

A Study of the Ecological Ethics in British Romantic Nature Poetry

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Abstract: This paper aims to reassess the unique value and significance of English Romantic poetry, using the new theoretical concept of “eco-ethics” in ethical literary criticism. The paper argues that the English Romantic poets of the 19th century were keen on nature, and they did not simply depict the natural scenery, but were permeated with profound thoughts about man and nature. Whether it was Blake as a pioneer, Wordsworth as a Lake Poet, or Shelley, who was famous for his nature lyric poems, all of them had a typical sense of ecological ethics. Even Byron defined human existence as the interpenetration of culture and nature. His socio-ecological outlook is also full of ecological ethical consciousness. Romantic poets tried to get rid of the loneliness after “natural selection,” to think and explore with natural imagery, or to find the connection between man and nature through them, to build a “community of destiny” in the real sense of man and nature, and to pursue the idea of man’s compatibility with nature. The concept is characterized by its complex and profound eco-ethical thoughts.

Keywords: English poetry; romanticism; ecological ethics; reverence for nature

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标题: 论英国浪漫主义自然诗篇中的生态伦理思想

内容摘要: 本文旨在以文学伦理学批评中新的概念“生态伦理”为理论支撑,来重估英国浪漫主义诗歌所具有的独到的价值与意义。我们认为 19 世纪的英国浪漫主义诗人,热衷于自然抒写,但不是单纯地描写自然景色,而是渗透着对于人与自然的深邃思考。无论是作为先驱的布莱克,还是湖畔派诗人华兹华斯,或以自然抒情诗闻名于世的雪莱,都有着典型的生态伦理意识。即使是与华兹华斯发生论争的拜伦,也将人类的存在定义为文化与自然的相互渗透。其社会生态观中,同样贯穿着生态伦理意识。浪漫主义诗人力图摆脱“自然选择”之后的孤独感,以自然意象来进行思维和探索,或通过它们来寻找人与自然的关联,构建人与自然真正意义上的“命运共同体”,追

求人与自然契合的理念，呈现出复杂而深邃的生态伦理思想。

关键词：英国诗歌；浪漫主义；生态伦理；崇尚自然

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Introduction

The impassioned writing on nature by the British Romantic poets profoundly reflects the relationship between man and nature, boasting distinct contemporary relevance. These Romantic poets used natural imagery as a means to explore or establish a connection between man and nature. Their works are imbued with complex and profound considerations of ecological ethics.

As for the considerations of ecological ethics, according to the editors of *Western Ecological Ethics*, the central issues of ecological ethics encompass the following subjects: 1. The existence of a moral connection between humans and the natural world, including non-human animals and plants. 2. The issue of value relationships between humans and nature—whether all humans possess inherent dignity and rights, and if these values and rights extend to non-human natural entities.¹ These questions are aptly addressed by British Romantic poets. They wrote about nature, exploring not only the independent value of natural imagery but also the shared values and ideologies that affect both humans and the natural world. Thus, the primary function of ecological ethics is to offer moral lessons for human existence.

I. The Ethical Metaphors of British Romantic Nature Imagery

The natural lyricism and the reverence for nature in English poetry have a long history and tradition. Moreover, the course of nature writing reflects the progress of mankind and the process of human civilization. If in ancient times, poets wrote about nature out of fear of natural forces, then, with the development of natural science, especially the geographic discovery and the publication of Copernicus' *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, people's world outlook has undergone fundamental changes. It was out of this spirit of exploration that the English Romantic poets were keen to write about nature. What's more, "poetry more than any other form of speech reveals the vital signs and warning signs of our tenancy on

1 See Zhou Guowen ed., *Western Ecological Ethics*, Beijing: China Forestry Press, 2017, 2.

earth” (Felstiner 4).

Influenced by Rousseau’s thought of “the return to nature,” the Romantic poets excelled in the depiction of natural landscapes. “His recognition of the importance of the feelings and emotions led the way in the development of the Romantic sensibility, and his awareness of the interaction between the mind and the natural world anticipated Wordsworth” (Raimond 226).

British Romantic poetry can be divided into two distinct periods of development. The early Romantic poets, represented by Wordsworth and Coleridge, were known as the Lake Poets. The second generation of Romantic poets included Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. They were all typical “nature poets.”

