

# Reimagining Nature: An Ecocritical Study of Environmental Consciousness in English Romantic Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to understand the study of role of nature in English poetry through the modern theory aspect called as 'Ecocriticism'. The poets involved were William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats they were the major poets who presented nature as a living source with all values and a mere background for human experiences. The study in this paper examines how the poetries of this major poets had expressed an early sense of the Environmental Awareness and the respect to the natural world. By the analysing of the selected poem 'ODE TO THE WEST WIND' paper highlights how the romantic poet have sculpted nature but has also recognized its autonomy and values. Overall research reimagines Romantic nature as a precursor to contemporary environmental ethics an artistic and philosophical foundation for rethinking our relationship with the natural world in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** - Ecocriticism, Romantic poetry, Nature & Environment, Environmental consequences.

## Introduction

**About Author:** - Percy Bysshe Shelley was one of the most renowned & major poet of English literature & amongst the romantic poets. His radicals in poetries, political & social views was very prominent. He didn't achieved huge fame from his works but the recognitions of his achievements in poetry had grew steadily which was followed by his death and through that he became an important influence on the subsequent generations of poets including 'Robert Browning', 'Thomas Hardy' & 'William Butler Yeats'. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Shelley's reputation fluctuated but since the 1960s he had achieved increasing creating acclaim for the sweeping momentum of his poetic imagery, his mastery of genres and verse forms, and the complex interplay of sceptical, idealist, and materialist ideas in his work.

Nature has always been the central theme in the history of English literature but it

has found its insightful expressions in romantic poetry. The poets involved in 19<sup>th</sup> century of romantic poetry were William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats they had really brought a new vision of the natural world for them nature was not just a physical thinking infact it was a part of their mere description and a source of moral and emotional inspirations which reflects human soul. During the Neo-classical era the poets has saw nature as a reflection of a perfect harmony and reflection. Nature has always provided the writers a source of symbolism for the concepts like life cycles, death, and renewals. As a part of a living character nature was not just a passive source but has often portrayed the roles as an active source. The Contemporary nature reflects growing awareness of anxiety about environmental degradation, which has led to the emergence of "Ecocriticism," a field dedicated to studying the relationship

between literature and the physical environment.

In this recent years, this perspective of nature has gained a huge importance through the source of **Ecocriticism** the literary theory that has examined the relationship between literature and the natural world which analyses the representment of nature and the environmental issues like change of climate and pollution. It was originally originated in the 1990s for the use of environmental studies and literary analysis for exploring literature. Ecocriticism was defined by ‘Cheryll Glotfelty’ as the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment interpreting the reflections of the ecological values. Applying this theory in romantic poetry has helped in uncovering how the early poets has expressed their ideas and has also anticipated in today’s environmental consequences.

The Role of Nature in English poetry is the main focus of this paper for the deep understanding from the perspective of Ecocriticism. It also explores how the selected poet “Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind” written in the year 1819 and published in 1820 is one of the most celebrated work of Shelley and an also a major cornerstone of romantic poetries. This poem was composed in the woods after the witnessing of the powerful autumn. The poem has a reflection of his fascination with nature’s energy, and his personal longing for creative and political renewals. This poem has literary been serving as a bridge in between of the Romantic idealism and the Modern environmental awareness it has also transformed nature into a moral and spiritual forces governing the human imagination and the ethical

responsibilities. The era marked by the ecocentrism & the ecological crisis the environmental degradation in poetry has totally changed & re-emerged as one of the most powerful forms of the ecological reflections from the ancient chants to the romantic meditations has consistently served as the medium for re-thinking the humanity’s relationship with the nature within this frame works of Ecocriticism poetry has occupied a unique position as it has become the mirror of ecological awareness & voice for the entire world.

### **Role of Nature as Ecocriticism in P.B Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind.’**

Nature the most played central role in English literature, during the romantic age it has acquired the new innovations like depth, emotions, and the philosophical meanings. The poets of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century - William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats has literary transformed the portrayal of nature from a stable background into a living, spiritual and dynamic things or the presences. They had wrote about in the intellectual change in Europe. Romantic writers has truly changed towards nature as a source of purity, wisdom and moral strengths, for them nature was not just a mere phenomenon infact it was an external reflection of the human soul with moral ethics. This unique transformation has led to a reflection of a response in changing the world of the industrial revolution which has distanced humankind with nature over the natural harmony.

Among all the major poets of early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the romantic era Percy Bysshe Shelley an English writer was considered as one of the major poet who had stand out as a radical visionary who’s works had had revealed an intense connection with the natural forces. In his life in poetry he

didn't achieved huge fame but has received recognitions of achievements in poetry which has grew steadily following his death. He has also wrote about prose fiction and also on quantity of political and social essays. His 1819 poem "Ode to the West Wind" had a powerful manifestation

"O wild west wind, thou breathe of autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead,  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing."

of this relationship. Shelley had presented the West Wind in both the perspectives of physical phenomenon and the symbolic change representing freedom and renewals. The poem opens up with the invocation:

Here, in this line Shelley had personified wind as mighty natural spirit, the "breathe of autumn" equipped with both destruction and regenerative power.

By this dual reflection Ecocriticism later identifies it as nature's autonomy and balance: the idea reflects destruction and creation which is a coexistent part of the same ecological cycle. The West Wind here scatters the dead leaves, of the old season but it also carries the new winged seeds that will be inactive until the spring. This entire process in accordance with the Shelley's views has been the mirror of the eternal renewal love for nature, suggesting the environmental awareness's longing before the final rise of the ecological theory.

