ABSTRACT

This article attempts to discuss the portrayal of nature and find the poet’s view towards nature in Walt Whitman’s “A Song of the Rolling Earth”. In “A Song of the Rolling Earth”, Whitman reflects his ambiguous view: anthropocentrism or ecocentrism. It is significant to conduct this study because the poem is written in 19th century, however it contains environmental issue which become well-known today. Since the writer relates the portrayal of nature with the environmental issue, ecocriticism is the most appropriate theory to analyze the poem. In analyzing the poem, the writer uses three steps of ecocriticism suggested by Cherryl Glotfelty: define how the portrayal of nature within the works is, how the text or images deliver the issue in different ways, and how the ideology is constructed in the text. “A Song of the Rolling Earth” provides the ideology of environmentalism in which sustainable development and sustainable society become the findings of the study.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism; Ecocentrism; Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

Human beings live in a great planet which has plenty of natural resources within it. Unfortunately, human beings often just take the benefits of what nature already serve to them without preserving it. Moreover, damage and exploitation of natural resources still happen today. For example, deforestation and illegal logging happen in Kalimantan, Indonesia. As a result, natural disasters such as flood, forest fire, and landslide come easily. The exploitation of animals may cause the termination of food chain and extinction of several kinds of animals such as the exploitation of shark fin may cause the decreasing population and the extinction of shark. Urban lifestyle will also damage the Earth such as the use of plastic, which is hard to be recycled, paper, gasoline, and electronics. Those exploitation acts refer to the term of anthropocentric which believe that human has absolute power to exploit the nature for human needs. These views also believe that human and nature are completely different and see nature as the other. In contrast, ecocentrism sees nature, including non-human things, has the same rights as human. Those two contrasting views are reflected in “A Song of the Rolling Earth” written by Walt Whitman. Thus, this article attempts to discuss about the portrayal of nature and the poet’s view towards nature in Whitman’s poem titled “A Song of The Rolling Earth”.

In the poem, the writer found Whitman’s ambiguous view towards nature. It is reflected by two contrasting views: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Both of them are related to the environmental issue today which people face: the degradation of natural resources. “A Song of the Rolling Earth” was written by Walt Whitman in 1856 as “A Poem of the Sayers of the Earth”. The title of the poem has been changed four times and finally appears as “A Song of the Rolling Earth” in 1881. The writer also analyzes the title of the poem in order to get deeper analysis.

Walt Whitman was born in 31 May 1819 on Long Island. He is an American poet and journalist. Whitman is also known as a poet of democracy whose most of works contain American values. Whitman’s collection of works in Leaves of Grass has a difficulty in its publication because of his radical voice and idea towards American politics. In Walt Whitman and Class Struggle, Whitman engages with a variety of literary genres, including transcendentalism, southwestern humor, political journalism, urban sensationalism, philology, sexology, and astronomy (Lawson xx). The themes of Whitman’s work are influenced by the philosophers he read or heard. Whitman declares “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul”. Whitman’s World Soul is influenced by Ralph W. Emerson that everything in nature contains a droplet of the immortal and indivisible. Whitman recognized that his soul was part of the World Soul which derived from his mystical experience. Thus, he united to all things, living, and dead (Volpe 333-334). In other words, Whitman feels that he has a connection with nature and “A Song of the Rolling Earth” is kind of the poet’s expression of his relationship with nature. The poem is the media to spread
the idea that the relationship between human and nature should be improved to decrease the damage of nature.

The damage of nature is caused by human assumption that nature and the non-human things are inaudible or silent. According to Christopher Manes, “nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Glotfelty 15). In other word, nature is understood by human as silent and only human beings are able to ‘speak’. These understanding cause the imbalance relationship between human beings and nature because they see nature as the other which is completely different from them.

Ecocriticism is the most appropriate theory to analyze the poem. The writer would like to show the definition of Ecocriticism before explaining a little about the history of Ecocriticism. The term Ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert which meant “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (xx). Simply means, Ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (xviii). In general, literary theory examines about the relationship between the writer, text, and world. The term ‘world’ in most literary theory means society or the social sphere. But, in Ecocriticism, the term ‘world’ is expanded which means the entire ecosphere. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii). Another definition of Ecocriticism is the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem..., oblivious of the nonhuman world (Coupe 160).

Environmental studies appeared in 1992 when Association for the Study and Environment (ASLE) was formed with Scott Slovic as the first president. The purpose of ASLE is to promote the exchange of ideas related to the literature which has a relationship between nature and human beings and to explore “new nature writing, traditional and innovative approach to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research”. There is also a journal, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) to provide critical studies of literary addressing environmental consideration, ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions and depiction of nature, the human/nature dichotomy, and related concerns (xviii).

