

# Research on the theoretical construction of ecological literature and criticism

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**Abstract:** Ecological literary criticism is a literary criticism theory to explore the relationship between literature and natural environment. The increasingly serious ecological crisis makes people realize the importance of ecological literary criticism. The theory of ecological literary criticism severely criticizes anthropocentrism, re-examines the relationship between man and nature, and explores the causes of ecological crisis. It plays an important role in guiding readers to reread classics, change ideas and standardize human behavior. The theory of ecological literary criticism provides theoretical support, moral support and intellectual support for solving the ecological crisis, and serves the construction of ecological civilization.

## 1. Introduction

In the political report of the 17th CPC National Congress, General Secretary Hu Jintao put forward the important task of “building ecological civilization”, which is a major theoretical innovation of the Communist Party of China and has epoch-making significance. This is the first time that our party has incorporated the construction of ecological civilization into the documents of the Party Central Committee and the original theoretical system of the three major civilizations. This is because the Communist Party of China recognizes the importance and urgency of “harmonious development between man and nature” [1], “scientific development and harmonious development are the basic requirements of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and what China needs is a civilized development path with rich life and good ecology”. China is at present developing rapidly. Thus this theoretical innovation has important guiding significance for solving the contradiction between man and nature. In order to effectively implement the tasks put forward at the 17th National Congress, we can learn and apply what people call the “most subversive” current.

The English prefix “eco” has become the most active affix, and there are more and more phrases composed of “ecology” in Chinese. Therefore, as an academic theory, “ecological criticism”, we can get out of the ivory tower of academic research, out of the study of experts and scholars, out of the university classroom, and play a special role in guiding readers to reinterpret classics, change ideas and standardize human behavior. Today, if we don't understand the ecological thought, we won't be capable of knowing that human beings are getting farther and farther away from nature and we won't, either, be aware of the impact of human beings on nature, the root of the ecological crisis faced by human beings, and the necessity of correctly solving the contradiction between man and nature and making man and nature coexist harmoniously.

## 2. Why should we move towards the construction of ecological criticism theory

In the past two decades, ecological critics have been exploring the direction of ecological criticism, but at present, all exploration has encountered great obstacles, and some have fallen into difficulties. Some people advocate giving up the cognition and aesthetics of nature and paying attention to environment-related social problems, such as environmental justice, toxic pollution and related development models or strategies. They also called this “social turn” the third wave of ecological criticism, trying to lead the development of global ecological criticism.

However, the study of this dimension is gradually far away from the original intention of Ecological Research - the relationship between man and nature, and more discusses the internal problems of human society. It is gradually confused with sociological research and political

research under the guidance of anthropocentrism, and the uniqueness of ecological criticism thought and perspective is gradually lost. Some people advocate paying more attention to eco-feminism [2]; However, many of these studies have shifted from paying attention to the relationship between man and nature to gender relations, serving gender research with ecological research, and expanding gender research, cultural research and even humanistic research under the guidance of anthropocentrism. Some people advocate that we should devote ourselves to the combination of science and literary research, especially the cross integration of ecology, biology and literary criticism; but there are few responders. On the one hand, in today's era of knowledge explosion, few people can cross the borderlines between the arts and sciences and pair at least one discipline in the humanities with another in the science so as to realize real interdisciplinary research. On the other hand, it may be that the essential requirements and characteristics of science and literary criticism are different. It is doubtful whether they can give consideration to and promote each other. There are many lessons from failure from naturalistic criticism in the 19th century to realistic criticism in the 20th century. Where ecological criticism goes is a controversial, difficult and urgent issue in the international academic community [3].

