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Anthropocentric Dualism in William Stafford's "Travelling Through the Dark"

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Abstract

Human attitude to nature is largely motivated to self-existence even if they seem to acknowledge the holistic existence of nature. William Stafford's poem "Travelling through the Dark" is one of the representative poems of how anthropocentricity privileges humans over nonhumans. An understanding of the poem from the perspective of textual analysis, Barry commoners and some of the other ecocritics' view of nature as an integrated existence spurs to analyze human tendency to nature as a dual perception. The narrator of the poem finds a doe dead on the edge of the Wilson River road. He concludes to roll her into the canyon. As he tries to trail the doe, feels a life into her belly. The unborn fawn spurs the narrator to rescue her but he pushes the pregnant doe over the edge into the river. Such a dual perception of the narrator is against anthropocentricity itself. Human activities are mostly influenced by self-interest ignoring other parts of nature whereas such attitude endangers human existence itself. Unless they acknowledge the truth of human dependence on nature, no human life will be alive. This article purposes that the poem "Travelling through the Dark" can be read as an eco-critical text because of its association with a nature-human relationship in terms of the ongoing ecological imbalance and its impact on human existence.

Keywords: Anthropocentricity, dark, ecology, road

INTRODUCTION

William Stafford's short pathetic poem "Travelling through the Dark" is a study of human attitude to other parts of nature in terms of ecological imbalance and its impact on both the human-nonhuman existence. It is structured as a conflict between human-nonhuman interests. It covers the unexpected death of a pregnant doe by an unknown killer, negligence upon the dead body of the pregnant doe, and the futile attempt to rescue the life of the unborn fawn. As a reflection of human attitude on ecology, it has an application value because of its focus on interdependence between human-nonhuman entities. With

the setting of Wilson River road, Stafford depicts the self-centric notion of humans issuing the death of a pregnant doe; and the consequent suffering as the co-product of human indifference against the nonhuman entities. The poem discloses a dual perception of humans. When the pregnant doe is forced to die on the road and left forlorn, the narrator tries to rescue the fawn, yet he is prompt in rolling the pregnant doe into the canyon.

The ecological perspectives of Barry Commoner's "Man and Ecosphere", Arne Naess' "Deep Ecology", Val Plumwood's "ecological crisis of reason", and other theories related to the consequence of anthropocentric domination over nonhuman parts of nature support to evince the consequences of anthropocentricity and the importance of interdependence between human-nonhuman existences of nature. Drawing upon the theoretical parameters from the aforementioned insights, I have attempted to analyze Stafford's "Travelling through the Dark" as an anthropocentric duality.

DISCUSSION

Stafford, in the spirit of Commoner, views human beings' suffering as consequent to the suffering of nonhumans. Similarly, like Naess, he finds environmental degradation as the result of human interference with other entities of nature. In the spirit of Plumwood, he asserts that the ecological crisis is the result of othering the nonhumans. Scientific discoveries and mechanical production have facilitated human life, shortened working hours but human beings seem to forget their interconnectedness with the nonhuman existence of nature.

Stafford imagines human habitation nearby the network. But because of mechanical intervention, the wild lives are at the risk of dwindling. His concern with nonhumans is to sustain human existence whereas human beings undermine their attachment with nature. Characterizing the nature of Stafford's poems James Armstrong views:

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Stafford's poems rarely concern wilderness for its own sake; the wild is defined in juxtaposition to the human, so it exists as a point of contact. This contact is abrupt and ubiquitous in the West; people read books in libraries and attend church and shop on Main Street—but amid their human tasks they are confronted by sublime prairie skies, or looming mountains, or terrible storms; at the end of the street runs the river that comes from and goes back to the unregulated outlands. (8)

Stafford's poems stress wilderness whereas his motif is to correlate wild lives with human needs. Human beings adopt nature as a means of human to an end. Arguing on the western culture, Armstrong claims that human beings just expect nature to be a favor for them that they do not think of nature for its own sake.

The narrator in the poem "Travelling through the Dark" says, "Travelling through the dark I found a deer /dead on the edge of the Wilson River road" (1-2). As dark symbolizes insecurity, uncertainty, fear, and mystery, he finds a mysterious death of a doe on the road. The doe lying on the road seems to have been collided with an unknown accident. The death of the doe is an example of encroachment on nature and its effect. 'Dark and dead adjectives' symbolize the hidden and forlorn situation of the doe. The killer seems to hit and run away from the doe ignoring the pathetic condition of the pregnant doe while his fellow beings are bound to face its effect. The death of the pregnant doe results in the suffering of the narrator.