As for “the poetry of nature,” Charles G. D. Roberts, a renowned Canadian poet, offered a clear definition of it, categorizing it into two distinct types. The first type “deals with mere description,” while the second “treats of nature in some one of its many relations with humanity” (Roberts ix-x). This clear definition provides a helpful framework for our discussion. It’s crucial to note that not all nature poetry reflects an ecological consciousness or a spirit of exploration. The poetry of “mere description,” despite its focus on the depiction of specific poetic materials or, at most, the expression of natural imagery, doesn’t necessarily qualify as “poetry of nature” in the strictest sense. On the other hand, “poetry of nature” that examines the relationship between humans and nature often articulates the vibrant connection between external natural landscapes and the profound depths of the human soul. This form of poetry acts as a powerful metaphor for the ethical relationship between humanity and nature.

The nature-inspired poems written by British Romantic poets are vibrant testaments to the spirit of exploration. They employ the distinctive imagination typical of Romantic poetry to delve into the human psyche and its interaction with the natural world.

Even in poems not clearly centered on nature, natural imagery serves as a pivotal tool. For instance, Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty” conveys the emotion of love through the potent use of nature-inspired metaphors, thus resonating deeply with the readers. In the first stanza, Byron wrote, “She walks in beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies; / And all that’s best of dark and bright / Meet in her aspect and her eyes: / Thus mellowed to that tender light / Which heaven to gaudy day denies” (19).

In this lyric poem, the poet skillfully uses grand natural imagery, such as the night sky and stars, drawing parallels between tangible visuals and abstract

concepts. For instance, “night” is used as a metaphor for “beauty,” while “dark and bright” represent “her aspect and her eyes,” hence conveying an air of mystery. This sense of enigma is further amplified by the use of natural imagery, such as the “starry sky” and “cloudless” night sky. Proceeding to the second stanza, the woman’s appearance is portrayed in such exquisite details that her beauty becomes the focal point, leaving no room for the slightest adjustment: “One shade the more, one ray the less, / Had half impair’d the nameless grace” (Byron 19). In the final stanza, the emphasis shifts inward, underlining the days “in goodness spent” that are overflowing with “innocent” love.

Shelley stands as a typical figure in the realm of nature writing. The defining feature of Shelley’s nature-inspired poetry lies in its ability to animate nature, infusing it with a spiritual and dynamic imagery. This imagery is not only tangible and material but also imbued with a strong pantheistic idea.

While Shelley’s nature-themed poems do seek a potent subjective fusion with natural forces, they diverge from the Wordsworthian hope and primitivism. Instead, his works delve into deep contemplation of life, often tinged with melancholy and sorrow. He even introduces a profound allegorical dimension characteristic of modern poetry, where nature isn’t simply depicted for its own sake but embodies a broader sense of moral and emotional truth. For instance, considering the poem “The Sensitive Plant,” critics often found its meaning somewhat elusive, yet it vividly portrays the transition from innocence and beauty to the modern wilderness in the human realm.

Undoubtedly, and perhaps more significantly, he persistently emphasizes the intricate blend of natural scene descriptions with societal conditions and the human psyche. He employs all kinds of methods of juxtaposing appearance with reality, and the present with the future, to eloquently convey the splendor of nature, the afflictions of the earth, the melancholy of reality, and the aspirations for the future. For instance, in his poem “Lines Written among the Euganean Hills,” he perceives the beauty of the cosmos and mountains, which prompts reflections on the troubles and transformations of the earth. Nonetheless, the most iconic nature-inspired lyric poems are “The Cloud,” “To a Skylark,” and “Ode to the West Wind,” collectively renowned as Shelley’s lyrical “trilogy” or “three odes.”

In “The Cloud,” Shelley skillfully personifies these ethereal formations, assuming the mantle of their herald. He crafts a vivid portrait of the ever-changing but never-dead clouds that deliver rainwater to the earth. Shelley’s portrayal is presented in the first person, characterized by exquisite lines, a leisurely rhythm, and an uplifting tone. It brims with self-assured optimism and an expansive, majestic

imagination.

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
 And the nursling of the Sky;
 I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;
 I change, but I cannot die. (Shelley 412)

The poem “To a Skylark” exudes an even greater degree of fervor and ebullience. Its rhythmic composition mimics the melodious warble of the lark, alternating between swift and slow cadences, encapsulating the harmonious image of the skylark ascending from the earth and its song cascading down from the heavens.

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
 Bird thou never wert,
 That from Heaven, or near it,
 Pourest thy full heart
 In profuse strains of unpremeditated art. (Shelley 426)

In the poem, the skylark evolves into more than a mere bird; it becomes an embodiment and spokesperson of the poet’s innermost thoughts. It transforms into a prophet-like figure, relentlessly seeking the light, rebelling against the world, and unfurling the wings of imagination to ascend to an ideal realm. The skylark represents both the idealized self-image of the poet and the universal image of nature in its pantheistic essence.

