The Earth’s Call: Human and Nature in Anglo-American Literature of the 19th and the 20th Centuries

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ABSTRACT: Ecological problem is becoming more serious with each passing day in today’s society. “Eco-literature” that manifests the relation between human and nature and appeals for environmental protection has gradually become people’s focused issue. This thesis firstly reviews the development history of “Human and Nature” in European literature history before the 20th century. Then, it focuses on analyzing the “Human and Nature” text in British and American classical literature of both the 19th century and the 20th century. These texts can be concluded as “Arcadia”, “Sad Melody of Heroes”, “Road of Returning to Native Place”, and “Thinking of Green”. The analyses respectively extract the ecological ethics and values contained in these texts. At last, this thesis discusses the “Human and Nature” relation in traditional culture of the east, so as to call on today’s Chinese writers to answer “the earth’s call” and bring Chinese literature to the age of ecology as soon as possible.

Keywords: British and American literature; ecology; human and nature; conception of nature

1 INTRODUCTION

Although the ecology with modern significance and ecological trend of thought appeared after the middle of the 20th century, they didn’t appear without foundation.

Instead, they had already obtained abundant nourishment and enlightenment from the centuries-old western ideology and culture, such as philosophic concepts about nature in each historical period. As individuals, literature artists are also inevitably in the historical inheritance and development. Their perspectives and attitudes towards nature are decided by their philosophic thoughts in most cases [1, 2].

Since the second half of the 19th century, although mechanical view of nature still prevailed as the mainstream ideology, western realm of thought had started to have deep criticism on it.

This criticism trend also provided necessary philosophical premise for the rising of modern environmental protection movement. Marx and Engels proposed the developing materialistic discriminating conception of nature on the basis of predecessors’ work, especially on German Classical Philosophy. Marx pointed out that nature is not something that remains the same since heaven was separated from earth; instead, it is a result of people’s actions from generation to generation. Engels pointed out that we don’t rule nature in the same way as how a conqueror rules a nation.

On the contrary, we ourselves and our flesh, blood, and brain all belong to nature and exist in it. Our overall governance imposed on the fact that nature is based on the fact that we are stronger than all the other animals and we can get to know and properly utilize natural laws [3, 4].

Since the 20th century, some philosophers and ideologists in the west have realized that we need to carefully conduct self-examination on our ideological traditions and rebuild human’s conception of nature. They have tried to explain the moral philosophical relation between human and nature from different dimensions; and have proposed various new approaches and schemes to coordinate the relation between human and nature. By analyzing the evolution progress of western conception development of nature, this thesis shows the call from the earth and looks forward to hearing louder voices in China to call for ecological protection.

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2 REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCHES

In 1930s, American ecologist Leopold proposed “The Land Ethic” [5]. Frankfurt school noticed the scientific tradition of humanism was losing its enlightenment significance and turning to become new totalitarian power and governing strength of controlling people’s existence. Marku pointed out that modern technology had accelerated the alienation between human and nature and also cut off human’s ethical purport on nature, forcing people to stay in an enslaved state with less and less freedom [6]. The famous American ecologist Ralston proposed “Theory of Nature Values” which builds people’s ethical obligations for nature on the basis of the intrinsic value of nature [7]. French philosopher Schweizer proposed the moral philosophy of “Reverence for Life” in 1920s [8]. German philosopher Heidegger saw the enormous danger existing in the technological world in 1930s and spoke out the urgent appeal for “Saving the Earth” [9].

Mengqin Cao discussed the authentic relation between human and nature from perspective of deep ecology [10]. Yuanyou Shui proposed the pattern to construct relation between human and nature [11]. Chicheng Chen analyzed the social objective of reconciling human and nature, and objecting to put human and nature in opposite positions. He also proposed a path for human and nature to coexist in harmony [12]. Junren Jiang proposed there are three relations between human and nature: already-be relation, naturally-be relation, and actually-be relation [13]. Since 21st century, Yanqin Lu proposed the common community destiny shared by human and nature [14]. Guanghui Zhao proposed that ecological civilization is historical necessity for the uniform relationship development of human and nature with basis of practice [15].