Stafford's motif of exploring anthropocentric confusion extends further. The narrator discloses human attitude to the nonhumans, "It is best to roll them into the canyon" (3). Unlike the killer, he concerns with managing the dead doe though he is less concerned with the predicament of the doe caused by human beings. Arguing for a conservation strategy, Arne Naess in his book *Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects* claims "present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening" (50). The invention of technology for humans may not be claimed as a curse on human relation with nonhumans; nevertheless, environmental hazards or the ecological imbalance enforce to evaluate the effect of such technologies. Like Naess, the narrator argues, "to swerve might make more dead" (4). The term "more" is either for the doe or for the human travelers it is ambiguous but it is manifest that the road is narrow and through the Wilson

Riverside. The encroachment on the nonhuman world might turn into other casualties.

Self-awareness of human activities is only the solution for maintaining ecological harmony. The forcefully invented mechanistic world perceives nature as an instrument for human purpose. It pushes ecological harmony under an alarm. The narrator's concern with the doe is not because of humanity but because he faces obstacles to go ahead. Regarding human tendency to nature Val Plumwood remarks on her *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, "We only pay attention to them after the disaster occurs, and then only restore the status quo, to fix things up" (108). Making aware of human conscience, Plumwood comments on human response to nature that it becomes too late to restore harmony when the crisis results. Because of the death of the doe, the narrator has to face a challenge, ". . . I stumbled back of the car / and stood by the heap, a doe a recent killing" (5-6). The killer of the doe ignores the life of the doe and runs away whereas the narrator, the present car driver, has to face the challenges. He also objectifies the doe. His analogy between "the doe" and "the heap", and the critical observation "a recent killing" alienates him from the wild nature. Despite his negative remark on the doe, the narrator seems to be concerned with the pregnant doe.

The duality between the needs and deeds of human beings limits them within the boundary of human deeds. Human supremacy is also based on the supremacy of nature, the earth whereas material reality is blind to the oncoming ecological threat. Illustrating upon human concerns, Stafford's another poem "At Home on Earth" echoes his message to the reader:

There is stillness about the ecological threat. We are surrounded, but the danger hardly appears-- but it is there. Was there yesterday, but not so demanding. Political issues begin to sound small, or social issues, or whatever. A giant has come along, outside human concerns. That always was a wilderness out there; now it is the wilderness itself that has moved its feet, still, waiting. (481)

Stafford's reading of anthropocentricity and its consequence question on human response to environmental degradation. The layer of oxygen has been

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decreasing slowly due to wars. We can even ignore the ensuing dissensions, yet we cannot deny the effect of our deeds on wilderness or the holistic ecology.

Stafford does not deny the existence of nature but unlike another nature writer, he interprets nature in terms of human needs. The poem "Travelling through the Dark" depicts human hubris as well as their unawareness of nature. Like his ecological perception on "At Home on Earth" Stafford's narrative of "Travelling through the Dark" critiques on the death of the doe, "she had stiffened already, almost cold / I dragged her off; she was large in the belly (7-8)". The doe is already killed but her body is noticed only when the car driver feels difficult to cross the road. He feels, ". . . her side warm; her fawn lay there waiting, / alive, still, never to be born" (9-11). The critical juncture between duties and needs entangles the narrator between the fawn and the doe. The life and death battle of the pregnant doe indicates that it is not only the fawn but also the doe who seem to have searched the timely rescue while the fawn, waiting to be born, is also forced to face death unintentionally as well as untimely. Stafford presents a great conflict between two realities, two systems of life. On the one hand, ability, duty, or virtues that we learn to admire when we face danger or loss. On the other hand, there is anthropocentric quality. Though it seems liberal towards nature and natural elements, the emotion is warmer than efficiency and deeper than good judgment. The narrator's comments on the predicament of the fawn are consequent to the ecological threat that human beings are prone to invite their end by ignoring the voice of nature like of the doe with a fawn. Human beings are concerned with a prosperous and hindrance-free world where only the human being is rational and superior to other things and beings on the earth.

