

Ecocritical Analysis of Edgar Allen Poe's Select Short Stories

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Abstract:

This article examines the presence of the environment, which has been conveniently ignored so far. It takes the short stories of world-renowned writer Edgar Allen Poe – who is known for his unique narrative techniques. The setting of the stories is brought to the center, and how they dominate the personality of the characters is focused. The paper attempts at the reader's understanding of the fact that the world is essentially ecocentric, not androcentric. Therefore, the characters and the plot of the stories are overlooked, and the background of the stories is examined.

Keywords: Ecocentric, Androcentric, Environment,

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Ecocriticism, unlike other contemporary theories, focuses on the connection between literature and the environment. "The word 'eco' comes from the Greek root word 'oikos,' which etymologically means household or earth, and 'logy' from 'logos' means logical discourse. Together, they mean criticism of the house environment as represented in literature" (Mishra 168). Mishra, in his article, "Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature," states the importance as well as the effect of ecocriticism in the recent decades as given below:

Ecocriticism is one of the youngest revisionist movements, which has swept the humanities over the past few decades. The present world is facing eco-disasters, and our environment is now at stake. Only science and technology are not enough to combat the global ecological crisis. We should make a change in our attitude to Nature. Literature does not float above life, so it has its role to play. For a long time, Nature was not given due consideration by literary critics, so ecologically oriented literature pleads for a better understanding of Nature in its wider significance. (168)

It is a unique theory that helps understand the ecological concerns that are exposed by literary writers. According to Glotfelty, as quoted by Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism*, 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. (3)

Thus, ecocriticism takes a unique stand when compared to its contemporary critical theories. The relationship between man and Nature is not new, but the study of the same is fairly modern. Literature has been a part of human life from time immemorial, yet the ecological concerns portrayed by the writers were conveniently ignored until quite recently. Edgar Allen Poe – an American writer – who is known for his poetry and short stories, has written short stories that convey the affiliation between man and Nature.

The paper attempts an ecocritical analysis of the following short stories: "Shadow—A Parable," "Silence—A Fable," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." According to Joseph Chandra, "A short story usually focuses on a single incident, has a single plot, a single setting, a limited number of characters, and covers a short period of time" (91). Poe's short stories have all the above-mentioned characteristics as he himself believes that, as quoted by Chandra, "A classic definition of story is that one should be able to read it at one sitting." (91). Even though most of his short stories have gothic, detective, and horror as their themes, Poe uses Nature and environment to convey the disposition of the story. Instead of focusing only on the biography of the writer, the narrative techniques, the structure, the society, and so on, ecocriticism focuses on the entire ecological system. The term *world* is normally used to refer to the above-mentioned ideologies; it is only ecocriticism that engulfs the literal meaning of the term.

According to Joseph Chandra, a short story contains a dramatic structure as follows:

1. Exposition: the introduction of the setting, situation, and main characters.
2. Complication: the event in the story that produces a conflict.
3. Crisis: the decisive moment for the protagonist and his or her commitment to a sense of action as the conflict becomes most intense and the reader's interest is at its highest
4. Resolution: The final stage of the plot is when the conflict is resolved, and a moral lesson is learned. (91)

Out of the above four, exposition is where the environment is mentioned. When the writer attempts to set the setting of the story, unconsciously or consciously presents a description of the atmosphere, surroundings, flora, and fauna of that particular geographical area.

Poe's stories establish the presence of Nature in a rather dominant manner. The existence of Nature over human life is one of the most predominant themes that one can pull

out of the stories of Edgar Allen Poe. For example, "The Fall of the House of Usher" begins as follows:

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in Autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. (Dey 213)

The narrator is traveling towards a house and is clearly aware of the environment. The mood of the person and the description of the setting seem to be in synchrony. The narrator attempts to elevate the mood of his friend, but the lack of connection to the outside world (Nature) makes it impossible. The grim natural scenario seems as if it is a reflection of the character's mentality, but in reality, it is just how Nature is. The writer just tries to set the atmosphere for the story; when he does so, he observes/imagines a scenario in his mind, and according to the need, he describes the environment.

