



Research Paper

Nature vs. Culture: Ecological Reverberations in Robert Penn Warren's *Flood*

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Abstract

*"In nature, nothing exists alone."
-Rachel Carson*

Eco-critical study has become a popular genre in recent literary trends. The opposition and the lack of connection between culture and nature have led to the degradation and destruction of the living environment. 'Man is an integral part of culture.' He exploits the natural environment to live a comfortable life, and in exchange, he doesn't give anything back to nature. It results in huge devastation for both human societies and nature. This research study focuses on environmental issues caused by men in Robert Penn Warren's *Flood*, a romance of our time. The story has the baseline of the devastating flood that has inundated Tennessee. The construction of the dam causes not just the havoc of the flood, but it is more than that: the thought of losing a rich heritage. Brad Tolliver, the protagonist, arrives at his hometown, Tennessee. He hears the news that a dam is to be constructed to produce electricity. This causes panic among the people. The cultural heritage would be completely wiped out because of modern ideologies. This research paper explores the destruction caused to the people of Tennessee and how their lives are disrupted by the intervention of modern advancement. The paper also underscores the importance of culture and nature in achieving sustainability.

Key Words- Environment Nature, Modern Era, Ecology and Culture.

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Nature and the environment have always been an integral part of man's survival. Man has evolved through the ages by depending on the natural resources for his living. It is time to seriously consider the consequences of the exploitation and deterioration caused to the environment and to restore the habitat for future generations to live. Sustainable practices are essential to save the earth and living beings. Eco-literature plays a significant role in creating awareness and educating for the well-being of the earthlings.

Eco-literature addresses the responsibility of preserving the environment and culture in this biosphere. Fictional narratives and stories expound on the exploration of natural resources and advocate a possible solution to revive the web of life for future generations. Environmentalists and ecologists have highlighted the depletion and the disappearance of the biomes around the globe. Analysing the literary works on Eco criticism and its branches of study helps in finding a solution to ecological sustainability and in preparing and preserving wildlife for a better living condition for men to prosper.

There are innumerable texts that explore the relation between nature and culture to promote sustainability and ecological concerns. The study sheds light on the holistic approach to understanding man and society. The agglomeration of ecological terms that has emerged in recent years has proved the gravity of the situation to solve the ecological issues that threaten the lives on the planet Earth. Dwindling natural resources is a major concern of the 21st century. Arne Dekke Eide Naess in his *Culture and Environment* observes,

As long as there were a moderate number of humans with moderate means to interfere with the richness and diversity of life on Earth, it did not matter much for the planet how they conceived their relation to the Earth. But now, with an enormous number of people and a practically infinite capacity for destruction, how they feel about nature is of great importance... The rapid extinction of non-industrialist societies is an ecosystem degradation and destruction. The threat of the extinction of cultures has an ethical aspect, and

belongs to the proper problematics of general ecology. Protection of human cultural diversity is a genuine part of the protection of biodiversity. (146)

Nature and culture should complement each other for the existence of “ecological systems of the Earth.” The diversity of cultures with the new technological advancement has transformed the living environment. The ethical, cultural practices and avoiding unsustainable habits could improve the situation. Robert Penn Warren, in his poetry collection and in some of his novels, has emphasized the need to preserve culture and nature. He further contemplates the deep connection between humanity and nature and underscores the stewardship of man to protect the environment. He advocates the practice of managing and conserving the natural environment. The modern industrialization and the escalating environmental threats have caused complete destruction to human life. Warren reminds us of the impending danger and has expressed the pressing need to balance and promote ecosystems.

Robert Penn Warren's *Flood* is the story of the self-realization of a man living in the modern world bereft of past and nature. The story is set in the fictional town of Fiddlersburg in Tennessee. The protagonist, Brad Tolliver, a writer, visits his hometown with his director, Yasha Jones, to shoot a movie. He attempts to document the final days of his native town before the flood. Flood also symbolizes the sweeping transformation brought by modern progress. The construction of a massive dam and the relocation of the inhabitants disturb and cripple the lives of the people. The novel depicts the environmental disaster that has resulted because of the construction of the dam. It presents how man, in this industrial and modern age, has exploited nature to erect mammoth buildings and other huge industries. It has led to the erasure of the eco-friendly environment and the cultural heritage of the nations. The traditional practices and natural surroundings are defaced by the external forces. The construction of the dam challenges the purpose of human life, cultural heritage, and the individual identity.

