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## Ecocritical Concerns in the Selected Poems of Wendell Berry

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### **Abstract:**

Richard Kerridge defines Ecocriticism as “literary and cultural criticism from an environmental viewpoint.” Wendell Berry, a man close to the land because of his work as a farmer, is an American poet, writing in Georgic tradition. His Sabbath poems, though having religious connotations, have deep concerns for the natural world. In his poems his awareness about the consequences of the misuse of natural resources can be found. Though he has written the poems in the collection titled as *This Day: Sabbath Poems Collected and New 1979-2013* (2014), during a solitary walk on the Sabbath day, these poems, as he points out, “does not dependably lead to rest” His poems, while admiring nature as eternal, unbound and timeless, condemn human economy-oriented mindset and industrialization with mention of environmental issues they have invited. They are the mirror to the natural world, which is no more natural due to unmaking of it done by human hands. This paper will ecocritically analyze Sabbath poems written in 2007 from the above-mentioned collection.

**Keywords:** Georgic Tradition, Ecocriticism, Environmentalism, Deep ecology.

### **Introduction:**

Lawrence Buell points out in the ‘Introduction’ to *Environmental Imagination*, “ For more than a century United States has been at once a nature-loving and resource-consuming nation . . . The earth’s most suburbanized citizens, we like being surrounded by greenery but ignore our reliance on toxic substances that increase the comfort of our surroundings until waste disposal becomes a local issue.”(Buell 4) Such local issues are the subject of the poems of Wendell Berry. He is a contemporary American poet, critic and farmer writing in the Georgic tradition. He is mainly recognized for his Sabbath poems which, as he says in ‘Preface: A Timbered Choir: Sabbath Poems 1979-1997’, “were mainly written in silence, in solitude,

mainly out of doors”. (Berry, XIX) He is different from the other American poets writing on nature like Mary Oliver and A.R. Ammons because of the inspiration that he takes from the nature which is not wild nature as found in the aforementioned poets but the farm land. Being close to the land because of his work as a farmer, Wendell Berry witnessed “the progressive decline of his home countryside and community” (Berry 2016) as he mentions in ‘Presence of Nature in Natural world: A long conversation’. Being aware about the environmental degradation, the poet ponders over the human- nature relationship and projects the real situation of nature which is unmade by human hands to show the disastrous result of human acts. In his poems, nature finds association with what is immortal, timeless, unbounded while the human acts of limiting everything is criticized. The poet is critical about the economy oriented mindset of human beings which has invited ecological calamities and have done irreparable harm to the nature. Littleness of human beings, their knowledge and their inventions find reflections in his poems with the preference given to being in the nature as emphasized matter. The poet also tries to show, through and in his poems, that his poems can also play the role in the environmental cause. Here, the selected poems from the section 2007 of *This Day: Sabbath Poems Collected and New 1979-2013* are analyzed with the theories of Ecocriticism in order to find out ecocritical concerns in the poems written by Wendell Berry.

### **Ecocritical Concerns in the Poems of Wendell Berry:**

Wendell Berry begins the poems of ‘2007’ with a quotation taken from Joe Begley which indicates the destruction of a place which brings grief to the person who acknowledges the absence of it on his/her next visit. The poems in this section talk about the similar aspects and mention the vanishing beauty of the natural places and the human hands in unmaking them. The subject Wendell Berry has chosen makes these poems proper to study them from the point of view of Ecocriticism. It is the aim of Ecocriticism to study the works of literature with the Earth centric approach. Richard Kerridge in *Environmentalism and Ecocriticism* defines Ecocriticism as “literary and cultural criticism from an environmental viewpoint.” (Waugh, 530) According to him, Ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in the terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* mentions the definition given by C.Glotfelty and H. Fromm in 'Introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* where they define Ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship

between literature and the physical environment”. (Garrard 3) It takes into account the treatment of nonhumans in order to determine how far any text is ecocentric.