Through this imagery Shelley's poetry had conveyed a deep understanding of nature's self-sustaining mechanisms aligning closely with the modern scholars. As 'Cheryll Glotfelty' defined Ecocriticism as the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment interprets the literary text as the reflections of ecological values and examine how the writers have expressed humanities interconnectedness with a natural world. When it got connected with "Ode to the West Wind" the perspective reveals how Shelley had anticipated the ecological ethics in which he had treat nature not as subordinating face but as a powerful amendment that commands respect.

In the second canto, Shelley extends his idea towards the wind influencing sky:

"Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,  
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean."

Here, the imagery of the poem fuses the lines of elements of earth, air & water, suggesting the vision of the nature's world. In this poem the language of the poet has portrayed nature as the independent source of system where no elements exists in the concept of the central to modern ecological thinking. The mixing of elements demonstrated the idea of Shelley's rejecting of the human centred thinking rather than the human experiences as he situates the wind's motion within the cosmic order.

"Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!"

In the Shelley's 'Ode to the west wind' the last stanza represents his urge for unity he had sought to become an instrument of the wind, which allows the energy to flow through him as an inspiration in poetics. This act has actually surrendered the ecocentric humility in an acknowledgement in which the humans are not masters of the nature but the participants are in the great grand rhythm. In all the Ecocritical terms Shelley has dissolved the boundaries in

between of the humans & non- humans which suggest that the creativity itself speaks with the world.

“Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!”

The concluding lines of the poem plea at transforming the poem to the personal lament into the universal ecological statements. The words of P.B. Shelley had carried out by the wind, which also spreads the transformations & resolves the renewals across the world. Thus, the ‘Ode to the west wind’ simplifies about how the romantic poetry transcends the admiration of nature and enters the realism of environmental philosophies. This concluding lines has helped Shelley emerge the language of ecology with of liberation the dead decaying leaves are the symbols of death symbolizing decomposition of natural necessity with all alone but of the renewals suggesting that the revolution, nature always gets operated through the cycles of decay and rebirth. Shelley has thus intied the modern ecological principles of the destructions in nature serving the regenerative purposes.

The ecological awareness in ‘Ode to the west wind’ is further illuminated through the Ecocritical theory keys that studies the relationship between the role of nature and ecocritism in English poetry in the romantic era or the romantic poetries. ‘Cheryll Glotfelty’ was one of the most founding figure of ecocritism he had tremendously studied the relationship between literature & physical environments he had also revealed that how this can shape and reflect the real ecological values. By coping this idea of Glotfelty and applying Shelley’s poem had become the literary model of environmental consciousness where the wind was not just the background symbol but the living entity which commands the moral attentions. In the same way

‘Lawrence Buell’ in his ‘The Environmental imagination’ published in 1995 & ‘Greg Gerard’ in his influential book ‘Ecocritism’ published in 2004 has expanded the views by defining ecocritism as the true environmental literature which forms the lives and ecosystems as independents of true utility to humans.

Shelley’s work has always emerged a foundational thought of text in the ecological theories. His poetries had bridged the romantic imaginations and the environmental ethics that demonstrates the romantic eras which has no sentiments towards nature’s intellectuals that are aware of its moral and the ecological significances. In all the works Shelley always reminds his modern readers that nature’s revival completely depends on the human’s moral awakenings and making his poetries a timeless calls for the ecological balances.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In the end P.B. Shelley’s ‘Ode to the west wind’ rises beyond the romantic meditations on its beauty which had become a voice that speaks across the centuries about nature and living power with humanity’s fragile that places within it. In his poem he had not only just praised the wind but he also listens to it, learns things from it and also tries to surrender himself into it ultimately. The poems rhythm echo’s the natural world itself which had a force that can destroy the orders of renews which also silences in order to speak again. The very first lines of

the poem ‘O wild west wind, thou breathe of autumn’s being,’ is transformed into the universal plea for transforming the real ecological and spiritual values.

After seeing from the lenses of Ecocriticism, Shelley’s wind has become the voice of earth itself which is yet to be eternally reborned. His poetries have always reminded us that nature is not a distinct but it is a stage on which the human dramas unfold the very heartbeat of existences & the consequences with breathes through the winds, water, & fire the real elements of nature. The last line of the poem “Drive my dead thoughts over the universelike withered leaves to quicken a new birth!” had resonates today as an ecological message which urges humankind to renew its moral and the spiritual relationships within the environment. The act of poetic humility had embodied the essence of ecocriticism which recognizes the nature as an intrinsic value & also the ethical significances beyond the human utility.

P.B. Shelley had concluded the poem ‘Ode to the west wind’ by a haunting question that ‘If winter comes, can the spring be far behind?’ this horrifying question of Shelley had leaved the readers in full of suspense between the despair & hopes. Shelley’s vision not only challenges the modern readers but it also recognizes the same wind.

Thus, the ode to the west wind stands as a timeless Ecocritical text that has a demonstration of how the romantic poetry can actually articulate the environments awareness, ethical engagements and the intrusive power of the nature. The poetic vision of Shelley not only celebrates the beauty of natural world but also the challenges which the readers are to recognize and respect the autonomy that resonates the message of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, Shelley had particularly transformed the ecocriticism in the romantic

poetry describing perfectly about the exclusive beauty of our nature in the romantic poetries.

“Honouring nature is not just admiring it, but also to understand & live in harmony with its eternal rhythms.”

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