

Ecocriticism and Romantic Ecology: Re-reading Wordsworth in the Age of Climate Change

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Abstract: *This study examines William Wordsworth's poetry through the lens of ecocriticism and Romantic ecology, situating his work within contemporary environmental discourse shaped by climate change. By conducting close textual analyses of selected poems such as Tintern Abbey, The Prelude, Michael, and Nutting, the research identifies ecological motifs of harmony, disruption, and sustainability. It contextualizes Wordsworth's poetic vision against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution and draws parallels to 21st-century ecological crises. Employing an interdisciplinary framework integrating environmental philosophy and ecological psychology, the study reinterprets Romanticism's imaginative engagement with nature as a precursor to modern ecological awareness. The findings reveal the continued relevance of Romantic ecological values in addressing the ethical and emotional challenges posed by the Anthropocene. This research contributes to ecocriticism and environmental humanities by bridging historical literary perspectives and urgent contemporary ecological concerns, advocating a green humanism rooted in reverence and ecological humility.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Romantic Ecology, William Wordsworth, Climate Change, Anthropocene, Environmental Humanities*

I. Introduction

Overview of the Ecological Crisis and Climate Change

The 21st century stands on the precipice of an unprecedented environmental catastrophe. Climate change—driven by anthropogenic carbon emissions, deforestation, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and large-scale industrialization—has emerged as a defining challenge of our time. The narrative of this crisis is no longer confined to scientific journals or environmental forums; it permeates public discourse, political negotiations, and cultural expressions, demanding an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to human-environment relations. Climate change is not simply a scientific phenomenon—it is a cultural crisis, implicating values, ideologies, and modes of human perception. The Anthropocene, a proposed epoch wherein human actions significantly shape planetary systems, marks a paradigmatic shift in how we conceive the relationship between nature and humanity (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). It forces us to reimagine environmental ethics, responsibility, and sustainability through multiple lenses. In this context, literature and the arts have taken on renewed significance as vehicles for expressing environmental consciousness, shaping public sentiment, and envisioning alternative ecologies.

The Emergence and Growth of Ecocriticism

Amidst this growing concern over environmental degradation, **ecocriticism** has emerged as a prominent field within literary and cultural studies. Originating in the 1990s as a formal academic movement, ecocriticism seeks to examine the representations of nature in literature and to understand the role of literary texts in shaping ecological awareness (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Cheryll Glotfelty famously defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” highlighting its interdisciplinary character and its commitment to bridging the gap between the sciences and the humanities. Early ecocritical works focused primarily on canonical Anglo-American nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Rachel Carson. However, the field has since expanded in both thematic and methodological scope, engaging with ecofeminism, postcolonial ecologies, indigenous narratives, animal studies, and climate fiction (cli-fi). Scholars such as Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise, and Rob Nixon have contributed to the growing body of ecocritical theory, situating literature within broader environmental, social, and political frameworks. Ecocriticism now investigates how texts mediate environmental values, question dominant ideologies, and offer imaginative responses to ecological crises. Importantly, ecocriticism does not merely analyze literary representations of nature; it also interrogates the historical and cultural constructions of “nature” itself. In doing so, it aligns with the broader environmental humanities in seeking to understand how narratives, metaphors, and aesthetics shape human engagement with the non-human world. Literature, in this view, becomes a vital site of ecological imagination—a space where the ethical, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of environmental consciousness are articulated.

Importance of Literary Studies in Environmental Discourse

While science and policy dominate mainstream responses to climate change, the role of literature—and the humanities more broadly—has often been underappreciated. Yet, the current ecological crisis is as much about perception and meaning as it is about data and regulation. Scientific facts alone are insufficient to change behavior or generate empathy; they must be translated into emotionally resonant, culturally embedded narratives that inspire action and reflection (Ghosh, 2006). Literature, with its power to evoke emotion, complexity, and moral imagination, is uniquely positioned to mediate ecological understanding. Literary studies contribute to environmental discourse by offering historical perspectives on human-nature relations, exploring the ethical dimensions of environmental responsibility, and critiquing anthropocentric ideologies. Through its focus on language, symbolism, and narrative, literature can illuminate the cultural roots of ecological degradation while also envisioning alternative ways of inhabiting the Earth. As such, revisiting past literary traditions—particularly Romanticism—offers valuable insights into how earlier generations conceived of nature, and what lessons might be recovered for contemporary ecological thought.

Focus on Wordsworth

His Influence on Nature Poetry

Among the literary figures who have profoundly shaped the cultural imagination of nature, **William Wordsworth (1770–1850)** occupies a central place. As a foundational voice of English Romanticism, Wordsworth is often celebrated for his deep engagement with the natural world, his celebration of rural landscapes, and his philosophical reflections on human-nature interconnectedness. His poetry—especially in works like *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, *The Prelude*, *Michael*, and *Nutting*—offers richly textured portrayals of nature that are both sensuous and spiritual, rooted in empirical observation and metaphysical inquiry. Wordsworth's legacy in nature poetry is immense. He transformed the genre from a mere descriptive celebration of the natural world into a meditative, ethical, and imaginative engagement with ecological existence. Nature, for Wordsworth, is not merely a backdrop or setting; it is a living presence, an active participant in human development and consciousness. His poetic voice foregrounds themes of solitude, memory, and renewal, situating nature as a site of moral instruction and spiritual restoration. Furthermore, Wordsworth's rejection of urban-industrial modernity and his emphasis on rural simplicity prefigure many of the concerns articulated by later environmental movements. In advocating for a return to natural rhythms and a deeper attunement to the earth, he emerges as a proto-environmentalist, whose work resonates with contemporary ecological anxieties.