Whenever there is a question of usefulness of writing for the environmental cause, especially in the form of creative writing, it is seen as a less effective form to bring change; to bring into action the ideas it talks about, merely because of its being creative and not scientific. But the usefulness of such a writing can be acknowledged if the distinction between ‘Problems in Ecology’ and ‘Ecological problems’ is known. It is brought into attention by John Passmore who sees ‘Problems in Ecology’ as “properly scientific issues, to be resolved by the formulation and testing of hypothesis in ecological experiments” (Garrard 5) while he says ‘Ecological problems’ to be “Features of our society, arising out of our dealing with nature, from which we should like to free ourselves, and which we do not regard as inevitable consequence of what is good in that society.” (Garrard 5)

In the case of Wendell Berry, it can be inferred that he sees poetry or literature as a whole to be a weapon to bring the environmental issues to the attention of the people. As he says in his ‘Preface: A Timbered Choir: Sabbath Poems 1979-1997’, “a poem can be a way of saying something of public interest in public: a way of making an argument, of declaring one’s allegiance, of taking a stand” (Berry, XIX) The revolutionary role of an individual required to bring change becomes visible in his writing when he insists “Speak/publically what cannot be taught or learned in public.”(Berry 306) This also indicates the lack of role models to be followed by the citizens in the public regarding the eco-friendly behavior in day to day life. The poet himself provides such a model by his work as a farmer and as a writer which is inferred when in the first poem of *2007*, he says “I dream by night the horror / That I oppose by day” (Berry 297). This horror is connected with the destruction of nature which he opposes both by his writing as well as his work as a farmer. He mentions about pollution of air and water which is done by “nation in its error/ And by its work and play.”(Berry 297) This reflects the idea of Passmore about ‘ecological problems’ which are not the result of what is good in any society, consequently, of what is wrong with any society. But poet is also aware about limitations put on the writers by the law and government which he reflects upon in the sixth poem in the Sabbath poems of *2007*, where he says to “Listen privately, silently to the voices that rise up / from the pages of books and from your own heart” (Berry 306) It indicates reading by being secluded

from the world and the work of the poet as an activist because the book has the voice that rises up. The poet also sees the poem to be a guide to nature and nature to be a subject of it. He urges poem to take human beings to the nature or to bring their attention towards its beauty as can be found in the eighth poem of the section '2007'.

While the poet defends nature against culture, he also seems to be defending Christianity against the charges of being anthropocentric. Richard Kerridge points out that "Lynn White Jr. has described Christianity as the most anthropocentric religions, because of God's command, in Genesis 1:26, that men should have dominion over the other creatures of the earth." (Waugh 537) Wendell Berry points out in 'The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation' that Bible also insists on "humans to take the best possible care of the earth and its creatures."(Berry 2016) He even criticizes the divine right of the Man over the land which is now "plundered/ And sold by purchased power" (Berry 297) So the power is purchased by which the rights are purchased. This shows the double contamination and the concentration of power in the hands of limited number of people. In his poem 'It is hard to have hope. It is harder as you grow old' he says the land should be maintained by human beings in such a way as is maintained by tress that stand upon the land. Such a natural, harmless and deeply rooted connection with the nature is desirable for the human beings to be cultivated. This knowledge he sees as being not buyable by wealth and power.

In the same poem the idea of recognizing the place of other creatures that surrounds human beings and from the human race, recognizing the place of marginalized (here; old and hungry) are reflected which are similar to the Christian idea of cultivating good relation with the neighbors. For Wendell Berry, this idea essentially includes taking care of nature which is seen in his mention of "Gospel's paramount moral commandment (Matthew 22:39) that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, even when our neighbor happen to be our enemies" in 'The Presence of Nature in the Natural World: A Long Conversation' from which he concludes that "This neighborly love cannot be a merely human transaction, or you cannot love your neighbor while you destroy the earth and its community of creatures on which you and your neighbor mutually depend" (Berry 2016) The poet says, "Belong to your place by the knowledge of others who are/ your neighbors in it"(Berry 305) The stanza mentions the human beings as well as other creatures found in the nature which hints towards the idea that not only humans but non-humans

are also to be counted as neighbors. He indicates towards the idea of dependency on nature on the part of human beings and other creatures as well by the mention of fishing activity done by human beings and by the heron too to fulfill their need of food. This reflects the idea put forward by Kate Soper in *What is Nature* as mentioned by Richard Kerridge: “We need to value natural ecosystems and acknowledge our dependence on them, without forgetting that ‘nature’ is a series of changing cultural constructions that can be used to praise and blame” (Waugh, 538)