Like a poet hidden
 In the light of thought,
 Singing hymns unbidden,
 Till the world is wrought
 To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not. (Shelley 426)

In the famous poem “Ode to the West Wind,” the poet uses his imagination to vividly depict the image of the west wind, which exemplifies both destruction and preservation. This imagery beautifully combines the awakening of the earth, the poet’s yearning to recover his inspiration, and his aspiration for his poems to breathe new life into humanity. The expression of the west wind harmoniously blends emotions with scenery, conveying an unparalleled optimism captured in the

famous line, “If winter comes, can spring be far away?” (Shelley 395) Shelley’s poem not only captures the changing seasons of nature and the arrival of spring but also embodies the belief in the necessity of dismantling the old to establish the new, the revival of imagination, and the profound significance of the poet’s mission as a “prophet.”

The most typical ethical metaphor of Romantic nature imagery can be found in Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Here, the crew, symbolizing humanity, is safeguarded by the albatross, embodying nature, guiding the ship away from danger and back on course: “At length did cross an Albatross, /Thorough the fog it came; /As if it had been a Christian soul, /We hailed it in God’s name” (Coleridge 65). Tragically, the ancient mariner murders the albatross, inciting a catastrophic conflict between mankind and nature. The entire crew perishes from thirst, leaving the ancient mariner isolated in agony, unable to court death, and receiving his deserved punishment. The death of the entire crew and the torment endured by the ancient mariner serve as powerful ethical cautions concerning the relationship between man and nature.

II. Returning to Nature: From Lonely Emotions to the Intimate Alliance

British poets boast a rich history and tradition of nature-inspired writing. This tradition not only reflects the evolution of humanity but also mirrors the progression of civilization itself.

Following the 17th century, the tradition of nature writing continued with numerous poets, the most emblematic of whom were the Romantics. Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley, for example, transformed the genre by focusing not just on the aesthetic of natural scenery, but also on the intricate relationship between humans and nature. Their works transcended mere lyricism, delving into the realm of eco-ethical consciousness. Although the seeds of this eco-ethical consciousness could be traced back to 17th-century metaphysical poetry, it was during the Romantic period that it truly flourished.

The concept of “eco-ethical consciousness” is effectively explained in the first volume of *Studies in the Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism*, edited by Professors Nie Zhenzhao and Su Hui. This book introduces the idea of “ecological ethical criticism,” which examines ecological issues in literary works from an ethical perspective. It is still considered part of the broader category of ethical literary criticism. Therefore, exploring eco-ethical issues continues to provide moral insights regarding human existence and offers ethical guidance that promotes harmonious coexistence with nature.

Examining the moral admonitions concerning the harmony between humans and nature, Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and Shelley's "three odes" serve as notable examples. In "The Cloud," "To the Skylark," and "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley skillfully merges descriptions of natural landscapes with societal conditions and human emotions. Using various techniques of contrasting appearance with reality and the present with the future, Shelley deeply conveys the elegance of nature, the distress of the world, the despondency of reality, and the aspirations for the future.

The poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" is widely considered as one of Wordsworth's most exquisite tributes to nature. Wordsworth is regarded as "Nature's Priest," "The poet's relationship to the natural world was central to William Wordsworth's life and work, and nearly all of his poems incorporate this theme in some way" (Glancy 176). In this poem, Wordsworth demonstrates a profound and almost mystical reverence for the natural world.

From the point of view of artistic structure, the poem, from "lonely" in the first line to "dances with [...]" in the last line, typically reflects the idea of getting rid of the sense of solitude and pursuing the harmony between human and nature. The opening lines of the poem read as follows:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (Wordsworth 204)

These lines mirror a profound sense of solitude and a distinct assertion of individuality, immediately following the culmination of "natural selection." After over 20 lines of introspection and vivid portrayal, the poet pens the concluding two lines of the poem, articulating, "And then my heart with pleasure fills, /And dances with the daffodils" (Wordsworth 204).

From the text, it's apparent that the final two lines have emerged from their initial "loneliness," achieving a profound knowledge about life and nature, thus experiencing a "sense of community." Moreover, the poem profoundly illustrates that the creation of this "sense of community" should not only be manifested among all human societies and nations, but also between humans and nature. It suggests that a genuine "community of destiny" should be established through the

collaborative efforts of humans and nature to attain harmony and unity. This concept should also be exemplified in the relationship between humans and nature.

