

An Interpretation of the A Wind-storm in the Forests——from the Perspective of Material Ecocriticism

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Abstract: An analysis of A Wind-storm in the Forests from the perspective of Material Ecocriticism reveals that Storm has a three-dimensional connotation of the agentic power, the ability to generate meaning and narrative capacity. The Storm has the agency to nourish and soothe the trees, and to present its invisible figure through the trees. Under the construction of social discourse, the storm represents the ecosystem of all living things, linking humans and trees into an interactive community with equal role. The Storm also tells the story of the human initiative into the wilderness and the equality between man and trees, reflecting the ecological text of humans interacting with non-human matters and coexisting with nature equally under the contemporary discourse.

Keywords: John Muir; Material Ecocriticism; A Wind-storm in the Forests

1. Introduction

Ecocriticism is a study concerning the relation between environment and literature. Since its emergence in 1970s till today. In the fourth wave, ecocritics witness a “material turn” of ecocriticism which is later alleged as “material ecocriticism”. Material ecocriticism is “the study of the expressive dynamics” of matters in its becoming or it is the study concerning “narrative agencies of storied matter” in their mutual interactions^[2]. Based on the insights from new materialism and ecological postmodernism, material ecocriticism develops its own distinctive assumptions with respect to three dimensional implications concerning matter: agency, meaning and narrative.

John Muir (1838-1914) is known as the “Father of the National Parks” and “John of the Mountains”. He devoted most of his time to the wilderness. The Mountains of California is a collection of travel notes from the Muir’s expeditions in this region. With the theoretical framework of material ecocriticism, John Muir’s A Wind-storm in the Forests, one of the essays in The Mountains of California, can be examined. The Storm, as the most important non-human matter in this essay, demonstrating its rich narrative content in three dimensions, namely, its agentic capacity, its ability to generate meaning and its narrative power.

2. The Agency of “Storm”

In A Wind-storm in the Forests, the author describes the unique forest landscape of the Sierra Nevada, recounting the diverse characteristics of the trees in the mountains. In the climax of the essay, he goes out of his house and over the mountains to observe how the trees behave during the storm. He even climbs up a tall Douglas Spruce to experience the power of the Storm^[4]. Although the story records the author’s personal experience in exploring the wilderness in the California forests, the title, structure and content of this essay suggest that the Storm has become the protagonist of the non-human world in this essay.

On one hand, the Storm nourishes the trees in the novel, Storm is the fundamental environment on which they can live. As Muir writes at the beginning of his essay, “the mountain winds are measured and bestowed with love on the forests to develop their strength and beauty^[3].” The Storm gives equal care to every tree: “the winds go to every tree, fingering every leaf and branch and furrowed bole; not one is forgotten.” For the forests, Storm serves as the catalyst to stimulate their growth. The care and blessing that the Storm brings to the tree is a clear indication that the Storm is a subject with agentic capacities, not a passive object.

On the other hand, ostensibly, the wind is invisible and few will care the wind in nature. However, it doesn’t mean that they are as insignificant and static as we thought. It is through their agency that they find for themselves the trees as their perfect interpreter. “Winds are advertisements of all they touch, however much or little we may be able to read them; telling their wanderings even by their scents alone.” This is a good illustration of its powerful agentic ability.

3. Meaning Generation of “Storm”

Paralleling with the concept of agency, meaning generation of matter that results from its agency is the second dimensional implication that material ecocritics emphasize. For material ecocriticism, the agency of matter makes it capable of generating meanings. Barad holds the view that “materiality is discursive”^[1]. Matter is a “medium of ecosemiotic and ecocultural processes”, so it can generate meaning of signs^[5]. Therefore, the matter and meaning is mutually connected. As a result, matter incorporates “material ecological relationships” which generate meanings interconnected with human society.

An examination of the meaning generating of this essay reveals the connotation of its discursive construction of the substance, namely that the wind symbolizes the ecosystem and that it is because of the Storm in the California forests give rise to a diversity of tree forms with beautiful variety of colors and shapes. “Even when the grand anthem had swelled to its highest pitch, I could distinctly hear the varying tones of individual trees, singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures,—manifesting a richness of variety to be found in no other forest I have yet seen.”. Storm plays a crucial role in refreshing the forests and shape the diversity of trees, this is the further evidence of the very important ecosystem connotations of Storm as a material component of the Muir’s writing in this text. “We all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense.” It is through his experiencing the storm in person and interacting with the wilderness that Muir gains a deeper understanding of the Storm as a large ecosystem, realizing that the trees are experiencing the storm the same as the human. The implication of the Storm as a whole ecosystem is not created by human alone, but a generative “hybrid” in which man and all matters are intertwined, constructed and intermingled.

4. Narratives power of “Storm”

Finally, Material ecocritics promote “material narrativity” which allows all matters to articulate itself . In this sense, narrative agency is no longer the ability of humanity but also that of other nonhuman matters. “When human matters and nonhuman matters jointly perform the agency, a multilayered reality in which material practices and discursive practices coexist will be formed”. In other words, not only do humans write stories, but non-human materials also can narrate the history of environmental change while demonstrating their ability to act as storytellers. The process of interaction between humans and non-human matter is also a process of meaning-production or discursive practice. The Storm narrates a discourse of ecological awareness and conservation where humans and nature live together as equals.

The forests and Storm are the text, the natural code of human knowledge waiting to be decoded. Muir comes to the California forest, experiences the Storm and observes the non-human matter during Storm as if a scholar reading a manuscript that has not yet been deciphered, trying to contemplate on the code written by the nature. As Muir writes, “After tracing the Sierra streams from their fountains to the plains, marking where they bloom white in falls, glide in crystal plumes, surge gray and foam-filled in boulder-choked gorges, and slip through the woods in long, tranquil reaches—after thus learning their language and forms in detail, we may at length hear them chanting all together in one grand anthem.” The ecological knowledge of plants is transformed into human-readable symbols, and the Storm integrated into the human language and culture, once again reversing the dichotomy between nature and culture. From this perspective, The Storm also tells a contemporary discourse in which the man and nature live in the contemporary space equally. With the Storm approaching, Muir decides to take the initiative to experience the Storm and he realized that humans and trees are all the same, all travelers. Trees are also the equal part of the whole community, who have the awareness and right to experience and to travel. Nature is also part of the community to which man belongs and in which we should live together with other living things equally.

5. Conclusion

An analysis of A Wind-storm in the Forests from the perspective of Material Ecocriticism reveals that Storm has the agency to nourish the trees, and to present its existence through the trees. Under the construction of social discourse, the Storm represents the ecosystem, linking humans and trees into an interactive world with equal role. The Storm also tells the story of the human initiative into the wilderness and the equality between man and trees, reflecting the contemporary discourse of humans interacting with non-human matters and coexist with non-human matters equally. Understanding and acknowledging the nonhuman matter’s agentic capabilities and narrative power can help us to deconstruct the dichotomy between nature and human and reject anthropocentrism fundamentally. Besides, the extension of narrative power to non-human matter promotes the enchantment of nature. There is no doubt that A Wind-storm in the Forests establishes a paradigm for the narrative of Storm, constructing a discursive mechanism that integrates nature and culture and demonstrates the immense vitality of Storm as a vital part of the ecosystem.

Works Cited:

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