3 “HUMAN AND NATURE” IN EUROPEAN LITERATURE HISTORY

3.1 “Human and nature” in literature before the 20th century

The earliest reflection of “human and nature” in European literature can be traced back to the various fairy tales of each country. In primitive society, humans were weak and feeble in front of nature. Natural force was respected as God by humans. All the fairy tales about the origin of human contain information that humans come from nature and are inseparable from it. In the meantime, fairy tales also record the arduous struggle between human and nature with human’s respect to powerful heroes who can defeat nature.

As one of the main origins of western literature, Bible has very complex reflection on “human and nature”. On one hand, it contains some anti-ecology opinions criticized by today’s ideologist, such as it is God that has authorized humans the right to govern nature. These opinions have left extremely important influence on literary creation in later ages. On the other hand, Bible also regards humans as trustees of the earth. The earth is a gift that God gives to humans which should be taken good care of by humans. God requires humans to respect and love nature. The love for everything on the earth is the love for God.

French enlightening thinker and litterateur Rousseau held an important position that functioned as a connecting link between the preceding and the following in western ideological history of nature. He proposed that humans should obey natural laws and restrict our desires. We should control development within a range which nature can bear; and we shall never have fantasy or attempt to finally defeat nature. Humans have already paid a lot for neglecting nature. He also criticized industrial civilization that distorted and violated natural laws. When commanding humans regarded nature as a plunder and the industrial revolution was growing vigorously, Rousseau called for “Returning to Nature” loud and clear. He thought humans had already been caught in morass in social progress and had finally become the tyrant for nature and ourselves. Humans should return to the simple and unadorned nature: regain their natural instincts; and return to some original state. On his initiative, a trend of finding nature and reaffirming nature appeared in the circle of literature and art. Description about “nature” could be seen everywhere in literary works. Hence, “nature” officially entered people’s mind. Westerners turned a brand new page on properly knowing and naturally treating nature. It is one of the most important achievements of romanticism.

Influenced by Rousseau, German Sturm und Drang litterateurs expressed their worship to nature and their praise for simple humanity and pastoral life without influence from civilization in their works.

Litterateur Schiller thought poets could be inspired by nature at any time. Nature is the only fire that can ignite and warm poet’s spirit. The fundamental issue of poem is the relation between human and nature. He said, “Poets either become nature or look for it. The former makes one a simple poet while the latter makes him a sentimental poet.” The relation between human and nature is closely related to humanity. When humanity stays in internal harmony, humans constitute an inseparable part of nature, meaning humans are nature. In this situation, poets can create simple poems. When humanity is in a splitting status of being sentimental and rational, humans are in an opposite position to that of nature. In this situation, poets can only look for nature through their ideals. Thus, sentimental poems come out.

Since the middle of the 19th century, there have been a large number of works about “evolutionism literature” which manifest the fierce conflicts between
human and nature and among humans. Some of such works show absolute support and belief in evolution theory, and some show certain suspect and worry even if there is belief in evolution theory.

3.2 The influence of romanticism and thought trend of evolutionism on “human and nature”

3.2.1 The influence of romanticism on “human and nature”

By the end of the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th century, a literature movement of romanticism that caused a radical change in western awareness rapidly spread. It almost left influence on every writer’s individual belief and literature trend at that time. Romanticists generally believed God exists in all things on earth. God is thing-in-itself. God is nature. They highly praised pantheism opinions such as assimilation of human and nature. Conception of nature in called romanticism which was widely divergent from mechanism to the age of reason. Under its influence, almost every romanticism litterateur respected nature as their teacher. They loved nature and tended to be closer to it. Conception of nature in romanticism could also represent disapproval of industrial revolution and its environment pollution and destruction since the 18th century. Romanticism writers directly expressed their hatred to pollution and destruction since the 18th century. Revolution in romanticism could also represent disadvantage of individualism and its environment pollution and destruction since the 18th century. Romanticism writers directly expressed their hatred to pollution and destruction since the 18th century. Romanticism writers directly expressed their hatred to pollution and destruction since the 18th century.

The organic theory in romanticism has provided fundamental philosophical framework for today’s ecological science and natural resources protection. Merchant once commented: romanticism in the early 19th century thought there was a viable and lively ground substance that combines a whole creature. It opposes mechanism and returns to organic theory. For example, Emerson took the wilds as fountain of spiritual insight. Thoreau regarded rocks, ponds, and mountains as evidences of life with vigor. All of these have influenced and inspired environmental protection movement in the late 19th century and early ecologists.