Stafford endeavors to situate the narrator between human and nonhuman entities but that does not last at the end. L White, JR. in *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* argues, "Changes in human ways often affect nonhuman nature" (143). With the encroachment of humans into the world of nonhumans, nonhuman beings get astray. Vehicles and their sound disturb the solitary of wild lives. So, it needs to redress the role of humans to the nonhumans. As White argues, the narrator gets mental conflict between his intention and the situation. "Besides that mountain road I hesitated (12)" raises a question on human power to withdraw life from death. If we lack the power to revive life from death, it is against humanity to

push the nonhumans into death. The real killer of the doe does not concern with the event. He is not even manifest in the poem but the narrator gets conflict between the scene of a dead doe and an unborn fawn waiting to be born. Such a pathetic condition compels one to question anthropocentricity. The killer of the doe can run away from that innocent doe but can he run away from the grip of ecological imbalance? He can neither regenerate the life of the doe nor can he survive the living fawn of the dead doe. The drive of the car and the resultant death of the pregnant doe evince how human beings are losing their respect, care, and love for the nonhuman worlds. Our reaction against nature is the outcome of our ideas based on the human-nonhuman dichotomy. Ecological balance and harmony among all living and nonliving things and beings cannot be restored unless we assess our role in nature.

The climax of the narrative occurs in the poem when the narrator finds life in the dead body of the doe. As Commoner in "Man in the Ecosphere" views, "Such a cycle of dependencies is a useful way to think about the relationship between any part of the system and the behavior of the whole. In the same way, we can seek relationships which link a series of human activities to the ecosystem on which they depend and which they, in turn, affect" (48). Commoner asserts that human beings seem to be dependent on nature and they should be. However, they define nature as per their convenience. Such a dual perception cannot secure harmony with the holistic nature.

Shifts in the narrative focus provide double consciousness. The narrator ponders upon the life of the fawn. Yet, his attention shifts from the fawn to the car. Arne Naess in his theory "The Deep Ecology", remarks on the human attitude influenced by technology:

The emphasis is upon resources for humans, especially for the present generation in affluent societies. On this view, the resources of the earth belong to those who have the technology to exploit them. There is the confidence that resources will not be deleted because, as they get rarer, a high market price will conserve them, and substitutes will be found through technological progress. Further, animals, plants, and natural objects are valuable only as resources for

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humans. If no human use is known, they can be destroyed with indifference. (68)

Naess describes the affluent culture and its inclination to nature as to be guided by technology. It perceives nature as never depleting sources that are for the humans who have rich in technology. Such a concept disregards the independent value of nonhuman entities also.

The road on the side of the canyon is through the habitat of the deer. Paradoxically, human beings encroach upon the land of the animals, kill them, and feel insecure. Nonhuman entities are insecure due to humans. Though we cannot ignore the disturbance and assault of the forest animals in human societies, it is because of human infirmities to understand the nature of such beings. While observing the life and death battle of the doe, the narrator gets suddenly drawn by the car. He even personifies the car as giving more importance to technology than to life, "The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights" (13).

Stafford himself acknowledges in an interview with Pinsker, "Travelling Through the Dark" says something drastic at the end too, although it is said differently (p.29)". After examining the situation of the doe, the narrator decides to move away from the site. His attention to the wilderness "around our group I could hear the wilderness listen (16)" seems to create awareness to nonhuman beings. It tries to tie humans with nonhumans. Nonetheless, like the comment of Stafford, the narrator reveals his anthropocentric perception against nature at the last "I thought hard for us all—my only swerving / then pushed her over the edge into the river" (17-18). The final narrative discloses the mechanistic representation of nature.

CONCLUSION

The researcher finds out that human beings' self-centric notion of seeing them apart from nonhuman beings and things is the cause of their suffering. Even if they try to treat nonhumans pathetically, they turn into their interest finally. Such a dualistic attitude leads humans to a further crisis. In the poem "Travelling through the Dark" by Stafford, the narrator tries to rescue the fawn from her dead mother the pregnant doe but he rolls her into the

canyon finally. His anthropocentric duality is manifest when he shifts his attention from the pregnant doe to the car. Such anthropocentric attitude is relative to the existence of human beings, not the existence of the pregnant doe whereas it cannot assure independence to human existence. Thus, the paper analyzing the human attitude to nonhuman beings contributes to exploring the causes of environmental hazards, and it paves the way for seeing the human being as a part of nature but not apart from nature.

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