

# Transcendence of Anthropocentrism: A Study of J. Wright's Poetry from the Perspective of Anthropocene Eco-criticism

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As the only Australian woman poet nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Judith Wright is not only renowned for her profound and meaningful literary works, but also for her deep passion for and contribution to environmental protection. Many of her poems reveal her deep love for nature and contemplation on the relationship between man and nature. The transcendence of anthropocentrism revealed in her works demonstrates the poet's broad vision and feeling as a global writer. From the perspective of Anthropocene eco-criticism, this paper discusses the ecological view reflected in J. Wright's poetry to explore the deeper connotation of Wright's nature poetry.

*Keywords:* Judith Wright, ecological view, transcendence of anthropocentrism, Anthropocene ecocriticism

## Introduction

As one of the prominent contemporary writers in Australia, Judith Wright (1915-2000) is the only Australian poetess twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature as well as a recipient of many honors, including the World Prize for Literature in 1982 and the prestigious Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1994. As an environmental activist, she actively advocated environmental protection and the rights and interests of indigenous peoples.

Wright is a prolific writer covering various subject matters such as love and nature. Critics and scholars at home and abroad concentrate on her poetry from various perspectives, from general studies to thematic focalization. There are also some studies focusing on ecological issues in her poems. Robert Zeller (1998, p. 21) concentrates on the language to describe the natural world and concludes that the poetry of Judith Wright "in addition to reflecting growing concern about environmental issues, shows her developing the sort of awareness". He (p. 78) demonstrates Wright's advocacy of harmony between man and nature through utilizing the power of love in human nature in her poetry. Wright's ecological thoughts are also examined by Bi Zhoupin (2009, p. 141). However, these eco-criticisms are confined to the traditional eco-criticism.

According to *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, the publication of Timothy Clark's *Eco-criticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* marks advanced progress in the "theoretical construction" of contemporary ecocriticism, especially that of Anthropocene ecocriticism. *The*

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*Year's Work* also further indicates that it will be bound to make a great difference to the field of ecological criticism (Jiang, 2017, p. 131).

The term "Anthropocene", firstly proposed by Paul J. Crutzen, the Nobel Prize Laureate for Chemistry in 2000, attracted considerable attention and acceptance the next year. Timothy Clark ingeniously appropriated the concept of Anthropocene from geology to literary criticism, making "Anthropocene" the cornerstone of a new exploration of eco-criticism (Jiang, 2017, p. 131). The concept Anthropocene involves considering human life in much broader space and time, something that significantly changes behavior patterns of once familiar issues (Clark, 2015, p. 13).

In Anthropocene period, the earth is always in a state of full load, even overload. The impact of human activities on the earth has reached an overwhelming state. That is to say, human beings pose the biggest threat to both the existence of man himself and the environment. The effects caused by human beings like global warming, overpopulation, and species extinction occur gradually.

In short, the core point of *Ecocriticism on the Edge* is that Anthropocene ecocriticism requires breaking the boundary of the traditional conception of time and space and examining literary works from the global viewpoint of sustainable development based on a broader time-space dimension (Jiang, 2017, p. 131).

Guided by the Anthropocene ecocriticism, Judith Wright indignantly condemns the anthropocentrism in human activities and shows the tendency of transcending anthropocentrism in her poetry.

### **The Criticism of Anthropocentrism**

Anthropocene means that man has become the main force of geological formation and the decisive factor of the whole ecology and human existence on the earth (Jiang, 2017, p. 131), posing the biggest threat to the world. The prevailing anthropocentrism is the source of environmental destruction and ecological imbalance.

Wright's attitude of the relationship between anthropocentrism and environment coincides with the major ethos of Anthropocene eco-criticism. Wright's nature poems embody her rational insights into environmental issues, which are not limited to national fields, as her ultimate concern lies in the global natural environment (Wang, 2003, p. 77). She states that the ecology in the traditional western industrial society falls into anthropocentrism ecology, which believes the ecosystem to be a kind of economic system serving human beings (Wang, 2003, p. 78). The poet sharply criticizes the effect of Anthropocentrism upon nature and man himself in her poetry.