### **3. The background and definition of ecological literature**

As for the naming and definition of ecological literature, there are differences in the literary circle at the beginning. In summary, there are mainly three kinds of "environmental literature", "natural literature" and "ecological literature". From a philosophical point of view, the word "environment" undoubtedly contains the color of anthropocentrism or dualism. What is hidden in it is a structure centered on human beings and surrounded by non-human materials, which is contrary to the overall value orientation emphasized by such literature. Compared with environmental literature, natural literature seems to be more appropriate. Natural literature is based on the special cultural background of the United States. Professor Cheng Hong defines natural literature as "in form, it belongs to nonfiction prose literature, mainly in the form of prose and diary. In content, it mainly considers the relationship between human beings and nature." Natural literature began to call on human beings to give up the human-centered concept, call on people to care for the land and seek spiritual value, pay attention to the sense of location of survival, and show the harmonious relationship between man and nature [4].

Natural literature has begun to look at the world and human itself with an overall thinking. When some definitions of ecology were introduced into the humanities and many interdisciplinary models were formed, the ideological core of integrity and systematicness was clarified and improved. The definition of "ecological literature" was also widely used in Mr. Wang Nuo's name and the discussions of many other scholars. In his book "European and American Ecological Literature", Mr. Wang Nuo defined ecological literature as "ecological literature is a literature that takes ecological holism as the ideological basis and the overall interests of the ecosystem as the highest value to investigate and express the relationship between nature and man and explore the social roots of ecological crisis. Its prominent characteristics are ecological responsibility, civilization criticism, ecological ideal and ecological early warning [5]." This definition highlights the core ideas of integrity, reflection and future of ecological literature, and establishes multiple entry points for the writing of the relationship between man and nature.

However, although this definition is quite complete and thorough, from the perspective of literature itself or the particularity of China's ecological literature, we believe that ecological literature is not limited to expressing the relationship between man and nature. It is a literature that brings the whole natural ecology into the perspective of care. It is a creative activity that pays attention to all natural life and communicates with it. It is the spiritual experience of writing over life spirit and life care, and it is a balance between self and non-self. The composition of ecological literature should attach more attention to the description of life experience and the leading transcendence of spiritual soul to reality.

## **4. The role of ecological literary criticism**

### **4.1. Guide readers to reread the classics with a correct attitude**

The 20th century, which has just passed, is a century famous for its rich “theories”, and various theories, critical schools and ideological trends are dazzling. Whether it is the “content school” that pays attention to the psychological state and social life of writers and artists reflected in literary works and reveals the mysteries of literature and art, or the “formal school”, that is, it hopes to explain the prescriptive essence of literature and art from two aspects of language symbols and formal structure, without paying attention to nature. “Russian formalist criticism”, “modern language criticism”, “British and American New Criticism”, “structuralist criticism”, “psychoanalytic criticism” and “deconstructive criticism”, which were once popular in the 20th century, also did not try to clarify the relationship between nature and man, man and nature. For a long time, “social and political criticism” has occupied a dominant position in Chinese literary criticism, and the direction of “social and political criticism” does not include “nature”. In reading people basically tend to adopt the method of anthropocentrism when interpreting classics. Nature is the object, the “other”, and the object that human beings want to conquer and transform. Human beings rarely or never treat nature equally [5].

In the artistic performance scene, due to the influence of anthropocentrism, nature is silent or even absent. Therefore, from the perspective of literary criticism, the focus of criticism is not the relationship between nature and man, and between man and nature. The focus of aesthetics is not to imitate nature, but to promote the “courage” of “man conquering nature”, praise human “heroism” and “let the mountain bow and the river change its course” are human “feats” towards nature, conquering nature and transforming nature [6]. In the classic reading of foreign literature, nature is only a foil and therefore, there are many fallacies in understanding. For example, the famous literary critic Malcolm Cowley once declared that Steinbeck’s famous book “The Grapes of Wrath” belongs to angry books like “Uncle Tom’s cabin” while Joseph Warren Beech said, “so far, our works are regarded as the best example of proletarian novels in the 1930s.” Edmund Wilson, the main critic in Paris, pointed out that “The Grapes of Wrath” was full of disgusting empty words between the lines.