The renowned poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” uses imagery that encapsulates the four elements of nature, depicting a realm where man and nature exist in sublime harmony. In this famous work by Wordsworth, the lyrical hero initially experiences loneliness, yet finds harmony, joy, and contentment within nature as he delves into its exploration. In the opening stanza, the poet, wandering through the hills and valleys, gazes upon the lake, spotting the daffodils swaying in the breeze. The second stanza sees the flowers evoking in the poet the image of twinkling stars in the night sky. The use of the term “Milky Way” elevates a sense of transcendence, forging a connection to the gleaming waves in the subsequent verse. By this point, all four natural elements—water, earth, air, and fire—have made their appearance. These elements are represented by the “lake” and “waves” (water), the “vales and hills” (earth), the “breeze” and “the milky way” (air), and the “I” and “flash” (fire). As the poem progresses to its final two stanzas, the poet, amidst the four elements, discerns something extraordinary, perceiving the dancing daffodils as more captivating than the rippling waves on the lake. In this moment of discovery that transcends the four elements, the poet’s loneliness subsides. He aligns himself with these “joyful companions,” experiencing joy, harmony, and a strong bond within the natural elements of water, earth, air, and fire. From this moment, joy and harmony spring forth from the poet’s heart. He realizes that this moment of enlightenment will bestow upon him endless treasures, perpetually illuminating his thoughts and enriching his life.

In considering the use of imagery and structural organization, a distinct aspect of the poem is the recurring motif of a dancing image in each stanza—initially embodying flowers, then waves, and ultimately, the mind. The poem commences with an expansive bush of daffodils, dancing and swaying in the breeze. These lively flowers then evoke in the poet a connection with the twinkling stars of the night sky. The use of the term “Milky Way” infuses the poem with a sense of transcendence beyond the mundane world, serving also as a bridge to the shimmering waves beneath. In the conclusion, the poetic persona assimilates into these “joyous companions,” dispelling his worries and solitude instantaneously. The sentiments of detachment and loneliness undergo a miraculous transformation into a belief in the harmonious unity of mankind and nature, incited by the enchanting lakeside flowers. The diverse elements appear to converge in the “dance,” bestowing upon the entire poem an uplifting and ebullient tone.

Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” similarly employs the four elements of

ancient Greek philosophy, reflecting the unity in the relationship between man and nature. The opening three stanzas of the “Ode to the West Wind” encapsulate the descriptions of three out of the four natural elements: earth (which disperses the seeds of life across the ground), air (which instigates storms and thunder in the atmosphere), and water (which agitates turbulent waves in the sea), yet the fourth element, fire, is conspicuously absent. It isn’t until the fourth stanza that the poet’s personal essence makes its appearance within the poem:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
 If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
 A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share [...] (Shelley 395)

From this point on, the poet’s ego enters into the imagery of nature, participates in their activities, and produces a spiritual penetration and interplay between them:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
 What if my leaves are falling like its own!
 The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
 Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
 My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one! (Shelley 395)

Toward the conclusion of the poem, the metaphorical “fire,” representative of another aspect of nature, finally emerges. This “fire” is symbolic of the poet’s inner self from which a peculiar melody ascends, merging with the poet’s elemental “fire.” This union generates sparks that scatter across the earth, arousing it with prophetic whispers. The poem illustrates the natural and seamless connection between the landscape and the poet’s sentiments while showcasing the poem’s well-structured and distinct layers. It is this powerful alignment between subjectivity and natural forces, along with the profound allegorical significance, that the poet seeks in his nature-inspired verse.

III. The Ethical Value: The Community of Human and Natural Lives

The Romantic literary movement, emerging in late 18th-century Europe, stood as a dynamic convergence of artistic and intellectual ideologies with a distinct inclination towards the exploration of nature. It centered around the articulation of

personal emotions and imagination, presenting a stark contrast to the perspectives and structures inherent in Neoclassicism. Further, it actively challenged prevailing societal institutions and traditions. The ethical values embodied by this movement are diverse and multifaceted.

Firstly, Romantic poets exhibited a profound sense of ecological ethics. Counteracting the notion propounded by scholars like Thomas Aquinas that only humans possess ultimate moral value, American eco-ethicist Francisco J. Benzoni affirms, “Humans are part of nature, even if they are the highest part. According to this perspective, all creatures are recognized as possessing moral value” (Benzoni 5). Assigning moral value to all living entities is particularly crucial, as the realm of plants and animals forms an “international community of destiny” with humankind. Here, plants and animals are equal members, sharing common attributes with humans. British Romantic poets emphasized the ethical consideration of non-human entities like plants and animals to promote a harmonious ecological relationship that supports the sustainable development of this community of destiny. In their works, the non-human world of plants and animals is portrayed as being in an interdependent relationship with humans. For instance, in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the poet transcends mere descriptions of natural landscapes to unveil the spiritual potential of nature in bringing tranquility to the human psyche. In his verses, the bond between mankind and nature manifests through seemingly unrelated non-human elements or natural images such as wilderness and bushes.

