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Ecocritical Perspectives on Early American Literature: "Walden" by Henry D. Thoreau and "Letters from an American Farmer" by Hector St. John De Crevecoeur[1]

Haider Jaber Husain

حيدر جابر حسين

Ministry of Education/ General Directorate of Education in Karbala, Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an ecocritical analysis of "Walden" by Henry David Thoreau and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's "Letters from an American Farmer". The field of literature and environmental studies encompasses a wide range of academic disciplines and activities that explore the ecological dimensions of literature and other forms of creative expression in an environment-conscious spirit that is open to a variety of approaches and areas of inquiry. Ecocriticism is based on the idea that skillful use of language, storytelling, and visual art may motivate and organize ecological stewardship. A possible explanation for environmental degradation on Earth. Ecocriticism agrees with other ecological humanities fields such as ethics, history, religious studies, the humanities, and humanistic geology that natural wonders should be appreciated and the ecological issue should be handled on both an individual and global scale. To address environmental concerns and natural disasters, ecocritics turn to the worlds of literature and academia.

Keywords: *American prose; Ecocriticism; environmental study; Environmental determinism*

INTRODUCTION

It is true that literature in general, and environmental literature in particular, reflects the mood and concerns itself with the problems of the society in which it was created. It does more than just describe; it develops, advances, provides food for thought, and motivates readers to take action. It follows that writing about the environment must take ecological considerations into account. There is now a well-established subgenre of literature dedicated to exploring how humans interact with their natural surroundings, and this field of study is known as ecocriticism.

Although the word "Ecocriticism" was not developed until the second half of the twentieth century, by its definition, environmental writers from even a century earlier qualify just like the ecocritics since they read and studied literature in addition to the environment (in their case, chiefly nature).

Because of their seeming synonymy, the phrases "nature" and "environmental" might lead to even more misunderstanding than the one between an environmental writer and an ecocritic. Yet, even though they both make allusions to ecocritical works, this is not the case. When compared to other academic disciplines, ecocriticism has advanced quite a bit in the past twenty years. Because of this, ecocriticism is presently experiencing a "new" second wave, with the most notable difference being a modification to the meaning placed on the natural world. Because nature increasingly dominated the spaces where humans lived, it was a central concern for the authors of the first wave of ecocriticism. The initial wave of people could never have imagined the world as it is now. Still, because of technological advancements and the subsequent explosion of metropolitan areas, people can live in settings that are

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primarily the product of human ingenuity and industry. There was a new generation of environmental writers emerging at the same time as the word "environment" was begging to be redefined.

Although Lawrence Buell (probably the most well-known contributor to ecocriticism in the field of literature) argues in his book how Environmental Criticism will develop in the Future "No definitive map of environmental criticism in literary studies can therefore be drawn" (1). There are some features common to the writers that are typical for such work. The forefather of American environmental literature, Henry David Thoreau, wrote about these things in his seminal work, “Walden”.

Ecocriticism's recent shift in emphasis may be so great that the first wave is rendered superfluous and unable to contribute to the ongoing discussion of environmental issues, the focus of which is no longer limited to the study of nature but also includes feminism and environmental justice. Prose works like “Walden” have piqued the interest of scholars of literature all across the globe. Thoreau is very concerned with the environment, the changing of the seasons, and the animals he encounters in the woods. From woodchucks to partridges, he describes the routines of a wide variety of creatures. He imbues some of them with deeper, more spiritual, or psychological significance. For instance, the hooting loon that plays hide-and-seek with Thoreau becomes a metaphor for the divine laughter of nature at human attempts. Thoreau discovers a full-scale ant battle, another example of animal symbolism that causes him to reflect on the nature of the human conflict. Thoreau's fascination with wildlife differs significantly from that of a naturalist or biologist. Instead of just recording his observations in a dispassionate scientific manner, he imbues each with a unique moral or philosophical message.

ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF “WALDEN” BY HENRY DAVID THOREAU

In his book "*Henry David Thoreau in Context"* Finley shows that Thoreau criticises mindless labour and, indirectly, capitalist institutions that prey on gullible working-class men. Of course, this is in addition to his harsh criticism of their misuse of the environment. The normal working man doesn't have time for sincere honesty every day. He bemoans the state of modern industrial practices, lamenting that his work will be diminished in the market. He is so overworked that he can only afford to be a robot. (2) Thoreau's reputation has risen to great heights, thanks in large part to his canonization in ecocriticism and in literature more generally; this is, of course, well-deserved, but it may sometimes work against a clear comprehension of the message Thoreau was attempting to convey.

