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The Influence of Nature toward the Main Character's Self-Realization in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*: an Eco-Critical Reading

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A B S T R A C T

This article discusses David Malouf's novel entitled *An Imaginary Life* from an eco-critical perspective. It examines certain symbols from nature that appear in the novel during the journey of Ovid, the main character, in the exile. The data is collected by applying library research methods. Primary data are all symbols from nature related to Ovid's journey and the formation of his new identity in the exile. Meanwhile, the secondary data are all information from books and articles related with archetypal symbols and criticism. The result of analysis is presented by the descriptive method. The analysis results in two conclusions. Firstly, nature that is presented as wild at the beginning of the story turns into a home for the main character at the end of the story. Secondly, nature, represented by some symbols, evidently plays an important role in making Ovid embrace his new life and forms new identity apart from his past life as a famous poet back in Rome.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings need nature to survive. Even if some people might survive without foods, they absolutely cannot make it without water and air. Thus, humans have a strong bond with nature. Additionally, nature is also involved in constructing culture and one's identity. In literary works, this relationship is frequently presented as a way to appreciate what nature has given us; making us inadvertently admit that nature helps to sculpt and represent the way we exist. Nature gives us a glimpse of our true selves; a reflection of what and who we are, and a repercussion of what we do. That is why it becomes the cornerstone of self-realization. It has its own tendency to show the way we look at environment itself; it will put us standing in front the mirror and to look at the representation of our identity. In literary history, one of the famous authors that show how nature can change one's life is David Malouf, an Australian author

whose subjects are mostly about the relationship of one man's life with one particular society far away from civilization.

In a novel entitled *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf [1] seems to present a perspective that the natural environment does help Ovid, the main character, in shaping his identity. As the plot progresses, we are shown that Ovid is going back to the wilderness after being exiled from the highly civilized place, namely the Roman Empire. The analysis of symbols from nature that are used in the story, I argue, can uncover the relationship between nature and one's self-realization.

This research utilizes Eco-criticism which is considered as a new branch of literary criticism due to its first official emergence in 1993[2]. The approach itself has been growing swiftly since the early 1990s. The term Eco-criticism itself was first coined by William Rueckert as he stated in Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* [3], that eco-criticism is "...the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Despite the aforementioned fact, it focuses on the interconnections between nature and culture. In this research, I would like to focus on the concept of space and place. Lawrence Buell [4] in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* argues that eco-criticism is the relationship between space and place. Quoting Carter, Donald, and Squires (1993), Buell argues that "space ... connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction, whereas place is "space to which meaning has been ascribed"[4]. Moreover, Buell also includes definition from Tuan (1977), which says that place is: "centers of felt value" (63). Additionally, Buell proposes that "the concept of place also gestures in at least three directions at once – toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond" (63). Thus, we assume, space is the main factor that shapes place; in this case human's identity. It is safe to say that nature plays a big role in shaping the identity of its inhabitants.

METHOD

This research is qualitative in nature. Therefore it deals with non-numerical data and it has interpretive characteristic. Krippendorff argues that qualitative approaches to content analysis are sometimes labeled interpretive[5]. The data is collected by using library research method. The writer begins by exploring the idea and concept of environmental changes which is related with the object of the research, *An Imaginary Life*, and the theory that is used, Eco-criticism. The following step is analyzing the data. The analysis begins by identifying several objects in Ovid's natural environment in the exile that are taken as symbols. Further analysis is finding the meaning of those symbols. Later, explaining how those symbols play a role in the process of Ovid's embracing his new life and identity. The last step is presenting the result of the analysis descriptively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ovid is a famous poet who now has to undergo exile due to the unstable political situation that happened in Rome. Not many details are explained by the novel but it is apparent that Ovid's life has changed significantly from a famous poet to a stranger in a rather primitive land. The land itself is still a wilderness; a vast plain, a dense forest and a high cliff in the horizon with only a small mud village in between that provides the basic human needs to socialize, gathering

food, etc. Tomis is a lonely place far away from the civilization where Ovid is known as a person of no importance. He describes that he is ignored, left to his own, and free to wander about the village as far as it is because Ovid actually does not even know the lay of the land that appears strange and makes him feel displaced.