Wendell Berry also tries to convey that when every creature is depended on nature, nature itself /herself does not need anyone to sustain. In the poem, ‘I go by a field where once’, the poet reflects on his failed attempt to grow crops on the soil where once there had been a forest. This simple incident convey the history of the place where the forest is cut, the land is tried to be cultivated and maintained but ultimately, nature has reclaimed its own place. This shows “Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given” (Garrard, 53) which is one of standards by which Buell suggests to analyze any text to be ecocentric. The poet remembers and rejoices about his failed work on the land to grow crops which now has small trees and where, “the forest that belongs here/ has come back and reclaimed its own.” The poet sees this failure in positive light as it has taught him about his place. It is important to note that poet does not use the word ‘field’ or ‘land’ but ‘place’ which hints towards his place in the world, in the nature.

The poet also criticizes the economy-oriented mindset of human beings in his poems which is visible in the poem ‘I Dream by Night the Horror’. In it the nation is shown as dying upward from the roots, which may indicate the high building structures which take the human beings away from their roots; land. In the parallel of from the roots dying upward, the poet mentions the death of their right on the land “from the head downward” (Berry 297) by being “marketed hour by hour” (Berry 297)

The poet says, “The market is a grave” (Berry 297) The grave is usually the place for the dead, for those whose life is over but here, the goods that lie in the market, which is called to be grave, are picked up before their growth was over. This becomes visible when the poet says that these goods “ought/ To live and grow and thrive” (Berry 297) Greed on the part of human beings is also mentioned by the mention of the fist which is always shut which has made “small the great Life” (Berry 298) ‘Life’ instead of ‘life’ may signify the Life of nature which is made short

by the acts of Man. The nature is said to be consumed by human beings to such an extent that it has been hollowed which is compared to the soul of human beings which cannot resist the power of death and surrenders to it.

In the poem ‘Yes, though hope is our duty’, the poet sees the environmental issues as the result of hopes of human beings. He tries to show that even without hopes “we are still well” (Berry 301) According to him, it is the hopes of Man that has made him larger and the world smaller. He says, “My small place grows immense as I walk upon it without hope.” (Berry 301) In the second stanza of the poem, the poet says,

“Out of charity, let us pray  
for the great ones of politics  
and war, the intellectuals,  
scientists, and advisors,  
the golden industrialist,  
the CEOs that they too  
may wake to a day without hope” (Berry 301)

It is a paradox here because the poet says to do charity to the people who are generally associated with doing some charity work which also shows their littleness. All these show the dominance of economy and intelligence over the emotional and religious aspects of human life.

In several poems of this section, the poet talks about hopes in different contexts. When it is about the hopes of human beings in favor of their benefits, their greed, the poet prefers to have no hope while he shows optimism and a living hope for the rejuvenation of the nature which can be seen when he says, “Shall we do without hope? Some days/ there will be none.” But he finds out or recognizes the possibility of this hope when he sees the flower that has just emerged from the land due to “small human acts of compassion, acts of care”. (Berry 300) This shows the requirement of efforts on the part of human beings to save and conserve nature from their own acts. But the poet is sometimes afraid to hope because the future is unpredictable. Here the

“Human accountability to the environment” (Waugh 537) is being suggested by the poem. This being one of the criteria for any work to be ecocentric as suggested by Lawrence Buell makes the poem not only the poem on nature but an ecocentric poem as well.