This study is a qualitative research which uses descriptive data such as written or oral words and behavior of people. In completing the study, the writer must have enough data from various sources. Primary source used in this paper is Whitman’s “A Song of The Rolling Earth”. Then, secondary sources used in this paper are The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, The Green Studies Reader by Lourence Coupe, a postgraduate thesis and essays which analyze the poem, articles from internet and books related to the study. To collect the data, the writer uses close reading. In analyzing the poem, the writer uses three main steps suggested by Glotfelty: first, describing how the portrayal of nature or environment within the works is; second, how the texts or images deliver the issue in different way; and third, how do people see the work using ecocriticism and consider it as a kind of ideology that should be broken down where the meaning is needed to be revealed (Maimunah and Arimbi 9-10a).

2. Discussion
2.1 The Portrayal of Nature

Based on three steps in analyzing nature writing or environmental text suggested by Glotfelty, the first step is to describe the portrayal of nature or environment within the text. In the poem, nature is portrayed as silent and feminine. The imbalance relationship between nature and human is caused by human assumption that nature is the other and different from them. Nature is subordinate and underneath the human culture. The daily communication is done between human being and human being. People often forget to try to communicate with nature, including the non-human things because people believe that nature doesn’t have the ability to speak. However, nature also ‘speaks’, although the language of nature is inaudible because nature ‘speaks’ through its elements such as air, soil, water, and fire.

In the poem, nature is also personified as a woman. The use of phrase ‘mother earth’ and the word ‘sisters’ refers to the earth. The term ‘mother nature’ is produced by understanding something non-human
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(biophysical environment) in human terms (Harper 39). Thus, there is a dogma of understanding biophysical environment as human produces human culture to personify nature as a woman. The earth is described as pregnant woman as stated in the use of French language accouche! Accouchez! (43). In English, accouche means ‘birth’ and accouchez means ‘give birth’. The word acchouche (birth) is a noun referring to female while acchoucez is a verb or the activity done by the female. In other words, Whitman would like to say there is a pregnant woman who gives birth to her child. It also refers to the earth which is pregnant with its resources. From those words, it is clear that nature or Earth in the poem is illustrated as a female because only female who is able to get pregnant and give birth.

2.2 Critics to Anthropocentrism

The writer found that the poet tries to criticize the anthropocentric (sees nature as the other) view through the illustration of nature in the poem. The poem is written in 1856 in which the influence of romanticism could be seen within the poem. The notion of nature is a part of Romantic discourse and critique of industrial system which destroy nature. Romanticists use nature as a metaphor to contrast the goodness of nature with the darkness of industrial system (Harper 39). In the first part of the poem, the critique is delivered to the portrayal of earth as silent figure. The silence or incapability of earth to ‘speak’ in human language cause human to see nature as passive character which can be controlled. The poet emphasize that earth also can ‘speak’ to human being and it is important for human beings to understand the language of earth. It is expressed in the repetition of the structure of phrase:

Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright
lines? those curves, angles, dots?
No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the
ground and sea,
Were you thinking that those were the words, those delicious
sounds out of your friends’ mouths?
No, the real words are more delicious than they.

From those repetitions, the word ‘curves’, ‘angles’, and ‘dots’ refers to the typography of alphabet. The alphabet is produced by human culture and become the media of communication. In the same case, the phrase ‘delicious sound of your friends’ mouths’ refers to the phonemes which is produced through the production of speech. Contrast to those products of culture: alphabet and phonemes, the poet emphasizes that nature has its own language which human being could not translate. Moreover, the poet would like to say that the language of nature is as important as human language.

The writer also analyze from the title of the poem, “A Song of The Rolling Earth”. From the phrase ‘The Rolling Earth’, the writer interprets the poet’s criticism to the anthropocentrism. ‘The Rolling Earth’ refers to the rotation of earth on its axis. The earth rotates in 24 hour on its 23.5 tilt. The rotation of earth gives us day and night. In other words, the earth gives heat of the sun in one region and gives cold in another region at the same time. The purpose of these activities is for balancing all regions or continents on earth to get hot and cold, or sun and moon. Thus, the writer interprets that the poet is dreaming of the balance, including the balance of relationship between human beings and nature.

