

W. GOYEN'S "BRIDGE OF MUSIC, RIVER OF SAND" – AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Noțiunea de ecologie culturală implică faptul că mediul natural contribuie în mod fundamental la organizarea socială, instituțiile umane și chiar la gândirea umană și conștiința de sine. Ecologia se ocupă de mediul înconjurător, nu numai ca un set de fenomene ale lumii fizice, care este interpretarea tradițională al termenului, dar și de circumstanțele în care o persoană, sau o comunitate, locuiește sau își desfășoară activitatea. Articolul subliniază abordarea nouă a lui W. Goyen față de interpretarea spațiului literar. Nuvela "Bridge of Music, River of Sand" de W. Goyen este un exemplu convingător de realizarea conceptelor de ecologie culturală.

Key words: cultural ecology, ecocriticism, environment, symbol, image, literary space

The complex biophysical environment, its structure and functioning, is comprehended by people through creating hundreds of images and 'stories' of their reality in a simplified form. Together, the images and stories form a person's worldview – his perception of himself and the world around him. Shared images and stories form a society's worldview. Gerald G. Marten states "The images and stories that societies have about ecosystems are the basis for their perception of nature, which has a central role in shaping social system - ecosystem interaction. Perceptions shape the interpretation of information when it enters a social system from an ecosystem, and perceptions shape the decision-making process that leads to actions affecting the ecosystem". [3, p. 122]

The notion of cultural ecology implies that the natural environment fundamentally contributes to social organization, human institutions and even human thinking and self-awareness. Ecology deals with environment not only as some phenomena of the physical world, which is the traditional interpretation of the term, but also as the settings in which a person, or a community, lives or operates. Environment can and does influence the social and inner perception of man, leaving a lasting mark upon his mind.

The ecological and the environmental problems are encountered worldwide. In her article, Tosic mentions that ecocriticism started developing as a separate movement or school of

literary criticism in the 1990s. In the initial phase, it was a meeting place of American critics dealing exclusively with American literature [4, p.43]. As a trend in literary analysis, ecocriticism is defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, the editor of *The Ecocritical Reader*, and one of the driving forces of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) as “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” [1, p. 505]. Further on, she specifies the area of application of this rather novel trend; she notes that ecological criticism “has one foot in literature and the other on land”. This implies that ecocriticism deals with interconnections between nature and culture. It shares the essential principle that human culture is unbreakably attached to the physical world, “affecting it and affected by it” [1, p. 506]. Hubert Zapf in *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* assumes that cultural systems and phenomena are interrelated with ecological ones, and that they can thus be analyzed in ecological terms. “As a medium of 'cultural ecology,' literature senses and symbolically corrects problematic developments within a culture; besides, it contributes to the continual creative self-renewal of language, perception, and cultural imagination. Thanks to its capabilities for cultural criticism and cultural renewal, it ... can be described as a sustainable form of textuality” [5].

S. Janaki notes that writers with eco-concern are especially popular in the 21st century [2, p. 52]. This statement places W. Goyen as a prospective author who set his narratives temporally in the second and third decades of the 20th century. Janaki also stresses the fact that environmental literature and eco-criticism have become massively popular in the literary world. Ecologically concerned authors provide distressing imageries of nature despoiled by the human and the man’s growing voracity [2, p. 53]. This article explores how W. Goyen’s short story “Bridge of Music, River of Sand” cries out to humanity about imminent ecological disaster, suggesting the following: due to the fact that man inflicts negative change upon environment, the latter responds with the same and, at its turn, wreaks back havoc on the man and human race.

The cultural ecological approach applied to the analysis of W. Goyen’s short story “Bridge of Music, River of Sand” that we adopted lies in conformity with key questions that Cheryll Glotfelty, a member of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, suggests [1, p. 506]: *How is nature represented in this short story? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this short story consistent with ecological wisdom? How do metaphors/stylistic representations of the land influence our perception of it?*

The short story features the dry riverbed of the Trinity river, the bottomlands seen by the narrator and the grim landscape of the small town where the narrator is heading. The river occupies a central place among the setting elements presented in the story. The major surprise is that the river is not an actual river anymore; it is reduced to nothingness. There is so little left of it that we could hear the narrator almost shriek with shock:

E.g. “Well that’s what he jumped off of. Into a nothing river. “River”! I could laugh. I can spit more than runs in that dry bed. In some places is just a little damp, but that’s it. That’s your grand and rolling river: a damp spot. That’s your remains of the grand old Trinity.”