### **The Effect of Anthropocentrism Upon Nature**

Judith Wright severely criticizes the effect of anthropocentrism upon nature, which is mainly manifested in the destruction of ecological system caused by the unchecked exploitation of natural resources. The reckless behaviors of human beings about nature suggest that human beings still regard themselves as the supreme master of the earth, and the existence of other species is only to satisfy their needs. To fulfill their own desires and needs, human beings mercilessly plunder natural resources, which inevitably destroys the environment and does harm to animals. Human actions and the unpredictable influence they cause are an obvious manifestation of anthropocentrism.

In "Eroded Hills", the poet shows great sympathy for the hills in which the trees were cut by her grandfather in the pioneering period. She compares the stripped hills to "the beggars to the winter wind" in a

state of being “humble, abandoned, out of mind,” emphasizing the wretched and desolated condition of the hills (Wright, 1971, p. 83). The exploitation of natural resources leaves the poet a sense of guilt that “neither fruit nor water” could ease her mind.

The tragedy of excessive exploitation is not a single case. The effect of human activities upon the ecological system can be seen in “Extinct Birds,” which sharply reveals the consequence of the destruction of the ecological system. The birds portrayed by Charles Harpur in his journals have vanished along with “the fallen forest,” symbolizing man’s invasion. Now the brilliant poet passes away, dense forests vanish and the “scarlet satin-birds” who “swung like a lamp in berries” come to an end (p. 182). Due to reckless pride and expanding desires, man inclines to follow the practical desires of material pursuits and cuts off the forests, which directly causes the extinction of the rare birds and brings Wright to contemplate the relationship between the annihilation of other species and human actions.

Considering from the point of view of Anthropocene, such a condition reveals that human beings’ want of “species-consciousness”. According to Timothy Clark, what does matter is whether human beings can realize their obligations and responsibilities as a species to the earth and other species, and such consciousness is called “species-consciousness.” (Clark, 2015, p. 17) Lack of species-consciousness is the representation as well as the reason of Anthropocentrism.

### **The Effect of Anthropocentrism Upon Human Beings**

The poet seriously criticizes the effect of anthropocentrism upon human beings. The destruction of the ecological system due to the pride and greed of human beings would conversely destroy humans.

The poem “Australia 1970” concerns the environmental crisis on the consequence of the excessive exploitation and foresees the doomed failure of humankind. In the first four stanzas, the poet indignantly portrays extremely miserable death condition of land: the suffering land dying “till the last breaths gone” (Wright, 1971, p. 292); once “living soil” recessed to “naked poverty”; “the scoring drought”; “the flying dust” and the drying creek; the furious animal (ibid, p. 292).

The dictions like “fear like suicide’s invading stain,” “stay obstinate,” and “stay blind” foreshadow the creator of such devastating condition. The next stanza exposes that “we” human beings are the source of the disaster. “For we are conquerors and self-poisoners more than scorpion or snake/and dying of the venoms that we make even while you die of us” point out the unpleasant reason that human beings are responsible for the damaging environment and the ecosystem out of balance would endanger the existence of mankind conversely. Based on the theory of anthropocentrism, Judith Wright considers the environmental crisis from a global dimension and underlines that we humans will be “ruined by the thing we kill” (ibid, p. 292). Here she unconsciously identifies with the Anthropocene view that human being has become the main force of geological formation and “the decisive factor of the ecology and human existence in the earth” and sadly decries the reckless activities and shortsightedness of mankind” (Jiang, 2017, p. 131).

### **The Transcendence of Anthropocentrism**

In Anthropocene, human beings are the center and key point of all conflicts. They must constantly carry out self-education while trying to reconstruct the damaged environment. It is undoubtedly of great significance for the progress of human ecological career to write nature poems to warn the readers. The construction of a harmonious relationship between nature and man demands efforts on the part of human beings. In Wright’s

poem, the premise of achieving the state of harmony is to realize the preciousness and uniqueness of other species and to discover the harmonious state between humans and nature.