The climatic conditions and the exploitations of Nature by humans are two interrelated concepts; literature is one platform that portrays this interrelation most beautifully. In the words of Carson, as quoted by Garrard is as follows:

The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is, for the most part, irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is, for the most part, irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little-recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world – the very Nature of its life. (103)

In the climax of "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator flees from the house of his friend 'aghast.' And when he turns back, he is able to see a blood-red moon and also the fragments of the 'house of Usher.' The whole narration of the above-mentioned story is constantly grim and clearly states a lack of interaction between the humans (Roderick and his sister) and Nature. This lack of positive interaction finally ends up with a total apocalypse. Here, the tolerance and the supremacy of Nature are simultaneously exposed.

The 'World' – nature/environment is believed to have a beginning and a prophesied end. The end is inevitable, but humans and their exploitations of Nature and its resources will move forward to the impeded end. Seers who are capable of understanding this truth are, in one way or another, trying to convey this reality in various means possible. Edgar Allen Poe does exactly the same in the above-mentioned short story. The reader is also able to understand that when the 'impeded end' is preponed, that would mean that all the living (along with humans) will perish. But the world will not go down without a fight.

The next short story, "Shadow—A Parable," also provides a bleak setting. But here, Poe registers the fact that human life is short when compared to the life of

'nature/environment'. The following lines establish the above idea, "Ye who read are still among the living; but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows" (Dey 395). This is a direct mention of the impermanence of human life, yet there is also an indirect mention of how the earth is capable of sustaining generations of human beings. The damages inflicted by humans upon Nature are slowly eroding the earth, and yet Nature sustains itself as much as possible. It sustains itself by fighting back. Why does it fight back? – 1. To sustain itself. 2. To uphold the living (that includes the human race), which is dependent on its existence.

How does the world fight back? – Natural calamities, and pestilence. These couple of years can be taken as an example of how Nature tries to reclaim its power. This is not something that is new; humans have witnessed the world's fight from time immemorial. In "Shadow—A Parable" describes one such situation as follows, "The year had been a year of terror and of feelings more intense than terror for which there is no name upon the earth. For many prodigies and signs had taken place, and far and wide, over sea and land, the black wings of the pestilence were spread abroad" (395). The mentioned lines can be taken as an admonition through which the readers are provided with a dreadful image to be imagined. According to Garrard, "The warning is presented in terms of absolute authority; the material threat is 'evil,' and so, by association, are the authors of it; the consequences of failure to heed the warning are catastrophic, and the danger is not only imminent but already well underway" (103).

One important factor to be noticed in Poe's short stories is that the depictions of the environment are dreadful. For instance, in "Silence—A Fable," the following lines appear:

And, all at once, the moon arose through the thin, ghastly mist and was crimson in color. And mine eyes fell upon a huge grey rock which stood by the shore of the river and was lighted by the light of the moon. And the rock was grey, and ghastly, and tall —and the rock was grey. Upon its front were characters engraved in the stone, and I walked through a morass of water-lilies until I came close unto the shore, that I might read the characters upon the stone. But I could not decipher them... (398)

The description is horrifying. Nature is depicted as if it is terrible and horrendous. But Nature has another side, just like a coin. The pictures portrayed by the Romantic poets are lovely, wondrous, and awe-inspiring as opposed to what is being represented in Poe's works. Nature can be both – horrifying as well as awe-inspiring. An ecocritical reading of the short stories gives the readers an eye-opener on what to do in the future to further delay the 'end.' An ecocritical reading of the short stories convinces the reader to look at the setting with an enviro-central perspective rather than a character-centric analysis. In the words of Joseph Chandra:

Ecocriticism is not just analyzing Nature in literature, but it implies a move towards a biocentric worldview and calls for a broadening of humankind's conception of global community to include non-human life forms and physical

environment. This is a matter of ethical commitment and calls for an extension of ethics that re-explores the environmental concerns and challenges the hegemony of androcentric constructions of the physical world. (24)

The characters of the stories are given much lesser importance, and the focus is centered on the environmental setting, the description of Nature.

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