But oft, in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind [...] (Wordsworth 91-92)

The comprehension of natural imagery allows the clamor and commotion of urban life, along with the fatigue and monotony of the human psyche, to retreat to a serene sanctuary. Under the influence of such imagery, these aspects harmoniously merge with the most pristine thoughts of humanity.

Secondly, it prompts an ethical epiphany, prompting reflection on the historical human perspective of nature. Since the era of ancient Greece, anthropocentric thinking has prevailed. Aristotle asserted, “Plants exist for the benefit of animals, and some animals exist for the benefit of others. Those which are domesticated serve human beings for use as well as for food; wild animals, too, in most cases

if not in all, serve to furnish us not only with food, but also with other kinds of assistance, such as the provision of clothing and similar aids to life” (Aristotle 23). This linear perception of the food chain and the notion of human supremacy have been widely discussed. Eco-ethics, however, aims to dismantle the constraints of traditional ethics, which restrict the focus and field of study to humans, and accentuate the shared fate encompassing all creatures in the natural world. Patrick Curry, an eco-ethicist, fully acknowledges the ethical connection between humans and other life forms: “We are merely a fraction of life on Earth; our dependence on the rest of the planet significantly outweighs its need for us; our relationships with the planet inherently possess a moral dimension” (Curry 13). Given that humans and other natural beings are equal participants in a “community of destiny,” the ethical identities, dilemmas, and constructs arising in the non-human world of flora and fauna offer invaluable lessons and ethical implications for human society. They serve as ethical cautionary tales in certain respects, even functioning as an ethical alarm in some specific aspects.

Thirdly, it emphasizes the recognition of ethical identity and the establishment of a community encompassing both humans and natural life. The realm of non-human flora and fauna also possesses its distinct ethical identity. The understanding of ethical identity is not exclusive to humans; non-human entities also bear their individual ethical identity.

Ever since the advent of the first industrial revolution in England during the 1860s, the notion of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature has gained significant importance, primarily due to humanity’s disproportionate demands on nature. This concept has captured the concentrated attention of scholars worldwide. For instance, in the book *Ecological Ethics*, the author assertively maintains that the “mutually beneficial evolution of mankind and nature, in tandem with the exploration and realization of moral relationships that both ‘enhance human existence’ and ‘foster ecological equilibrium,’ serve as the inception and fundamental premise” (Ye 7-8). Because of such a fundamental premise, the eco-ethics assumes that ethical norms can and do govern human behavior toward the natural world. A theory of ecological ethics, then, must go on to explain what these norms are, to whom or to what humans have responsibilities, and how these responsibilities are justified.

Although the idea of “mutually beneficial evolution of mankind and nature” is a very recent suggestion, it shares many similarities with the ideas and principles of British Romanticism, particularly the insistence on harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Nature, being the life-giving cradle for all creatures, including

humans, is the fundamental condition for human survival and development. Humanity relies on nature for sustenance; therefore, we must respect, adhere to, and protect it. Disrespect for nature and defiance of its laws will only invite retaliation. If nature is systematically devastated, human survival and development will be akin to a river without a source or a tree without roots. Thus, we must safeguard nature and the ecological environment as if it were our own eyes, and encourage the evolution of a new paradigm of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

We believe that the concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, along with the notion of a “community of lives,” is deeply rooted in the acceptance of advanced global culture and the meticulous dissection of literary classics.

It is through this lens that we can discern the intense ecological ethical thought imbued within English Romantic poetry. The writings of Romantic poets often depict a clear moral relationship between humans and the natural world of flora and fauna, and inanimate objects. Furthermore, the non-human world portrayed by these poets bears its own intrinsic value.

Conclusion

Although it can be challenging to reach a consensus on the definitions of eco-ethics among scholars, it is clear that eco-ethics serves as a moral principle guiding human attitudes toward the environment. As an ideology, eco-ethics primarily aims to regulate human behavior and uphold the “duty to preserve species, habitats, and biological diversity” (Kisner 154).

While Romantic poetry often focuses on the non-human world, its main objective is to provide moral guidance and ethical insights for social progress within the human realm. British Romantic poets avoided celebrating human-centered ideals, such as the conquest and transformation of nature. Instead, they consistently explored spirituality and emotion through non-human imagery found in nature, like a blade of grass, a stone, or a piece of wood.

These poets advocated for a return to our inherent nature and sought harmony between humans and the natural elements that embody the true essence of life. The ecological ethics embedded in their works deserve our attention and thoughtful reflection.

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