### **Realization of the Preciousness of Other Species**

For Judith Wright, the premise of constructing a harmonious ecological system is to recognize the uniqueness and preciousness of other species and respect for their living right. Human beings need to break from the shackles of anthropocentrism and realize that man is not the master or God of the earth. Then, they will gradually accept the precious existence of other species and reach a further realization that they possess responsibilities for the whole earth and other species in the stage of Anthropocene, which serve as the requirement of Anthropocene ecocriticism “the species-consciousness” defined by Clark (Clark, 2015, p. 17). Clark believes that species-consciousness is a power of redemption, which can reverse the consequences of environmental degradation. Politics, culture, and art should aim at promoting species-consciousness of human beings (Jiang, 2017, p. 132).

This kind of valuable consciousness is also shown in Wright’s poems. Her animal poems such as “The Surfer” and “Egrets” are precisely the evidence of this point. In “The Surfer”, the poet paints a vivid picture of the surfing creature in the sea. Under the weight of the sea, the brown surfer swims with delight and joy. It is of strength and speed to swim against the waves of the sea in the place where the mortal feels “frail” (Wright, 1971, p. 21). There is a correlative of the swimmer in the sky— “gull” who flies freely and jubilantly in the vast sky just like the swimmer surfing in the deep sea (ibid, p. 21). The poet suggests some physical qualities which the lauded surfer possesses but do not belong to man, such as speed and dexterousness, which further illustrates the uniqueness and preciousness of the surfer.

### **Consciousness of Harmony Between Mankind and Nature**

Being not limited to exposing existing questions, Judith Wright still commits herself to exploring the harmony between man and nature. Her commitment to establishing a harmonious ecosystem is presented by the representation of the memorable moments of the harmonious state between mankind and nature, which encourages the readers to make efforts to restore the harmony between man and nature and avoid potential disastrous ecological failures, and urges upon mankind the need to protect nature.

The typical poems presented in the first encouraging way are “Egrets” and “Night Herons.” In “Egrets”, the poet vividly depicts meeting egrets on a journey night with her concise and fresh diction. The speaker encounters a pool and 30 egrets crossing the water by chance during his or her journey. Unwilling to break the silent state, the speaker “watched in silence” until his or her heart is filled with natural beauty. The speaker believes that he/she is “lucky” enough to grasp this scene because he/she is deeply attracted to the contrasting beauty blackness and whiteness in nature. The “clear dark water” and “the white trees” as well as the wading egret whiter than the trees bring the speaker peace, comfort, and joy. In this poem, animals and plants in nature, which is presented by egrets, pool, trees, and human beings and the speaker, compose a serene and harmonious state advocated by Judith Wright. The line “As though for many years I had been waiting for” makes a further illustration of the preciousness of such an ideal harmony between nature and human beings.

In the poem “Night Herons,” people consistently keep quiet to avoid disturbing the heron and appreciate heron’s beauty in serenity. The appearance of herons makes the children think of what they are fond of, like “fountains” and “circuses, swans feeding,” and brings women to their youth. In all, people’s life is lightened by the night heron. In the last stanza, the heron flies away and “the light faded.” (1971, p. 177) Here, Wright

adopts a metaphor, comparing people's mood to the light that the faded light represents the change of people's feelings from pleasure to gloom.

### Conclusion

The renowned Australian critic Bruce Bennett once comments upon Wright's poetry that her poetry shows close attention to reality since Wright does not attempt to convey completely metaphysical thought but practical moral education (Bennett, 1976, p. 80).

The criticism of anthropocentrism and the vision of transcending anthropocentrism to foster the harmonious state between mankind and nature in her poems are evocative and far-reaching. The disastrous effect of anthropocentrism not only leads to the imbalance of the ecological environment or the extinction of endangered species, but also threatens the survival and health of human beings. The poet portrays this condition carefully and condemns it sharply. In Anthropocene period, human beings are decisive in balancing the ecosystem and protecting the environment. It does not mean that human beings have the right to decide the destiny of other species, but that they should make considered decisions because human activities are deeply involved in the global ecosystem. In her poems, Judith Wright shows the direction of human efforts. The foundation of reconstructing a sustainable ecosystem is to break from the bondage of anthropocentrism. Then the preciousness and existing power of other species should be fully recognized.

All in all, Wright's moral ideal is not to establish a fixed mode of belief and behavior, but to construct a balanced state between individuals, society, and environment. She expresses this ideal based on the broad conception of "ecology." It is easy for the readers to comprehend Wright's broad and profound ecological view from the perspective of Anthropocene ecocriticism.

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