The narrator uses a variety of figures of speech to convey his shock at seeing the actual state of the river, irony and oxymoron standing out the most. The initial shock of having seen a naked man jump into a river is intensified by the horror of seeing that there was not an actual river to jump into. The only positive description of scenery is in the lines below; some of the landscape is still green. Yet the dreadful state of the environment is reinforced by the emotionally loaded figures of speech – the metaphor in “the scar of the river”, the epithets in the “orphaned bottomlands” and “healed-looking patches”.

Further on, the narrator dwells on the unnatural feeling he has when he looks at the dry, non-existent river. Obviously, the unnatural condition of the environment cannot go unnoticed. The picture of the ecological disaster is right there, depicted right in front of the reader’s eyes.

E.g. “In a landscape that was unnatural – flowing water was missing – everything else seemed unnatural. The river’s vegetation was thin and starved-looking; it lived on the edge of sand instead of water; it seemed out of place.”

Based on the ecocritical approach, we would like to assert that the answer to the enigma of natural disaster in the literary space of the story is openly revealed in the following quote:

E.g. "I could see the tornado-shaped funnel of bilious smoke that twisted out of the mill in Riverside, enriching the owner and poisoning him, his family and his neighbors. [...] On the other side of the bridge, [...], there was nothing more than a plain little town of mud streets and weather-faded shacks. The town of poor people lived around an ugly mill that puffed out like talcum something called Fuller's Earth over it. This substance lay on rooftops, on the ground and in lungs. It smelled sour and bit the eyes."

The desolate picture of a chemical plant polluting the surrounding space for miles is painted so vividly that it leaves no doubt what, or should we rather say WHO, is the cause of the river's disaster, and of its subsequent effect on the narrator. This can be interpreted as nature's payback for man having poisoned hundreds of miles around the small town with the chemical plant in it. It is known that chemical pollution does induce grave changes in the ecosystem, and the river that died out is certainly a direct consequence of the chemical contamination.

Moreover, nature's revenge for pollution extends beyond the symbol of a dry, ghostly river. The effect that we would like to highlight is the apparent hallucination that the narrator had - the image of the naked diver jumping into a dry river and even being absorbed by it. This, to a certain extent, can be attributed to an almost supernatural global effect of the environment on the narrator. Though, taken more prosaically, the narrator might have merely been exposed to the summer heat, worsened by the aridity of the landscape, and to the intoxicating, inescapable effect of the chemical in the environment. But, the narrator seems aware of the dire ecologic situation too:

E.g. "Where can so much water go? I at least wish they'd do something about it. But what can they do? What can anybody do? You can't replace a river."

But indeed, the questions remain rhetorical. As the story ends in the description of the polluted town, and the narrator is tortured by the hallucination that he had seen, still doubting having seen it on the railroad trestle above the dead river, we do realize that nothing was or will be done about this precarious ecological condition that takes its toll on the narrator.

E.g. "As I drove away toward that town, haunted by the vision of the leaping man and now so shaken in my very spirit, lost to fact but brought to some odd truth which I could not yet clear for myself, I saw [...] that lost river that held in its bosom of sand the figure diving off the trestle that I was sure I had seen. I was coming in to Riverside and already the stinging fumes of the mill brought tears to my eyes."

Environment can and does influence the social and inner perception of man, leaving a lasting mark upon his mind. The dead, "nothing" river becomes a symbol for the irreversible environmental changes inflicted by man upon the nature in the settings of the short story, changes that produce a horrifying environmental and personal outcome. Thus, the river itself inflicts damage onto the narrator's mind, while the pollution gnaws at his body. A person's inner being and the outer world have reciprocal correspondence and interdependence which ideally should lead to an integral, complete life. Yet, W. Goyen in "Bridge of Music, River of Sand" brings to light the dark vision of life caused by the shattering effect of the modern progress, which pollutes the tranquil restful environment and subsequently the society itself.

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