As aforementioned, the term ‘space’ and ‘place’ will be utilized to define how nature is represented in the novel. We argue that nature is presented as a ‘place’ (inhabited land) rather than a ‘space’ (uninhabited land) as it is experienced by Ovid. In spite of the growing but remote population of Tomis, Ovid tends to relate his state of mind into the wilderness rather than the society; which can be seen as soon as the story begins: “It is the desolateness of this place that day after day fills my mind with its perspectives. A line of cliffs, oblique against the sky, and the sea leaden beyond. To the west and south, mountains, heaped under cloud. To the north, beyond the marshy river mouth, empty grasslands, rolling level to the pole” (6). This condition is similar with King Lear as analyzed by Simon C. Estok. He argues that “Lear, controlled by rather than in control of everything, especially (and most dramatically) the natural environment, loses his identity when he loses his ability to control spatial worth”[6]. It confirms that natural place does play a significant role in one’s shape of identity. Ovid feels displaced and lost because he is positioned in a place he does not belong to.

The word choice shown in the quotation above shows that Ovid is clearly seeing Tomis as desolate, empty, and vast wilderness. The cliff, the sky, the sea, the mountain, the river and the grasslands represent the grandeur of nature, where Ovid is nothing compared to them. His negative perspective of the land of Tomis such as the feeling of desolation in the early part of the story is mainly influenced by his own situation; the once famous and renowned man in a thriving city is now just a lonely and desperate man in a faraway village. Ovid’s feeling of loneliness and despair is also due to the lack of interaction that he made with the villagers of Tomis. Ovid wanders around, trying to admit that nature is the only object that he can understand (whether it is true or not). It can be seen when he encounters a horde of horses that comes thundering toward him. He says: “I stood silent in the center of the plain and they began to wheel in great circles about me, uttering cries – not of malice, I thought, but of mourning” (8). The tone that is contained in the sentence focuses more on how he positions himself; as a mournful man. He claims that the horses utter the cry of mourning instead of malice as if he does understand those animals. His effort to overcome his loneliness and displacement is by associating himself with nature so that he could understand nature and feel he belongs to it. Nature, in this case the land of Tomis, is at the beginning represented as strange wilderness due to his lack of understanding of it and his less contact with the inhabitants.

After his interaction with nature, particularly with some symbolic natural objects, this perspective changes. From a wilderness to a home; his perspective which sees nature as a strange wilderness into which he does not belong now changes into a very opposite of it. He slowly places himself into the environment as if it is the place that he should belong, where he spends his life until the day he dies; his home. The encounter with natural environment which surrounds his life after being exiled is influencing him in shaping his identity. Due to the lack of communication with another human being, Ovid tries to understand nature; he slowly began to learn from what nature has shown him. The fate of the out of place scarlet poppy is one of the examples. All of his thoughts are slowly influenced by his surroundings; he becomes more

accepting compared to his former self. In other words, the nature which is represented as a blank space before is now a place for Ovid to begin living and start anew. In a more specific term, Ovid does not make ‘space’ (wilderness) to fit his human needs and turn it into a ‘place’ (settlements, etc); Ovid is accepting and adapting himself into the space; creating his own place as he names, labels or makes meanings of what he encounters.

As mentioned before, after being exiled, Ovid’s journey of the story takes place inside the remote village, Tomis, where he wails and mourns for his glorious former life. It is quite desperate of him to realize that his fame is gone. His condition gets worse day by day due to the inability to admit his desolate condition even though he is not imprisoned there. Some natural objects, fortunately, help him gain his confidence.

a. The Scarlet Poppy

One day Ovid stumbles upon a Scarlet Poppy (14). Ovid considers his encounter as gift from god as it is the flower that he usually sees back in his hometown in Rome. The flower preferably comes there as the seeds are swept away by the wind, or brought by the birds on its way north; managed to land and stay alive.

A Scarlet Poppy that Ovid has stumbled upon influences him to gain control over his current condition as he is in the middle of despair. It can be considered as his salvation as it triggers him to call back his past and resurrect his will to survive and adapt. The out-of-place flower motivates him; he comes to the idea that if a flower can survive even after being taken far away from where it supposed to live, a man should also do much more than just survive; he must transform and adapt.

b. The Wild Boy

The wild boy plays another important role in the shaping process of Ovid’s identity. As the name suggests the Wild Boy is uncivilized due to the environment that he lived in and physically described as “about eleven years old, tall, strongly but scraggly made, with the elbow and knee joints enlarged and roughly calloused. There are sores on his arms and legs, and old scars that appear as discolorations of the flesh, brownish under the yellow tan” (41).