3.2.2 The influence of evolutionism on “human and nature”

In 1859, Darwin published Origin of Species which marked the birth of evolutionism. Theory of evolution is a great impact for western dualism philosophy. It brings people back to nature and destroys the unfounded attempt of separating human from nature and regarding human as master in the high rack. Ecological ethics fully supports identity and continuity of life in evolution theory. It agrees that human’s appearance is not a sudden event; it is a result of life evolution and continuity. Thus, there is no reason for humans to feel proud or be arrogant. Humans are just the same as other creatures. We are all parts of the community on the earth. There is no good or bad among different species. In the system of nature, humans should be regarded same as other species.

“Evolution theory is a humble ideology. It means existent on the earth should have the same right of subsistence as other existents, at least the right to fight for survival.” Ecological ethics admit there are survival competition problems among different species and between species and environment in nature, regardless of whether the competition is within a species or among different species. However, we cannot neglect the co-existence and plentiful cooperation among lives and only focus on competition. We can absolutely never apply the food chain phenomenon and law of competition in living nature to human society. We should “understand the external conflicts of nature as mutual dependence of a deeper level”.

4 ANALYSES OF TYPICAL EXAMPLES IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE BEFORE THE 20TH CENTURY

By analyzing the above “human and nature” problems in western ideology and literature traditions, we can find that for humans, nature can be a mother, a cradle, and an enemy, a battlefield at the same time. Reflection of this contradictory relation in human’s concept of nature leads to two opposite attitudes: returning to nature and conquering nature. This opposition has run through western ideology and literature traditions from beginning to end all the time.

For litterateur individuals, their ideological concepts and the “human and nature” expressed in their works contain deep complexity. Sometimes, the complexity even can be contradictory and variable. For example, some praise and adore nature while some focus on human’s dignity and value when fighting with and conquering nature; some emphasize on special humanized natural environment while some manifest blending of returning to nature and conquering nature; some show foresight and sagacity beyond current age and become pioneers of ecological literature… There are plenty forms of nature writing, including poems, essays, long fictions, short stories…There are plenty forms of described “Nature”, including forests, lakes, oceans, northern snowfield, primitive villages…They are warm and sweet, or beautiful and charming, or lofty and mysterious, or cruel and harsh…This thesis categorizes such colorful “Human and Nature” into four types and explores the “human and nature” in British and American literature of the 19th century and the 20th century by case analysis and intensive text reading.
4.1 Arcadia

Arcadian literature results in literature works in which romanticism poets highly praise nature. They love nature, pursue freedom, and emphasize on blending of heart and nature. Romanticism poet generally regarded nature as their spiritual trust. They tend to express their all kinds of spiritual feelings about nature.

Whitman was the most outstanding poet in America in the 19th century. He was “An Artist in the Open Field”. Born in a village names Wester Hill on the coast of Long Island, Whitman often played and swam on the coast when he was young. The simple and happy rural life in childhood helped him develop deep friendship with nature. He regarded land as his father and ocean as his lifetime beloved mother. Nature was his source of insight and had brought so much enlightenment and kindness to him among which Leaves of Grass is the biggest and brightest artistic fruit. Whitman’s lifetime friend John Burroughs once commented: Leaves of Grass is not a temple of God. It is forest, field, or a boulevard. It has all the keynotes for building an open field. When readers appreciate his poems, you need a vast long-range perspective. You cannot put your face into a book to check the lines. Instead, you must develop magnanimity and get close to the poems with the kindness and belief that match the words.” It is said that while writing Leaves of Grass, Whitman always read the lines in open field. He deliberated the characters in natural environment to check whether they can be real and lively as nature.

Whitman was influenced by pantheism and Indian philosophy. There are obvious proofs in Leaves of Grass. Whitman inherited Rousseau’s “Returning to Nature”. He eulogized natural state of human, which is human without social disguise. Meanwhile, he also praised laboring people’s simple and natural instincts and their outdoor life. Same as transcendentalism ideologists, Whitman thought nature itself is beautiful. He believed nature “is the only perfect and real poem. It never declines in its beauty as soon as it begins. It will never bore anyone like artificial artwork”. Solenity and beauty of the world are hidden in each little corner, waiting for artists to find them.