Besides this, there is also resistance to culture in favor of nature present in his poems. This can be inferred from ‘The nation is a boat’. In this comparison itself, two manmade objects are visible. It is land which is natural while nation, having boundaries signifies human interventions while it is wood that is natural and boat is a manmade thing. The poet perceives the present state of the nation to be that of fallen from “the high vision of dignity, freedom/ holy writ of habeas corpus, / and the land’s abundance” (Berry 299). To overcome this situation he suggests, “go back/ upstream, if you have to swim/ shore and walk.”(Berry 299). It is significant to notice that when the poet talks about nation, humans are passengers of that boat while here, to be saved from the degradation, the poet suggests walking and boat being a manmade machine is not considered as a tool to regain the past which is lost due to other such human inventions. His resistance to culture and insistence to nature is also highlighted in the poem numbered six in the ‘2007’ poem where the poet asks to speak the language that one’s place has taught one before it was affected by the mechanical time. Going back to the past, preferring primitive, indigenous dialect is emphasized by the poet due to their being close to the nature. In addition, everything that is old and pure finds association with nature in the poems of Wendell Berry which can be the reason behind his preferring them. This also suggests how the lives of people can be affected by the place they live on. Here, “The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Waugh 537) as preferred by Lawrence Buell for an ecocentric work can be noticed.

In addition to this, the poet sees the littleness of human knowledge as a reason behind ecological problems of the time. It is mentioned in the poem ‘Those who use the world assuming’. The poet says “Those who use the world assuming/ their knowledge is sufficient/ destroys the world.” (Berry 304) The poet points out cutting of the trees for little sticks which shows how for little needs, immensely important thing is harmed. Besides this, the streams are also foul which kills the creatures which live in it. So, the poet declares, “Industrial humanity, an alien species, lives by death” (Berry 304) The poet also points out the limited human knowledge by pointing out that human beings cannot name everything, cannot put everything into the words



which is pointed out by the mention of the chirping of birds which humans cannot translate into their language. He also mentions about the apocalyptic stories that humans make which is not the whole story. This indicates towards the incapability on the part of human beings to predict the future correctly and their lack of their knowledge on how the nature may respond to their acts. The poet says,

“Hang down your head. This

is our hope: Words emerge

from silence, the silence remains.” (Berry 304)

Wendell Berry does not only talk about the reasons behind the environmental problems but also indicates the possible ways to make the nature rejuvenate. The poet sees disappearance of Man and everything manmade as necessary for the nature to be visible. This is presented in the poem ‘In time a man disappears’ where he ponders over the mortality of human beings and immortality of nature. He says that if once the man disappears from the field, he may miss himself there “as if always he has been there” This indicates towards the mortality of human beings as well as the danger that Man may lose the field he thinks belongs to him. He says,

“But first he must disappear,

and this he foresees with hope,

with thanks. Let others come.” (Berry 307)

Richard Kerridge says, “Nature is what the earth is and does without human interventions.” (Waugh 538) and points out Bill McKibben’s idea in *The End of Nature* (1990) that global warming has brought the possibility of this pure state of nature to an end. She has written, “By changing the weather, we make every spot on the earth man-made and artificial.” (Waugh 539) The need of everything manmade to be disappeared is thought of in the poem ‘The sound of engines leave the air’ where the poet talks about the silence that is spread when the engines leave the air and with it the call of birds also becomes noticeable with there being visible as well.

The knowledge about the place one belongs to is seen as essential for one to have peaceful survival on that place. As Greg Gerald says, “Berry rejects the primacy of science, even ecological science, in favor of a resolute emphasis on the affections, since ‘To be well used, creatures and places must be used sympathetically, just as they must be known sympathetically to be well known’” (Garrard 113) In the sixth poem of *2007*, the poet worries about the loss of hope in the present time regarding the wellness of the place he belongs to as nothing can be predicted but he says to “Hope/ then to belong to your place by your own knowledge/ of what it is that no other place is.” (Berry 305) The word ‘Knowledge’ is frequently used in the poem and with it the emphasis is on the ‘own knowledge’ which suggests the instinctive knowledge about the place because of the connection with it.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, the poems of Wendell Berry present importance of nature and plead humans to save, conserve and nourish it. He criticizes the mankind for the harm it has done to the nature on which they depend. There is a resistance against the industrialization, mechanization and so called development which finds expression in his poems with the mention of technical objects like radio and boat in against which he prefers the modes prior to them to be used by human beings. Nature stays at the center of his poems and poet is more concerned with nature and wellness of human beings is depended on the wellness of nature. Besides his writing also concerns about the use of writing for the environmental cause. His poems can be seen as nature centric as they are mainly about nature and for nature.

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