Thoreau embarks on a quest for "a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" as he searches for a new way of thinking and living (3). He begins by detailing how he met his most fundamental requirements during the two years he spent in a little cottage on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. He proposes living as autonomously as possible with minimum interference from society, arguing that nature meets many of these requirements.

While Thoreau does say that it is possible to survive without a roof over one's head, he still considers shelter to be a human need. According to him, “Adam and Eve, according to the fable, wore the bower before other clothes. Man wanted a home, a place of warmth, or comfort, first of physical warmth, then the warmth of the affections” (p.27). But, in his opinion, landlords have exploited renters by taking advantage of their need for a place to live by setting rents so high that tenants are practically trapped in their apartments.

The first paragraph of Chapter 4 is about being cautious. While literature is a great resource, Thoreau cautions that “we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard.” (p.108). He keeps saying that being awake and tuned in to one's surroundings is all it takes to pick up a wealth of information.

Thoreau continues by saying that he learned just as much from the mundane tasks of bean picking and viewing nature as he did from books during his first summer at Walden Pond. Using examples from Confucianist Chinese sages and Puri Indians, who have a single phrase for "yesterday, today, and tomorrow," (p.109) he advocates for the value of being present in the here and now. As Thoreau sees it, the sparrows' chirping represents the peace of the present-moment living.

The harsh noise of the Fitchburg Railroad cuts into Thoreau's narrated passage here. The "restless city merchants"(p.112) who come to buy and sell the luxuries that Thoreau despises are associated in his mind with this noise. Thoreau sees these trains as emblematic of rampant commercialism, the danger posed by human greed, and an intrusion upon the peace and tranquility of nature. Thoreau believes that the mournful hooting of owls at night

represents the spirits of men who have lost touch with their humanity. “I rejoice that there are owls.” (p.122) Thoreau thinks.

As he works in his bean fields, Thoreau mulls the work involved in farming and uses the chance to write about it. When he accidentally disturbs the blackberries and Johnswrot that grow wild on his property, he questions "what right" he has to do so and what lessons may be drawn from the experience.

“The pines still stand here older than I; or, if some have fallen, I have cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all around,” (p.151). Thoreau muses on natural renewal processes, citing pine trees as an example. In a similar vein, he muses, "Almost the same johnswort sprouts from the same perennial root in this meadow"(p.151). With this approach, Thoreau argues, people may still coexist peacefully with nature while farming the ground. The trick is to take just what is necessary and to allow nature time to recover.

More than just blackberries and johnswort were once residents of Thoreau's field. Many times, he has found arrowheads and other Native American artifacts while working in the bean fields. Inspecting these arrowheads, he concludes that "an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here and planted corn and beans are white men came to clear the land," (p.151). He speculates that the methods of growing beans and maize have not changed much since Native Americans cultivated the land.

Thoreau talks of the woodlands and groves he visits close to Walden Pond. He considers these forested sanctuaries to be sacred: marshes where usnea lichen hangs in festoons from the white-spruce trees and toadstools, circular tables of the swamp gods, spread the ground; or to forests where trees are clothed in ancient blueberries and grow taller and higher till they are fit to stand ahead Valhalla. (p.194).

As he strolls down the railroad causeway, Thoreau comments on the eerie glow that surrounds his shadow. He thinks back to Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography, where it is written, "[A] resplendent light appeared over the shadow of [Cellini's] head at morning and evening, whether he was in Italy or France, and it was particularly conspicuous when the grass was moist with dew." (p.195) and is reminded of this peculiar halo Thoreau admits that doubters would see his experience, as well as Cellini's, as evidence of "superstition". For those who feel this way, Thoreau has a question: "But, those people who are aware of their status at all aren't they truly distinguished?” (p.195).

Thoreau goes apple and chestnut picking in the fall. The little waxen diamonds of cranberries he discovers are beautiful, but he does not pick them. He complains that local farmers use unsightly rakes to collect the berries, "leaving the smooth meadow in a tangle, heedlessly measuring them by the bushel and the dollar alone, [selling] the plunder of the meadows to Boston and New York" (p.228). Thoreau, aware of the impact he has on the natural world, takes just what he needs.