2.3 Celebrating Anthropocentrism

The interesting part of the discussion is the fact that the poet not only criticizes but also celebrates anthropocentrism. The poet sees nature (earth) as a planet which has many potential resources that can be used for human needs. As stated in:

Conveying a sentiment and invitation, I utter and utter,
I speak not, yet if you hear me not of what avail am I to you?
To bear, to better, lacking these of what avail am I?
(Acchouche! accouchez!
Will you rot your own fruit in yourself there?)
Will you squat and stifle there?)

The lines show the communication of the poet and earth. The poet tries to communicate with earth. The poet sees the potential resources within the earth. The word ‘fruit’ refers to the resources. Related to the meaning of words ‘acchouche’ and ‘accouchez’, the poet ask the earth to deliver (give birth) its natural resources because human needs these resources for the growth of its civilization. The poet also brings forward that the existence of human beings are to control and use the resources which is expressed in the line what avail am I to you? (41).

Moreover, the poet seems agree with the dogma that culture will always master nature. The dogma produces human’s belief that God created nature only for human’s benefit. Human has absolute right to control animals, plants, and other resources. Thus, human, including the poet, think that it is appropriate to take the benefit of nature. It is expressed in:

Whoever you are! Motion and reflection are especially for you,
Whoever you are! you are he or she for whom the earth is solid and liquid,
You are he or she for whom the sun and moon hang in the sky,

The celebration of anthropocentrism is also expressed in three words signifying the act of anthropocentrism in the last part of the poem: ‘delve’, ‘mould’, and ‘pile’. First, based on Oxford dictionary, ‘delve’ means “to search for something inside, container, etc”. Implicitly, it means that human must ‘search’ something potential (natural resources) within the earth. For instance, crude oil is drilled to be used as source of energy. Second, ‘mould’ means “to shape a soft substance into a particular form or object by pressing it or by putting it into a mould” (Oxford). The writer interprets ‘mould’ as the process of making bricks and metal. ‘Mould’ is the next step after ‘drilling’. In other words, to make metal, people must mine ores and then ‘mould’ it as a solid metal. The last word is ‘pile’ which means “a large wooden, metal, or stone post that is fixed into the ground and used to support a building, bridge, etc (Oxford).

Thus, the writer concludes that those three words (‘delve’, ‘mould’, ‘pile’) refers to the process of building a structure. Based on the line Delve! mould! pile! the words of the earth, it can be said that the poet support anthropocentrism by exploiting natural resources, processing it into materials, and making building, the place where human culture is produced.

2.4 Sustainable Development as an Ideology

The last step in analyzing the text is to find the ideology constructed in the poem. Based on the previous step, the writer concludes that the poet spreads the ideology of sustainable development through the poem by harmonizing two contrasting views: ecocentrism and anthropocentrism. The position of the poet is between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism (human beings and nature). Whitman does not belong to nature or human beings, but in-between. That is why he criticizes and, at the same time, celebrates anthropocentrism.

The development of transportation and communication emerged in 1860. New York City was a great port with ferries and omnibuses, and become the hub of information network. Since the invention of steam-powered travel and telegraph, messages from Europe arrived earlier, it only took a week and a half to receive it. There was also the changes of the function of advertising from a simple product of information to a persuasive media. As a journalist, Whitman saw those developments in transportation and information as the opportunities of technology (Killingsworth 76). It means that there was a conflict in the poet’s mind which produce the poet’s ambiguous view towards nature and directly put his on in-between nature and culture.

Whitman was born in 1819-1892. In other words, the poet lives in the period of romanticism and realism. It can be said that Whitman’s position was in-between the romanticism and realism. The idea of romanticism (ecocentrism) and realism (anthropocentrism) appear in the poem. The poet accepts the idea of romanticism (praise the nature) but he also does not reject the idea of realism. The poet finds the opportunities of technology. On the other hand, the idea of preserving nature must be realized.

Environmentalism could be the ideology between romanticism and realism. According to Harper, environmentalism is a kind of both ideology and action. As an ideology, “it is a broad set of beliefs about
desirability and possibility of improving the human relationship with the environment” (Harper 360). In addition, as an action, it is a “purposive action intended to change the way people relate to the environment”, and also means the “collective action of many individuals...intended to transform the way communities, companies, and societies impact their environment” (Harper 361).

