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“What Man Has Made of Man”: An Eco-critical Reading of Wordsworth’s Lines Written in Early Spring

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Abstract

William Wordsworth’s “*Lines Written in Early Spring*” is often read as a gentle reflection on nature and the poet’s inner world, but when approached through an eco-critical lens, it reveals something far more urgent and relevant. This article explores the poem as an early expression of ecological consciousness, one that quietly laments the growing divide between humans and the natural world. While Wordsworth’s Romantic ideals celebrate the harmony and innocence found in nature, his subtle grief over “*what man has made of man*” opens up a space to consider the environmental concerns that resonate even more deeply in today’s world. By re-reading this short poem through the perspective of eco-criticism, the article sheds light on how literature from the past can speak to present-day ecological anxieties and offer a timeless call to reconnect with the earth. In doing so, it also repositions Romantic poetry not just as an escape into beauty but as a gentle protest, and perhaps even a warning, against human estrangement from nature.

Keywords: Eco-critical, Ecological consciousness, Romantic poetry

Introduction

"Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" This perspective, as articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty, underscores the intrinsic link between literary expression and environmental contexts.

William Wordsworth, a seminal figure in Romantic literature, is renowned for his profound engagement with nature. Jonathan Bate, in *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, posits that Wordsworth's poetry embodies 'green' politics, emphasizing the poet's vision of human integration with nature. This integration reflects a deep-seated ecological consciousness that predates contemporary environmental discourse.

In the poem "Lines Written in Early Spring," Wordsworth juxtaposes the serene beauty of the natural world with a contemplative critique of human actions. The line "*What man has made of man*" serves as a poignant reflection on societal discord and humanity's estrangement from nature. This sentiment aligns with the principles of ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment.

This article aims to analyse "*Lines Written in Early Spring*" through an ecocritical lens, exploring how Wordsworth's portrayal of nature not only reflects Romantic ideals but also offers insights into the enduring relevance of ecological awareness. By situating the poem within both its historical context and contemporary environmental concerns, this research seeks to illuminate how Romantic literature can inform and enrich current ecological discourse.

The objectives of this research are to

1. Apply an ecocritical lens to Lines Written in Early Spring.
2. Identify environmental themes in Wordsworth’s imagery.
3. Connect the poem to present-day ecological issues.
4. Relate Romantic ideals to modern environmental thought.
5. Show the continued relevance of historical literature in ecological discourse.

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Analysis

Applying an Ecocritical Lens to the Poem

Viewed through an ecocritical lens, "*Lines Written in Early Spring*" reveals Wordsworth's deep communion with the natural world and a subtle but striking commentary on humanity's detachment from it. As Greg Garrard outlines in *Ecocriticism*, this approach involves the "*study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment*" (Garrard). Wordsworth's immersive sensory experience in the grove, "*I heard a thousand blended notes*", situates the speaker not as an observer, but as part of the natural ecosystem, foregrounding a human-nature interconnectedness central to ecocritical studies.

Identifying Environmental Themes in Wordsworth's Imagery

Nature in the poem is not passive; it is animated, emotive, and vibrant. The lines

*"The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air"*

personify vegetation, suggesting intentionality and joy in even the smallest acts of growth. The periwinkle "*trailed its wreaths,*" and the birds "*hopped and played*", details that emphasize movement, life, and pleasure. Wordsworth's belief that

"every flower

Enjoys the air it breathes"

reflects a near-spiritual conviction that nature possesses sentience, aligning with what Lawrence Buell describes as a "reimagining of the environment as active and expressive" (Buell). These vivid images reinforce the poem's thematic concern: that nature embodies a pure and joyful order from which humanity has drifted.

Connecting the Poem to Present-Day Ecological Issues

The lament repeated in the final line:

"What man has made of man"

can be recontextualised in today's climate crisis. The phrase resonates as an early recognition of human destructiveness, not just towards one another, but by extension, towards the planet. In an age marked by deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss, the contrast between the serenity of nature and the corruption of mankind feels hauntingly current. As Kate Rigby notes in *Topographies of the Sacred*, Romantic poets like Wordsworth provide "*a poetic groundwork for contemporary ecological awareness*" (Rigby). This poem, while situated in the 18th century, anticipates modern anxieties about our alienation from and damage to the natural world.

Relating Romantic Ideals to Modern Environmental Thought

Romanticism placed immense value on emotion, imagination, and nature as an antidote to industrial progress and mechanisation. Wordsworth's reverence for "*Nature's holy plan*" aligns with today's eco-philosophical ideals, such as biocentrism, which asserts the intrinsic value of all living beings. The Romantic belief in nature's moral and spiritual significance overlaps with contemporary ecological ethics that seek harmony rather than dominance over the environment. As Timothy Morton suggests in *Ecology Without Nature*, Romantic texts serve as "*a key site for the emergence of ecological awareness*" (Morton), offering a framework for reevaluating our place in the biosphere.

Relevance in Today's Ecological Discourse

Despite its age, "*Lines Written in Early Spring*" continues to speak meaningfully to our times. Its simple diction and accessible imagery mask a powerful critique of human disconnection from nature, a concern that has only intensified. The enduring resonance of this poem illustrates how literary texts can transcend their historical moment to participate in larger, ongoing dialogues. As Glen Love asserts, "*Literature has always provided one of the primary means by which cultures come to understand themselves and their relation to the environment*" (Love). Wordsworth's work, then, is not merely an artifact of Romanticism but a living document in the evolving conversation on ecological consciousness.

Conclusion:

Lines Written in Early Spring may appear deceptively simple at first glance, yet its depth unfolds through an ecocritical reading that situates it within both Romantic ideals and contemporary ecological concerns. Wordsworth's meditative reflections capture not only the healing harmony of the natural world but also the dissonance created by human estrangement from it. By invoking nature as a conscious, almost sacred entity and juxtaposing it against the moral and environmental degradation of mankind, the poem becomes more than a personal lament, it stands as an early call for ecological awareness. The enduring relevance of Wordsworth's vision emphasizes that historical literature holds valuable insights for navigating today's environmental crises. In bridging past and present, poetry such as this reminds us that the path to renewal may begin by simply sitting in a grove, listening to "*a thousand blended notes,*" and asking ourselves what we have made of man and of the world he inhabits.

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