In Specimen Days, Whitman also proposed to use nature as the standard of measuring literature art—The pure atmosphere, the primitive landscape, the vast broadness and fertility, the softness and vigour, the abundance and restriction, the ideal and reality…All these fantastic original elements, all these plains, Rocky Mountains, Mississippi, and Missouri River…All these amazing combinations…Are they in a form of standard for our poems and art?” As an artist with strong sense of responsibility for society, Whitman put forward the problem of tree protection in his western trip in 1879. It showed his advancing awareness of unexpected development. If what we see in Leaves of Grass is a passionate Whitman yelling for Americans’ personality, what we see in Specimen Days is a calm Whitman who carefully observes, studies, and speculates about nature, and a Whitman who spends all every minute with nature and writes sunlight, tree shadows, blue sky, white clouds, grass, wild flowers, and bird’s singing into his life and works.

4.2 Sad melody of heroes

There are many works manifesting human’s combat with nature and eulogizing human’s bravery, spirit of challenging limit, and persistence in literature history. All these works generally describe the dual relation between human and nature. They often show certain suspect and ambivalence while affirming human’s fighting and conquering nature.

Melville’s masterpiece White Whale is a typical representative of sad melody of heroes in literature. White Whale tells a tragedy with complicated and secret symbolic meaning which is mainly reflected on two main characters: Captain Ahab and white whale Mawby Dick.

Mawby Dick is a big white whale full of legend. It can naturally make one’s hair stand on end. At ordinary times, it is calm and peaceful. Once being attacked, it will show terrible violence. Human’s iron pitchfork can leave little harm on it. “White Whale” becomes a secret, transcendent, and undefeatable creature hostile to human being. Or, we can also say it is the representative of nature and Ahab represents human. Ahab understands disobeying and fighting with nature will inevitably lead to death. He has no hesitation and advances bravely to fight with white whale till the end: being buried in the sea.

While highly praising people’s continuous exploration and indomitable pioneering spirit as represented by Ahab, Melville also aroused introspection and query. Ahab can accomplish his long-cherished wish spiritually. However, his body dies with the white whale which is a tragedy to him. Humans are both antagonistic and unified to nature. The final ends for fights between humans and nature are all tragedies. However, Ahab still insists that fighting with and conquering nature is the principal rule for surviving in natural world (including human’s world). Strength and charm of life can be better shown in competition between the weak and the strong. Human’s particular individualism and emotion of heroism can also be deeply manifested.

4.3 Road of returning to native place

Nature is not only our hometown in material meaning: but also our spiritual hometown. “Village” is special environment in which human and nature can mutually blend. “Village” always refers to free life in nature with peaceful atmosphere and close relations among people. With the passing of the years, “village” has gradually turn into homesickness in our memory.
which is more obviously manifested on writers and poets who love to describe rural landscape and local customs. Writers and poets hold deep love and are sentimentally attached to natural scenery, old-style life in hometowns. The regional feature and rural atmosphere linger in their mind. In addition, their success can’t exist without the villages that have cultivated and edified them.

Thomas Hardy is a fictionist and poet grown up in pastoral life. He is always regarded as the last spokesman of British traditional rural life and native culture. Thomas’ writing and life were closely related to his hometown Dorset. Dorset brought talent of writing and provided soil of writing for Thomas. Today, Dorset is famous for Thomas and Thomas is immortal because of Dorset.

Nature has its own language, facial expression, and temper. Nevertheless, only people who love nature can understand its beauty. Thomas Hardy used his heart full of tender affection to catch all beautiful spots in the natural field of Wessex. Besides the beautiful side full of laughs, nature also has its gloomy side. For this part, Thomas tended to show the desolation and depression of nature by dark night, nightfall, rainstorm, sparse bush, and barren field. Thomas thought humans are part of nature. All creatures in nature have intelligence and are connected with each other. Thomas loved nature and was full of sympathy and affection to all creatures. He hoped human beings can maintain a harmonious relation with all creatures in nature.