Sustainable development is a form or realization of environmentalism. Sustainable means “the change process or activity can be maintained without exhaustion or collapse” and development means “change and improvement can occur as a dynamic process” (Harper). In other words, sustainable development means the act of inventing and developing technology to fulfill human needs along with preserving the biotic environment. The writer argues that the poet spreads the ideology of sustainable development through the poem. The interesting point is the fact that the poem was written two century ago. However, it contains the idea of sustainable development which emerged in 20th century. It can be said that two centuries ago, the poet had already predicted the emergence of sustainable development and warned people to put more consideration on earth to get a better environment. As Whitman stated in:

The earth is just as positive and direct as it was before
Facts, religions, improvements, politics, trades, are as real as before, (166-168)
Undeniable growth has establish’d it (171)

From the lines above, the writer interprets that the earth will always be a ‘carrier’ in which there is a ‘carrying capacity’ within it. The resources in its ‘carrying capacity’ are limited. On the other hand, human culture, such as ‘improvement’ (invention of technology) and ‘trades’ will always develop, which the poet call as ‘undeniable growth’. Thus, the idea of sustainable development is the answer of the ‘undeniable growth’ of human civilization.

In conducting the sustainable development, there must be a sustainable society within it. Sustainable society is a society that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Harper 276). There are seven requirements which sustainable society must have to do with: the biological base, population, energy, economic efficiency, social forms, culture, and world order.

First, sustainable society must conserve and restore the biological base such as grassland, tropical rainforest, desert, tundra, freshwater reservoir, and saltwater bodies. Second, sustainable society must control the growth of population. The purpose is to give people the access to contraception and family healthcare, and reduce gender inequality. Third, sustainable society would minimize the use of fossil fuels like coal and petroleum by using the less polluting fuel. In the future, sustainable society would get the energy from solar, wind and water. Fourth, sustainable society would produce efficient vehicles, transportation systems, machinery, offices, and appliances. It would reduce the waste of the process of production, packaging, and distribution of goods. Thus, sustainable society would maximize the recycling of material and waste. Fifth, “sustainable society would have social forms compatible with the natural, technical, and economic characteristics. The latter can produce many economies and efficiencies,...” (Harper 306). For example, transportation systems become more efficient such as ride-sharing programs, mass transit, and bicycle. Sixth, sustainable society must “require a culture of beliefs, values, and social paradigms that define and legitimize these natural, economic, and social characteristics” (Harper 306). The natural environment must be recognized more as ecological system to be preserved and maintained than as open environments to be utilized and exploited. The culture of consumerism will be replaced by sufficiency. The social characteristics of sustainable society provide a tolerance of diversity, social justice, and democratic politics. Last, sustainable societies would work to transform the system of global investment and world trade to promote a world of sustainable societies (Harper 305-307).

In the poem, the poet has already predicted not only the sustainable development, but also the sustainable society two centuries earlier. It is expressed in the following lines of the last part of the poem:

When the materials are all prepared and ready, the architects
shall appear.
I swear to you the architects shall appear without fail,
I swear to you they will understand you and justify you, (185-188)
Based on oxford dictionary, ‘architect’ means “a person who designs buildings” or “a person who is responsible for inventing or realizing a particular idea or project”. It can be said that the word ‘architects’ in those lines refers to the sustainable society who support the sustainable development by inventing technology without harming nature. The poet has already predicted the idea of sustainable development in the future. The poet promises there will be societies who build and develop their culture along with the preservation. These sustainable societies ‘will understand’ the earth (nature).

3. Conclusion

Based on the analysis, “A Song of the Rolling Earth” is categorized as environmental text because it contains of environmental issue and environmental ethics as the prominent message. Thus, ecocriticism is the most appropriate theory to analyze the poem.

Contrast is important to find the hidden meaning of the poem. The conflict in Whitman’s mind produces his ambiguous view towards nature. As a result, the contrast between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism is reflected in the poem. Through the contrast, the poet would like to harmonize those two different views. It can be said that the poet is in-between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, or romanticism and realism. The poet has an ecocentric view, but he also does not reject anthropocentrism.

Environmentalism is the realization of the hybridization of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Walt Whitman spreads the ideology of environmentalism through the poem. It is related to Harper’s statement that environmentalism is a kind of both ideology and action. As an ideology, it is a belief to improve the relationship between human and environment which is constructed in “A Song of the Rolling Earth”. Then, as an action or collective action, it takes form as sustainable development, including the sustainable society.

In conclusion, human race and technology will always develop. People cannot back to hunter-gatherer era. What people can do for a better environment is minimizing the negative effect of industrialization and maximizing the ways to preserve the biotic community by considering and understanding nature more through sustainable development. For instance, inventing and using eco-friendly vehicles and materials, recycling waste, planting trees, and using electricity wisely.

4. Works Cited

Lawson, Andrew. Walt Whitman and Class Struggle. Iowa: University of Iowa Press. 2006. PDF