Thoreau enjoys the fall foliage surrounding Walden Pond very much, especially as the leaves start to change colours and become more vibrant. "Ah, many a narrative their colour conveyed!" (p.231) he exclaims. And as the weeks passed, the unique personality of each tree emerged, and it admired its reflection in the lake's placid surface.

Thoreau passes the time by taking strolls across the ice after the pond has frozen over. The ice's internal bubbles are not as numerous or noticeable as those below it. Thoreau discovers how the bubbles function when the ice melts "like a burning glass," thanks to the "little air-guns" that help the ice "crack and whoop" when he breaks off pieces to study. (p.238)

Thoreau awakens with the impression that he has some query to ask Nature, a question his dreams have not answered. He looks out over the frozen countryside, where the snow falls deeply on the soil covered in fresh pine trees and the incline of the hill where his house is situated. He believes this frozen picture is calling him, Forward. "Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask." (p.273).

Every morning, Thoreau obtains drinking water by slicing through the pond’s ice. As he bends down to drink, he notes the peaceful fish salon was illuminated by a gentle light that appeared to be coming from an overture of ground glass. Marveling at this undersea beauty, Thoreau observes, "Heaven is under our feet as well as above our heads" (p.274).

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Ice fishermen assemble on the pond, and Thoreau observes as they capture wonderfully colored pickerel. He also ponders the unusual life cycle represented in the act of fishing: "The perch swallows the grub-worm, the pickerel swallows the perch, and the fisherman swallows the pickerel; and thus all the chinks in the scale of being are filled"(p.275). Thoreau wonders half-seriously whether Walden Pond is as deep as the people claim it to be or if "all ponds [are] shallow" (p.277).

ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF "LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER" BY HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CREVECOEUR

"Letters from an American Farmer" written by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782, features a character named James the Farmer, who praises the virtues of agrarian life while also criticizing what he sees as more heartless practices, such as slavery in the southern colonies and lawlessness on the frontier. James is first nervous about fulfilling Mr. F. B.'s request for these letters, but the Englishman's reassurance that "writing letters are nothing more than conversing on paper" gives him hope that he will be able to do so (4). So James picks up a pen and documents his travels from Pennsylvania and Nantucket to Charles Town and the western frontier. Inviting investigation of American identity as it is conceived and tested throughout this turbulent transition from colony to republic, Crèvecoeur's letters and essays span the emotional spectrum from the optimism sparked by industriousness to the agony ignited by war.

Myths contributed to the consolidation and preservation of a strong relationship between man and the earth or nature. Bidlingmeier, in his book "I Have Heard the Land Sing:" shows Crevecoeur's "Letters from an American Farmer" that one of the things rooted in American culture is the adherence to the land and its preservation as the identity of the community. (5)

Crèvecoeur stands for the broad start of the world's envisioned environment. He well recognizes that nature is dynamic, and he makes use of nature in numerous ways: *Letters* portray human nature as semi-ethic fables that use the natural world as a stage for morality lessons that are heavily metaphorical (6). It seems, without a doubt, that Crèvecoeur is fond of rural life and simple farming, and this is what Jennifer Rae Greeson revealed, as she found a watercolour painted by Crèvecoeur between the years of 1773 and 1775, displayed his earlier exemplification of American life in which he obviously portrayed himself as a traditional planter rather than a yeoman farmer. (7).

The book emphasizes European-American distinctions. The minister raises the subject to show James that he is competent to write to Mr. F.B. While Italy's "half-ruined amphitheaters and the filthy fevers" "must fill the mind with the most dismal thoughts," everything in America "would inspire the thinking visitor with the most charitable ideals," according to the minister (8). Europe has old class structures, monarchies, and religious tyranny, whereas America is "modern, peaceful, and benevolent" (p13).

James quickly celebrates that America "is not formed, as in Europe, of big lords who own everything and a herd of peasants who have nothing" (p39–40). He emphasizes these distinctions throughout the book, reminding Mr. F.B. that America is more egalitarian by pointing out that "the rigorous norms of Christianity as practiced in Europe are lost" in America (p48).

James often draws metaphorical analogies between people and animals or presents animal behaviour as a model for humans. He praises bees and birds, saying "the entire economy of what we proudly call the brute creation is magnificent in every circumstance" and better than "the defective institutions of men" (p35). He uses his livestock to illustrate his thoughts on government. "The law is to us just what I am in my barnyard, a bridle and check to prevent the powerful and greedy from abusing the timid and weak," he says (p30).