The description of the town highlights the destruction caused due to the development of modern advancement and the extinction of the species in the ecosystem. The following lines from the novel throw light on the extinction of the natural surroundings, proliferating cement buildings:

The big sycamore by the creek was gone. The willow tangle was gone. The lump of dogwood on the little rise across the creek—now that, too, was gone. But the trouble was not so much what was not there. It was what was there... The water in the stream looked real. But the water lilies were definitely cement (4).

Warren connects his personal experience to the flooded places in the novel *Flood*. Relocation and displacement of the people wipe out the cultures and relations with the geographical region. It leads to serious repercussions for the ecosystem. The people of the small town have invariably grown with the nature-abounding region. The residents are emotionally bound to their native town. The construction of the dam threatens the impending danger of snapping the cultural ties, traditions, and their homes. Brad Tolliver recollects his past life in his hometown. Brad and Yasha Jones have come to write and screen a movie on the plight of the fictional town. The construction of the dam necessitates the townsmen to vacate and relocate themselves to a different place. It is not just the dislocation of the residents but even the graveyard. Brad gazes at the long stretch beyond “the church and the crowd, over the river” and at the far-off remnants of tombstones and coffins. Modern advancements and inventions are the curse, disrupting not only the living but also the dead people in Fiddlersburg.

There should be a harmonious blend of nature and culture for the survival of man and other entities. In *Flood*, Warren explores man's exploitation of the ecosystem for his personal gain. The construction of the dam is the symbolic representation of the destruction caused to the cultural nuances of the region. It is the age-old traditions, customs, and stories that are forgotten and neglected. The narrative examines the challenges of the townsmen who struggle to adapt to the modernization that secludes them from their culture and traditional lifestyle.

One of the characters, Leontine Purple, the blind girl, and other inhabitants of the place have lived their lives breathing familiarity into the locality. The disturbance to the environment would dislocate not only the community but also the time-immemorial living habitats. The blind girl, Leontine Purtle, expresses her difficulty in acclimatizing to the new environment.

Fiddlersburg—every hump in the road, every sagged gatepost, every cocklebur patch and pig wallow, every flake of rust on the iron posts that hold up that corrugated metal awning in front of Perkins Dry Goods and the P.O.... I bemoan the fate of Leontine Purtle. Her hand, in darkness, shall seek what is not to be found. Her foot shall be set on a stone that speaks not. The air shall be a heaviness unto her lungs, and the dawn bird in the rose arbor shall utter a note of no comfort. (87)

The modernization of the town leaves the place sans the precious flora and fauna and erases the place without any cultural heritage. The environmental transformation in the real sense does not progress but remains unsustainable for the ecosystem to support the lives. The story through the Eco critical lens leads to the environmental degradation causing irrevocable loss to the biodiversity. The story, when seen through the lens of bioregionalism as critiqued by Zackary Vernon, provides a clear view of the “interconnectedness of people and

place.” It also reflects on the ecological and cultural aspects that shape man’s identity. The protagonist, Brad Tolliver, depicts the significance of bioregionalism and how culture, history, and ecology are bonded together for shaping the region and the people.

The modernization destroys marine life, wiping out the aquatic life, depleting natural resources, destroying the vegetation, and dislocating the entire community. *Flood* is not just the story of the characters; it also paints the beautiful land of Fiddlersburg to which the characters are bound. Warren portrays the intersection of the narrative and geographical identity. The culture and nature, when disturbed, have their reverberations on the environment and community. Warren’s story interrogates the psychological impact and the social identities in the wake of modernization and historical reckoning. Though *Flood* depicts and thematizes the self-awakening of the protagonist and the other major characters, Brad Tolliver, Lettice, Yasha Jones, and Maggie, it also reconnects human existence with that of ecological consciousness.

Encouraging sustainable lifestyles, supporting afforestation, preserving the ecosystem, and strengthening geopolitical ideologies would restore and revive the lost habitats on the planet Earth. Further destruction can be avoided by fostering a harmonious bond with Mother Earth. *Flood* underscores the significance of environmental protection and preserving the human culture. The novel focuses on the development and the importance of preserving the culture.

It is man’s responsibility to preserve and to integrate with the cultural heritage. Warren’s narration underscores the inevitable bond between the natural world and the human psyche. Preserving a culture indirectly preserves the ecology. Warren, through his narration, binds the inseparable connection between the culture and place.

"The environment is where we all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share."— Lady Bird Johnson (former First Lady of the United States)

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