Thomas Hardy is a trans-century writer combining traditional literature and contemporary art. He had dual awareness for nature: on one hand, there is certain primitiveness, roughness, happiness, and mystery in nature which can be source of artistic and spiritual movements. People can find innocence, simplification, wisdom, hope, and comfort. Thus, he wandered about unhurriedly and enjoyed himself in the ideal world of Wessex. On the other hand, nature has its cruel laws. Creatures have to fight fiercely, groan in pain, and get hurt with countless scars to survive. For this part, Thomas could only abandon himself to despair. Although it is too difficult to get rid of paradox, pain, and disappointment, the mountains, grass, local dialects, and rural atmosphere left by historical sites described by Thomas Hard are still very appealing to us living in today’s complex and tiring urban life.

4.4 Thinking of Green

Thoreau is a famous American ideologist, essayist, and transcendentalism movement leader. He is called as “Ecologist before Ecology was Established” by people. His works are all about people’s thinking on nature. They are full of detailed description about natural scenery to make readers feel nature which is touchable.

Thoreau’s basic concept of nature is transcendental. He thought nature is created by universe spirit; nature and human are spiritually connected; nature is real and concrete; nature has its own purposes and reasons; nature has life and personality; and nature doesn’t belong to human, but human belong to nature. In front of nature, Thoreau had no adult disguise. He was curious and sincere like a child. He tried to integrate with nature, Titmouse could stay in his arm and peck firewood with no fear; sparrow could take a rest on his shoulder; and squirrel could step on his feet. He “come and go in nature in a bizarre way, becoming part of nature”, “There’s only one feeling all over the body and every pore is so infiltrated with joy.” All his life, Thoreau was looking for the simplest and most direct contact with nature. He taught people to experience nature with the five sense organs, and to pursue a new simple life.

Thoreau related his praise for nature without reservation and deep criticism on society. He discussed the relation between human and nature comparatively early. He thought if civilization is to maintain long, it must keep balance with nature. Life coexists with wildness. The most vigorous things are often the wildest which have never been conquered by human. The existence of nature can help people recover their fresh spirit. In the meantime, Thoreau emphasized on human’s sympathy on nature and opposed to impose unnecessary violence on nature. He was against with killing other creatures in the name of scientific research. He advocated vegetarianism.

Thoreau has great impact on modern environmental movement. His thoughts are showing greater charm today. Walden written by Thoreau with natural and fresh language is regarded as a classic masterpiece in ecological literature. Thoreau himself is also respected as the spiritual pioneer of western ecological ethics.

In conclusion, Arcadia, Sad Melody of Heroes, Road of Returning to Native Place, and Thinking Green can all show attention paid to natural environment and thinking about “human and nature”. Literature and nature are born-to-be allies. Although there are many differences among litterateurs’ ideologies and writing, they can all be taken as having been called by “the earth” to create those imperishable masterpieces.

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis discusses the “Human and Nature” in western literature on the basis of comparison and reference. We get to know that Whitman and Thoreau were influenced by eastern religions and philosophy. More and more western scholars have realized that the environmental thought contained in eastern culture has really important modern values. In Chinese traditional culture, the relation between human and nature is called “Relation on Heaven and Man”. It was in the explanation of Heaven-and-Man Relation that some ancient Chinese ideologists proposed a series of
thoughts on respecting life and protecting environment. It is a pity that after entering modern society, eastern countries are eager to get rid of poverty and have imported a large number of western ideologies, cultures, and scientific technologies. As a result, construction and update of local cultural traditions have been neglected. Nowadays, eastern countries are facing environmental deterioration problems which are more serious than those in western countries. How to make the valuable spiritual wealth left by our ancestors play a new and even greater role in contemporary eastern countries is an urgent and important problem we need to solve.

Because modern people are capable of thoroughly changing and completely destroying nature, we now have the ability of deciding the earth’s fate. As a result, people’s attitude towards nature is especially critical. Ecological problem has become a global issue which needs support from all over the world to be solved. China is the largest developing country in the world. It is working hard to catch up on economic development. However, the cost that natural environment has paid and the serious situation we are facing during construction and development haven’t aroused enough attention and alert from Chinese people. There are very few natural literature masterpieces in modern Chinese literature that can undertake the important task of providing ecological environment enlightenment for readers. This thesis is a response to “the earth’s call” and the writer earnestly looks forward to hearing louder voices in China calling for ecological protection.

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