Comparisons between plants and humans, especially on American soil's appropriateness for healthy plants and cultures, highlight the theme of settings molding people.

James who wrote most of the letters is kind. "I provided you nothing more than what conventional hospitality dictated," he tells Mr. F.B. (p9). He is likewise humble about his writing abilities, expressing astonishment that Mr. F.B. does not have "persons more enlightened and more educated" (p 9–10) to write to and stating that depicting life in America takes "a range of qualities which [James] does not possess" (p. 9). James is modest and content with "the limited circles in which [he] perpetually revolves" and "never owned nor wished to possess anything more than what might be gained or created by the joint work of [his] family" (p38). He wants his children to "be like their father,

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decent, solid, independent American farmers" and "envy no man's prosperity" (p 38). Despite celebrating simple American life, he is first terrified of writing to Mr. F.B. since he is an educated Englishman.

In "Letters from an American farmer" Crèvecoeur tries to blend between urging respect for the environment and returning to the cultivation of American lands on the one hand, and acquiring optimal values when joining this wise profession on the other hand. Whereas, the concept of Crèvecoeur's "environmental determinism" proves that man should stop supporting the destructive concept of the environment and seek to embrace the idea of environmental and ethical peace and integrity in behavior that guarantees respect for the environment. [(9)].

CONCLUSION

This study concludes how chaotic traditions can be disciplined and compel our relationship with the environment, as well as how representations shape our sense of place. Thoreau defends the environment through his literature and recalls his times in Walden Pone that he learned from the mundane tasks of bean picking as he learned from books, as the chirping of birds represents the peace of the present life. He advocates being in the present and quotes from the sages of the Burmese Indians and the Confucianists of China who have one phrase for "yesterday, today, and tomorrow", as a message that if we want to live in bliss, we have to pay great attention to our environment. Thoreau invites people to coexist peacefully with nature in an amicable way. When he reminded the pine tree that it lived in peace until its death, he was able to take advantage of its roots to cook food. It is a moral lesson to take only what is necessary from nature because it is our environment that contains us and guarantees our prosperity.

On the other hand, the study highlights the contribution of "Letters from an American Farmer" that Crèvecoeur, through James, has contributed to that one of the most important cultural commitments of the American people is adherence to environmental preservation. James clarifies there is a difference between European and American general culture. America has trends and cultures that are more suitable for people than those in Europe, where people can return to a decent life represented by returning to embracing the environment. James further believes that the symbolism of bees exemplifies hard work and does not allude to the misuse of natural resources or underestimate them. It is worth noting that Crèvecoeur used the concept of "Environmental determinism" which is a study of how the material environment tends to lead American society toward specific and ethical development patterns. It is also referred to as geography determinism or climatologic determinism.

Since environmental challenges are now part of our lives, ecocriticism seeks to explain how humans and nonhumans may cohabit. Ecocriticism tackles this issue to make literary studies more ecologically conscious. The environment has become a major political, personal, and philosophical problem for the average American. Due to growing worries (and ocean levels), a massive influx of fiction, nonfiction, movies, and music that address the topic, directly and indirectly, has entered our daily social use. As terms like "green" and "feasible" become more common, we may discuss the environment and our connection.

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NOTES

[1] Lawrence Buell, 2009, *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. John Wiley & Sons, p.17.

[2] James S. Finley, 2017, *Henry David Thoreau in Context*, Cambridge: University Press, p.161.

[3] Henry D. Thoreau, 2004, *Walden: A fully annotated edition*, Yale University Press, p.14.

[4] John, J. Hector St., 1983, *Letters from an American farmer*. No. 6141. Jazzybee Verlag, p.5.

[5] S. S. L. Bidlingmeier, 2019, "I Have Heard the Land Sing:"(Re) reading American Landscapes in Shawn Wong's Homebase and Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men. *Iperstoria*, 14, p.191.

[6] Lauren E. Lafauci, 2016, *Encountering early American environments*, 2016, p.468.

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[7] Jennifer Rae Greeson, 2003, "Colonial Planter to American Farmer: South, Nation, and Decolonization in Crèvecoeur." *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*. Ed. Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, p.106.

[8] John, J. Hector St., 1983, *Letters from an American farmer*. No. 6141. Jazzybee Verlag, p.13.

[9] Takahashi Tsutomu, 1990, *The Myth of the Land and Crevecoeur's Vision of Self in Letters from an American Farmer*, 1990, p.105.

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