This view has been popular in China for a long time [7]. Unfortunately, the views misled readers. These scholars and critics did not see the rich ecological thought and civilization critical consciousness expressed in the works. Nor did they see the author’s understanding of western “Anthropocentrism” with Judaism and Christianity as the core. It deeply reveals the social, political and economic roots of the ecological crisis, expresses the beauty of nature, the close relationship between human destiny and natural destiny, and put forward human vision for a better future [8]. These traditional explanations ignore the ancient “ecological dimension” in the novel.

Another example is Melville’s epic marine novel “Moby Dick”. The traditional reading perspective is from the aspects of “Biblical image”, revenge theme, symbolic significance, Captain’s character, tragic interpretation, etc. [9]. However, these interpretations do not realize the ecological significance and Ecological Warning consciousness of the work, and ignore that it, due to its reflection of the multidimensional relationship between man and nature, is another bible book, which expounds human nature, nature, man and how people get along with and survive with nature. In sharp contrast to this people-centered reading, with the help of the powerful weapon of ecological theory, readers will appreciate and evaluate the classics from a new angle, absorb spiritual nutrition and realize the real value of the works. Ecological criticism is not only a literary criticism, but also a criticism involving the whole human culture.

### **4.2. Standardize human behavior and improve the living environment with the theory of ecological criticism**

Although it is important to change human concepts, it is ultimately necessary to serve the standardization of human behavior. Only by standardizing human behavior can we really save the earth and fundamentally implement the scientific outlook on Development [10]. However, changing human concepts and then changing their behavior needs theoretical support, and ecological /

environmental ethics theory can play a specific role in regulating human behavior.

Dais Judins, an American ethicist, pointed out that generally speaking, environmental ethics aims to systematically explain the moral relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Environmental ethics assumes that human behavior towards nature can and will always be bound by moral norms [11]. Roderick Frazier Nash in "The Rights of Nature" points out that "ethics should be extended from only caring about people or their God to animals, plants, rocks, and even nature or environment in a broad sense." In an interview with Professor Buhler, scholar Wei Qingqi asked why Confucianism and Taoism have profound ecological philosophy and ethical theories, but at the same time, great construction has been carried out in various dynasties. In fact, before the process of China's modernization, China's ecological resources have been seriously damaged, and there are some gaps between ideas and practice, which is almost universal: human beings are not aware of the ethical relationship with nature. They only know what to ask and do not know how to return, which makes human activities more unscrupulous [12]. It can be said that human beings are the initiator of environmental disasters.

The serious ecological crisis and ecological disaster faced by mankind today are caused by itself. The extinction of animals and plants, the deterioration of the environment and the waste of resources are all attributed to mankind. When people realize that they are only a member of nature, nature is the mother who gave birth to them, and any other life form on the earth is the same as mankind, it is difficult for them to enjoy the right to survival and development. Is Tao's heart not touched when he understands that nature is always suffering, human beings exploit the proletariat, and the destruction of nature will directly lead to the destruction of all life on earth? Will he remain indifferent? In this way, ecological thought is no longer a profound theory, can go out of the academic palace, become an easy-to-understand practical law, and emerge as a spiritual weapon for humans to save the earth. With this weapon, mankind will gradually realize its own standardization. The more people know about nature, the more they can accept that they are only a member of nature rather than the master of the earth [13].

## 5. Conclusion

Industrial civilization has brought progress to mankind. At the same time, it has also brought harm to nature. The construction of ecological civilization needs to lessen the destruction of nature caused by industrialization and balance it with the action of human beings' returning to nature and seeking beauty and nobility. Ecological criticism should not only stay in the criticism of the apparent relationship between man and nature, but should extend the perspective of criticism to the depths of man's soul. Compare the relationship between man and nature to man and the whole spiritual world, and establish the concept of green ecology, so as to form the harmony between man and nature. In today's increasingly serious ecological crisis, ecological criticism will play a more and more important role in guiding people to respect nature, love nature, return to nature and build a green lifestyle.

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