jordan river. In another passage, she even fears the sacredness of the mountains: “I have never understood why so many mystics of all creeds experience the presence of God on mountaintops. It often feels best to lay low, inconspicuous, instead of waving your spirit around from high places, like a lightning rod.”(87-90)

III.VI Leslie Marmon Silko -Ceremony

In her novel, *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko illustrates the many paradoxes of American culture, values and history the America’s ideal of bravery and the nature of the American tradition of recording history. The novel itself is illustrative of American literary traditions because of its fractured memories, story-like quality and the cyclical nature of family legacies. The main character Tayo is suffering from a sort of post-traumatic stress disorder. To compound his problems, Tayo is half Caucasian and half Native American, so he must deal with the added pressures of biculturalism. The only antidote for his illness and depression are the Native American ceremonies. Some of the themes treated in this novel are:

1.The United States’ Relationship with the Natives -The American settlers attempted to destroy the Native American peoples and use the land for their own purposes. Furthermore, the American government subjugated them by forcing them onto Indian reservations : “They see no life, when they look they see only objects.”¹

The relationship becomes even more paradoxical during times of crisis. The Native Americans were drafted to fight for the country that stole their land, yet they were expected to be patriotic, loyal and willing to die for America, “They were America the Beautiful too, this was the land of the free. They had the uniform and didn’t look different no more. They got respect.”(42).Part of the paradoxical perception of the Native American culture was their commercialization, “The Gallup Ceremonial had been an annual event for a long time. It was good for the tourist business coming through in summertime on Highway 66”(116).They were marginalized and equated to cattle. Like cattle they were considered to be drifting around the country with no land of their own.

2.The America Ideal of Bravery-Peace Through Destruction. According to Silko fighting for one’s country was a way of proving one’s masculinity. Men attained control over nature by dominating it, the way they did with the female counterparts. “White women never looked at me until I put on that uniform and then by God I was a U.S. Marine and they came crowding around”(40)The attempt to find peace through violent means comes out when the author parallels the intervention of the Americans in global affairs to that in nature: “The destroyers had tricked the white people as completely as they had fooled the Indians and now only a few people understood how the filthy deception worked; only a few knew that the lie was destroying the white people faster than it was destroying the Indian people.”(204).The American government perpetuated peace through violence by constructing the atomic bomb on the very land that it took away from the Native peoples: “And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were in the deep Jemez Mountains on the land the government took from White Pueblo.”(246)

3.Oral History and Tradition as an Integral Part of Native American Culture –Passing on wisdom from one generation to the next illustrates how Native American History is very cyclical. In contrast, American history is linear and not as rich in wisdom. It can be readily found in books across the country-while Native Americans must work hard to preserve their rich cultural tradition existing in oral form, and should be praised for their efforts. Leslie Marmon Silko presents the paradoxes spreading through the natural and political fields and is considered a master in paralleling nature writing, biculturalism and racist issues.

¹ Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*, New York :New American Library, 1978 (135)

Conclusions

Before starting with the unfolding of the conclusions that I have reached throughout my study and research work, I would wish to foreground that according to me, no opinion concerning the culturally/literarily set approaches to nature, can be considered as totally objective and undisputable. The reason why I handled these works from the point of view of the thematic congruencies and convergences they display, was because I intended to show how female attitudes to nature differ from the male ones, and how nature writing developed from an aesthetic genre to an environment-conscious one.

The conclusions I reached are:

- ❖ Though ecocriticism is attempting to break new trails by going through the untrammelled nature-centered works, humans are failing to go within the uncharted depths of their spirit and consciousness. Yet it is consoling to accept that the traceable development of Nature writing, is marked by an ever-increasing environmental awareness.
- ❖ Ecocriticism must question more closely the nature of environmental narrative, not praise it, but accept critique and use it constructively because it speaks within a cultural context. Praxis is possible only in view of "new frontiers" to explore.
- ❖ There is a close connection between the systematic undervaluing of women's writing and the exploitation and abuse of the earth.
- ❖ American nature writing as opposed to the European one, is closest to nature and deeply rooted in their ancestors respect and reverence for the land.
- ❖ Male nature writers mostly develop themes such as: the austerity of nature and the wish to explore and alter landscapes to suit the "human design"; the idea of hunting for a "trophy"; grandfather wisdom; wilderness and governmental institutions; earth as a religion. Female-centered approaches to nature are marked by the occurrence of such themes as: moral –considerability of non-human beings; disapproval of economism; the bond to the land; anthropogenic destructive tendencies; nature/self consciousness.
- ❖ What nature writers share in common is the awareness that, the earth is inexorably and fatally be altered, and together with it men are precipitating into alienation and estrangement. Though male writers fall into the snares of economism and exploring as a way of controlling, they still implicitly share women's consideration of the unbreakable bond to the earth and their awareness of the impactful immediacy to humankind.

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