

The Special Purpose of Environmental Literature in the Protection of Environment

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Abstract

Environmental literature is the perfect combination of environment science and literary text. The nature of literature is the reflection of social life. The nature of environmental literature is the reflection of environment crisis. Hence, to some extent, literature is the barometer of environment crisis. This article takes American classical environmental literature, which includes *Silent Spring*, *A Sand County Almanac* and *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, for example and discusses the special role and influence of environmental literature in the protection of environment.

Key words: environmental literature, special role and influence, protection of environment

I. Introduction

In the 1970s, ecological criticism appeared in the academic field, but it couldn't be called a school until 1990s. In 1993, Patrick Murphy established a new journal: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*. The tenet of the magazine is to increase the numbers of both the creation and the criticism of environmental literature (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, pp. xvii-xviii). Up till now environmental literature has not only gotten rid of the marginalized status but also strengthened its position in the academic research (Slovic, 2010). Nowadays in some universities, environmental literature is the compulsory course, some experts and scholars have been engaged in the study of it. Lawrence Buell (1995, 2001, 2005) is the influential scholar who is specialized in the overall study of the environmental literature. His masterpiece *Writing for an Endangered World* shows us the relationship between environment and science. The state of mind (attitudes, feelings, images and narratives) decides the success of environmentalist, instead of the technology (Buell, 2001). Since the 18th National Congress, State President Xi Jinping have talked about ecological civilization for more than 60 times, especially the 13th National Five-year Plan insists that the green development and the improvement of ecological environment should be one of the most important means of the wealthy and strong country. This article attempts to provide the construction of Chinese ecological civilization and culture with some valuable references. At the same time, this article explores why the representative works of Rachel Carson (), Aldo Leopold() and Terry Tempest Williams(1991) have become the classics of environmental literature on the basis of the analysis of their themes and forms. Environmental literature helps the readers realize the significance of life, the interrelationship between way of life and intrinsic value and arouse ecological awareness and conscience.

II. The Ethical Enlightenment of Environmental Literature

“Ethics” come from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning custom, but in its proper philosophical usage it refers to how people ought to live and act (Curry, 2001, p28). From this definition we can understand ethics as the answer of the following questions: what is the world where people live like? In what way can people live meaningfully? What is people’s life meaning and survival value? Classical environmental literature texts provide us with candid and in-depth replies. These texts take the protection of the environment as the main theme, require people to show their moral concern for the nature, and introduce a range of theories and propositions about environmental ethics.

2.1 The value of wildness and land ethics

In *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold (2015) first proposed the land ethics which considers the land as the source of life community where all the living things live. The conception of the life community gives mature considerations to the significance of the land from the holistic perspective. In *Refuge*, Williams tells us the story of the Great Salt Lake. In the eyes of anthropologists, the Great Salt Lake is useless. Not far from the Great Salt Lake is the municipal dump. While in the eye of the author, it is the heaven of the birds. Our urban wastelands are becoming wildlife’s last stand. (Williams, 1991, p54) Williams thinks that man ruthlessly destroy the nature in pursuit of political and commercial interests, which is obviously against the principle of life community and symbiosis. At present, species reduction and ecological disaster are the great price of man’s rashness. Nature is like an interrelated web where every member fills a niche and plays a role. Plants, animals and human beings interact. If one party is destroyed, then the other is affected in the end

2.2 The Intrinsic Value and Bioethics

The Contemporary philosopher Peter Singer proposes the framework of bioethics which considers animals also have the equal right of survival. This theory expands human being’s moral consideration. In Carson’s opinion, every creature in nature has their own value no matter how little it is. We should revere this instead of ignorance. Carson’s writing uncovers many beautiful details of nature: the fishing techniques of herons and skimmers, the fine structures and hidden beauty of jellyfish (Sideris and Moore, 2008). Every creature has their own significance of existence. In *Refuge*, Williams also describes a prosperous life community which consists of the Great Salt Lake, salt flies, sea birds and human beings. No doubt, Carson and Williams, their ethics are non-anthropocentric, they share something in common: they recognize the intrinsic value of the nonhuman beings. They are the indispensable parts of flourishing nature.

