
An ecocritical exploration in Stafford's *'Traveling through the Dark'*

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Paper Received on 02-06-2023, Accepted on 10-07-2023,
Published on 13-07-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.3.04

Abstract

Eco criticism studies the association of all forms of plant and animal life with their habitat. In doing so, it argues that we exert a considerable amount of exploitation on the environment around us. Also known as Green Studies or Environmental Criticism, this unique area revolves around the depiction of nature in the works of literature. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, Eco critics like herself 'studies the relationship between Literature and the Physical Environment.' Some of the major themes that can be found while ecocritical reading a text are the depiction of wilderness, the beauty of nature and the countryside, etc. However, another important factor that the Eco critics have constantly criticized since their inception in the 1970s is the essentially anthropocentric view of the Western canon. For example, in the episode of creation in the Bible, God gave man "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Genesis 1.26). This argument lies at the core of Eco criticism as they strive to make human beings aware that they are not the owners of the earth. The world is to be co-habited, and nature should not be exploited for incessant and exorbitant needs.

Keywords: Eco criticism, history, environmental criticism

History stands as the phenomenal pillar through which we witness people die, societies destruct, cities disappear, nations collapse, and empires dismantle. All this happens with the backdrop of nature- stable, powerful, and eternal. However, it is time that we reconsider the usage of these adjectives. We have destabilized the makeup of nature, and so have we usurped her of her power that she is no longer eternal. The Romantics loved nature, and this is clearly visible in their works. But if we closely observe William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," we can see that even the greatest of the Romantics had his doubt about the eternal, unchanging nature in his mind. Observe how he hopes about the plenitude of nature and, more importantly, the changes in the landscape brought by man's intervention:

While here I stand, not only with
the sense
Of present pleasure, but with
pleasing thoughts
That at this moment, there is life
and food
For future years. And so, I dare to
hope,

Though changed, no doubt, from
what I was when I first

I came among these hills;
(Stafford)

Although Stafford doesn't glorify nature, he is clearly frustrated with our actions that position nature in danger. In this particular poem, he explores the instability of the relationship between man and nature. He is also concerned with our conscience, which should normally prevent us from committing such heinous crimes as the killing of the deer in the poem. While the narrator drags the dead deer away from the road and into the river, "the wilderness listens." Thus, he almost personifies the wild and untamable nature around him. The wilderness becomes the silent spectator to the doings of the narrator. As mentioned, the human conscience should have prevented the man from committing the crime, but it doesn't. Nevertheless, we are also endowed with free will and choice. The narrator could have moved the deer into a secure place and could have left it there. But he chooses to mangle the already dead body. This is a stark representation of how we choose to destroy God-given natural resources.

'Traveling through the Dark' was first published in 1962. But it continues to echo the problems of modern times in a fairly commendable way. The title, also the first line of the poem, sums up the blindfolded journey which we have undertaken. In fact, the entire poem is set in a noir background which signifies danger and death. The poet is warning us

of the visible consequences of our actions which we choose not to see. We are indeed 'traveling through the dark.' It is high time that we realize that natural resources are limited and that nature is not all forgiving. The calamities that we witness all around us are solid signifiers that prove that the planet has reached its saturating point. We cannot go on forever 'traveling in the dark,' and the poet is asking us to make the reasonable choice of not over-exploiting the environment.

Interestingly, the poet accentuates the gloomy darkness with the help of the red light of his car:

"By the glow of the tail-light I
stumbled back of the car" and
towards the end of the poem;

"The car aimed ahead its lowered
parking lights; under the hood
purred the steady engine. I stood
in the glare of the warm exhaust
turning red;" (Stafford)

Red is the color that is usually associated with anger and hatred. A famous example is Wole Soyinka's 'Telephone Conversation,' where the poet attributes color to everything around him. Thus, the readers *see* the angry narrator spurring his feelings in the uncommonly red telephone booth. Not unlike Soyinka, our narrator also uses a similar technique. But once he makes the red light 'glare' in the darkness, the tension of the situation is surprisingly heightened. It lends a more sinister and somewhat surreal mood to the already noir setting. The darkness is

often cleared by the lights of the car. But even this is ephemeral, and although it lights up the surroundings, the red 'glare' does not fulfill the purpose of perpetual light. The narrator is enveloped by the darkness around him and fails to notice the wilderness, which follows him like a shadow. For a moment, let us go back to the beginning of the poem:

"Traveling through the Dark, I found a deer dead on the edge of the Wilson River Road.

It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:

That road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead."

It is clear from the third line that this is not his first encounter with a dead animal:

"It is *usually* best to roll them into the canyon." (Stafford).

The usage of the word 'usually' underlines this fact. The poet brilliantly captures the hamartia of mankind with respect to the environment. We know that we should not kill animals mercilessly. We also know that they are living just like we are and that they have equal rights to roam on this planet. But we still choose to hunt and kill them. A counterargument that can be made here is that the poet does not tell us how the deer got killed. Therefore, we might safely assume that it died on its own accord. But in the fourth line, we are told that the "road is narrow"; this completely shatters the opinion that the deer was not killed by

humans. As the road was narrow, any other passerby could have easily hit the deer as it was trying to cross the road, or a more plausible explanation could be that the deer was injured during hunting:

"and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;

she had stiffened already, almost cold."

At this point, one should mention the lucid juxtaposition that the poet makes. He cleverly makes the road cut through the savage wilderness of the forest. This is another consequence of our actions, that of the development of the environment- another aspect of Ecocritics. While the deer symbolizes nature in its mildest form, the wilderness around him is nature in its ferociousness. The pregnant deer is a poignant reminder of our deeds:

"My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—

her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting, alive, still, never to be born.

Beside that mountain road, I hesitated." (Stafford)

The deer evokes pity in his mind as he hesitates. He can exercise his will at this moment and choose not to disturb the dead. 'Her fawn' will never be able to come out and see Mother Earth, and not because of her fault. In a sense, the poet urges all of us to hesitate, to think, and to decide for ourselves whether we should continue on the same "road" or not. We can always choose to "swerve," or in other words, we can always change our

direction abruptly. As the wilderness stands as the silent observer of our collective deeds, one should decide what to do:

"I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group, I could hear the wilderness listen."

This image is no less than a frightening one, and we are expected to think, as the narrator does in the final lines of the poem:

"I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—
then pushed her over the edge into the river."(Stafford)

He constantly plays on the usage of the term "swerve." It is never too late to change our stance; he seems to urge us. We should change, or else we will have to fight with the all observing "wilderness" for our survival. It is indeed us who are accountable to the

environment, and we should heighten our level of consciousness with regard to this grave problem. The Eco critics might not agree with the ending of the poem, where the narrator pushes the deer into the river. They would want us to find a solution to this, maybe not to take the "narrow road," for darkness is always followed by light.

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How to cite this article?

Dr. Sushant Kumar Dubey "An ecocritical exploration in Stafford's 'Traveling through the Dark'" Research Journal Of English (RJOE)8(2), PP:01-04,2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.3.04