The Wild Boy is presumably an envoy; an agent sent by the force of nature to have contact with Ovid and other villagers. He leaves a strong impression on Ovid who wonders: “...is it the breath of some animal that warms him, wolf or deer, even there in my dreams?” (28). The Wild Boy lives his life without any intervention from another human; being taught to survive by another animal, which is in this case a part of nature itself (no human involved). In other words, the wild boy who spends all his life imitating all the things that nature has shown, has becomes the one who is very close to it; immediately becomes the important part in influencing Ovid who has little idea of what and where he belongs to now. Ovid’s impression of the boy makes it easy for him to embrace nature smoother and quicker. The boy stays with Ovid until the end of their journey.

c. **The Natural Environments**

From the beginning of the story, Ovid's state of mind is heavily influenced by the environment; the cliff, the empty grasslands, the river, and so on. The majority of the environmental object tends to make Ovid feel weak; it is all about adapt or perish. Ovid sees the cliffs as "the sharp incline that leads to sky" meaning that the cliff is represented as a tall barrier which he cannot pass. As we know that a barrier is a limitation; thus it is limiting Ovid's dream and desire, making it a must to accept where he belongs now. The part where Ovid describes himself as he walks under the cliff can also confirm that the cliff can be interpreted as a barrier. "I walk up and down the stony shoreline under the cliffs, whose shadow divides the shingle into distinct segments of light and dark"(12). It is to be understood that the segments of light and dark mentioned in the previous sentences will always have a clear line that separates the two of them; thus we argue that the cliff is interpreted as a barrier that diminishes Ovid's desire to leave and forcing him to accept where he belongs as explained in this sentence. "It's a long way to Rome. If they are ever to hear me again I must raise my voice and let these torrents of dark air that flow west over the plains carry me with them. I have been silenced. But will not be stilled" (12).

Ovid first explains the grasslands as the place that the savages inhabit who steal the cattle or destroy the wheat field of Tomis. In overall, the grasslands appear in many situations and are often described as a place in the north where savages come from. Thus the grasslands is Ovid's own edge of the world where adventure waits beyond; a symbol of hope. As we usually know in many stories, an adventure usually based on hope to discover something new, which also happens to Ovid where he goes beyond the grassland to find hope, or in this case, the Wild Boy. His urge to go through the grassland is explained in these sentences: "The time has come at last. Far to the north, deep in the grasslands that roll away towards the pole, is the place I have so often dreamed of in these years of my exile, walking out under the high moonlit clouds in my sleep" (81). Thus, the grassland can be interpreted as a symbol of hope.

The word river appears many times in the story. It plays the similar interpretation as grassland, but with some differences. The rivers mentioned are different from each other; one is near Tomis, and the other one is the Ister where Ovid and the Wild Boy crossed at later in the story. The river located in Tomis is related with the life of the villagers. "The river flats stream and hum with midges. But in a few weeks the first of the winter will be upon us. The north winds blow in across the river, out of the Scythian steppes, laying the reeds flat, whipping up the water" (9). It is interpreted as a familiar thing, as the river is usually shows that we humans begin to build settlements near body of water, and so on. It is interpreted as the embodiment of what nature provides, and what we humans take advantages of; a symbol of life as explained by Ovid "Once the river freezes we must stay in the stockade day and night, and day and night men will keep guard. The river now is our protection" (9). This interpretation of the river goes hand in hand with the interpretation of the grassland; one is the symbol of life and the other one is the symbol of hope. Interestingly, the story put grassland and river near to each other.

Overall, the river, which is a symbol of life can be seen after he crosses the river, or in this case, when he becomes one with nature. “I am growing bodiless. I am turning into the landscape. I feel myself sway and ripple” (86). At the end, Ovid is no more a mournful, selfish and pessimistic person; he is now an accepting and open-minded person. He changes his mind from thinking about his former glorious life as a famous poet at Rome into a just person who has nothing compared to what nature gives. He accepts everything as if he becomes one with nature even though he is a little late to do that. “From here I ascend, or lower myself, grain by grain, into the hands of the gods” (89). He is old and dying but satisfied because he is finally able to fulfill his dream to be at the place that he has dreamed for so often back at Tomis.

Ovid’s success has gained him a great satisfaction and the process of doing so has transformed him from a mournful, selfish, and pessimist man into a more accepting and open-minded man. He has achieved peace, illustrated when he lays his old body to restful sleep: “It is summer. It is spring. I am immeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six. I am there.” (90).

CONCLUSIONS

Ovid undoubtedly has got big influences from nature – the special Scarlet Poppy, the familiar Wild Boy, and all the natural environments that surrounds his life – by which his identity is shaped accordingly; from a desolate and lonely pessimist into a more accepting and peaceful man. Ovid has successfully become someone new; from a famous and renowned poet into just a man in the ecology. His new identity is shaped along the journey that he has gone through; his perspective has grown wider; his life is made anew; no more closes minded famous Roman, there is just a man in nature.

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