2.3 The Dilemmas of Ethics of Science and Technology

Science and technology continuously extend to our culture and try to change it. On the one hand, Science and technology doesn’t make people close to nature. Instead, it helps people on the way of arrogance and sacrificing moral beliefs for profits. On the other hand, modern way of life is closely related to high technology. It is not true for modern people to return to the primitive society. Confronted with this survival dilemma, we think the ethics of science and technology is not only related to science and philosophy but also to the view of the world and the state of mind. In the epilogue of *Refuge*, Williams tells the history of her family. The author’s mother, grandmothers, and six aunts have all had mastectomies. Seven are dead. The two who survive have just completed rounds of chemotherapy and radiation. Even the author herself had breast cancer and a small tumor. All these misfortunes are caused by the nuclear tests in Nevada. Williams

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lives in a Mormon family with roots in Utah since 1847. In Mormon culture, authority is respected, obedience is revered, and independent thinking is not encouraged. She was taught as a girl not to “make waves” or “rock the boat” (Williams, pp.283-285). Even mother, as a victim, always says just let it go. As a Mormon woman of the fifth generation of Latter-day Saints, I must question everything, even if it means losing my faith, becoming a border tribe among my own people. Tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives (287). Witnessing family members’ suffering of cancer, the author finally realizes to question authority means a great deal of courage and strength. Her religion even her mother will be sad to accept the fact of her challenge to the authority. It is the duty of writers to reveal the truth that what on earth the nuclear energy brings us--- life guarantee or higher standard of living just as the mass media has advocated. Probably neither is the right answer.

2.4 The Responsibilities of Writers

Since September 11, 2001, patriotism, terrorists, the conflicts between different civilizations are everywhere in the mass media. Mass culture seems to lead citizens to agree with sending armies into battles or maintaining the world order. If you don’t agree, you are imposed on the name of terrorists. If we refer to anything that threatens to the citizen security as terrorism, then what are those that can raise serious disease caused by species extinction and environmental deterioration? In the novel Williams describes the sufferings of her family members including her mother because of the fallouts nuclear tests radiated. I watched beautiful women become bald as anti-cancer drugs were injected in their veins I held their foreheads as they vomited green-black bile and I shot them with morphine when the pain became inhuman (286). How terrible the science and technology without the limits of ethical morals is! The writer explains to us that the real patriotism is not to crush terrorism. Instead it is a kind of citizen consciousness which includes ecological awareness, moral consideration, ethical principles and spiritual beliefs. Professor Liu Dong once pointed out the real source of pollution is the increasing cruelty of human beings (Liu Dong, 2007, pp.240-243). After September 11, a number of people enjoyed the spectacular of the collapse of the World Trade Center. After catastrophe, people’s indifference probably is crueler than the disaster itself. As a result, the responsibilities of the writers are to make it possible to build an invisible bridge between readers and writers to purify human’s spirits and arouse the ecological consciousness. Perhaps it will take great deal of courage to tell the truth. Dare to question anything to the authority is every citizen’s sacred responsibility. Blind obedience and the tool of some political power mean that we have already betrayed our soul. American theorist Hannah Arendt once pointed out a kind of evil called the banality of evil. Adolf Eichmann, a common Nazi German officer who is in charge of the concentration camp. Each day he just did the routine job--- murder the Jews from the world. He never doubts the order from the superiors. After the war, he escaped to Argentina. After 15 years he was arrested and put on trial in Jerusalem. Arendt (Arendt, 1964) defends Eichmann as an ordinary bureaucrat who never questions the legal orders given to them. In a society where everyone dares not ask why, the authority will do anything they want to do in the name of the benefits of the civil citizens. Hence blind obedience does harm to not only the others but also the person oneself. Writers’ duty is to give readers the ability of thinking critically.

III. Conclusion

From the point of view of theory, the ethical study of environmental literature which belongs to interdisciplinary research is not only the extension of American contemporary environmental literature but

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also a significant attempt of ethical application. Maybe it is also a new perspective to the study of environmental science. The reason why we explore American contemporary environmental literature from the perspective of ethics is that there reflect moral ethics in these texts. The ethical understanding of environmental literature means the reflection on the nature of environmental degradation.

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