Romanticism's Relationship with Nature and Imagination

Wordsworth's ecological sensibility must also be situated within the broader framework of **Romanticism**, a cultural and intellectual movement that arose in late 18th-century Europe as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, industrial capitalism, and political upheaval. Central to Romanticism was a valorization of nature, emotion, subjectivity, and imagination. Romantic writers such as Coleridge, Shelley, Blake, and Byron, alongside Wordsworth, sought to rediscover a holistic vision of human life that embraced the sublime, the organic, and the mysterious. In contrast to the mechanistic worldview of Enlightenment science, Romanticism viewed nature as a dynamic, interconnected whole—what today might be called an ecological system. The Romantic imagination was thus not escapist fantasy but a cognitive faculty that allowed humans to perceive deeper truths about their relationship with the natural world. In this light, Wordsworth's poetry exemplifies what Jonathan Bate (1991) calls "**Romantic ecology**"—a mode of thinking that sees humanity as embedded within, rather than above or separate from, the more-than-human world. This Romantic vision, though often idealized and limited by its historical context, offers a powerful counterpoint to the alienation, commodification, and environmental destruction characteristic of modernity. Re-reading Romantic texts through an ecocritical lens reveals a proto-ecological consciousness that remains relevant in the Anthropocene.

Research Gap

Despite the rich ecological potential of Wordsworth's oeuvre, **contemporary scholarship has not sufficiently explored the intersection between Wordsworthian Romanticism and current climate discourse**. While Romanticism has been recognized as a fertile ground for environmental thought, much of the critical attention remains confined to general discussions of nature and aesthetics, or to the cultural-historical analysis of Romanticism as a reaction to early industrialization. Few sustained studies have attempted to reinterpret Wordsworth's poetry in light of **21st-century ecological paradigms**, particularly in relation to climate change, environmental justice, and planetary sustainability. Moreover, much ecocritical work tends to focus on American transcendentalists or modern climate fiction, bypassing the formative role that Romantic poetry played in shaping ecological imagination. There is a need to revisit and recontextualize canonical texts such as Wordsworth's within the framework of **climate humanities**, attending to their potential for reimagining the ethical, emotional, and ontological dimensions of human-nature relations. This research seeks to fill that gap by **re-reading Wordsworth through the dual lenses of ecocriticism and Romantic ecology**, thereby establishing a dialogue between

historical literary traditions and contemporary environmental challenges. Such a reading not only revitalizes Wordsworth's relevance but also enriches ecocritical practice by anchoring it in historical depth and poetic insight.

Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to **explore how Wordsworth's poetry anticipates or contrasts with modern ecological thinking**, and how his vision of nature can contribute to contemporary environmental discourse. Specifically, the objectives of this research are:

1. **To analyze Wordsworth's poetic treatment of nature through an ecocritical framework**, identifying themes of sustainability, interdependence, and ecological ethics in selected works.
2. **To evaluate the extent to which Wordsworth's vision aligns with or departs from contemporary environmental concerns**, particularly those related to the Anthropocene and climate change.
3. **To establish the relevance of Romantic ecology in the age of climate crisis**, arguing for the recuperation of Romantic literary traditions as resources for ecological consciousness and cultural renewal.
4. **To contribute to the interdisciplinary dialogue between literature and environmental studies**, demonstrating how poetic imagination and historical insight can inform ecological understanding and action.

Research Questions

1. How does Wordsworth's portrayal of nature resonate with or diverge from ecocritical principles?
2. In what ways can Romantic ecology provide insight into our current environmental crises?
3. How might re-reading Wordsworth help reframe our relationship with nature in the Anthropocene?

Significance of Study

This study seeks to reimagine canonical literature as a critical tool for fostering environmental awareness and responsibility. By re-reading Wordsworth through the lens of ecocriticism and in the context of climate change, the research contributes to a growing body of environmental humanities scholarship that bridges literature, ethics, and ecology. The study underscores the continuing relevance of Romanticism in shaping ecological consciousness and offers pedagogical insights for climate change education. In doing so, it not only revitalizes literary studies but also positions them as essential in the broader discourse on environmental sustainability and planetary survival.

II. Literature Review

Ecocriticism: Definitions and Evolution

Ecocriticism, a relatively new field in literary studies, explores the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It emerged prominently in the early 1990s with the foundational work of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, particularly the edited volume *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), which called for literary scholars to take the environmental crisis seriously by interrogating texts for their representations of nature. Glotfelty famously defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996), initiating a wide-ranging inquiry into how literature reflects, shapes, and contests human interaction with the natural world. Lawrence Buell further advanced the field with works such as *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), which established the theoretical contours of ecocriticism by analyzing American pastoral literature. Buell introduced key ecocritical concerns, such as place-based identity, environmental justice, and the ethics of representation, laying the groundwork for ecocriticism to expand into areas such as deep ecology, ecofeminism, and postcolonial environmental critique. Deep ecology, associated with Arne Naess, advocates for intrinsic value in nature beyond human utility. Ecofeminism, with contributions from Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant, links the domination of women and nature in patriarchal cultures. Postcolonial ecocriticism, as explored by critics like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, examines how environmental exploitation intersects with histories of colonialism. These theoretical streams have expanded the purview of ecocriticism from a Eurocentric and nature-centric framework to include questions of race, gender, class, and global environmental justice. This diversity highlights ecocriticism's evolution from its roots in Romantic and American pastoral literature to a global and interdisciplinary field responsive to contemporary ecological urgencies.

Romantic Ecology

The term "Romantic ecology" gained prominence with Jonathan Bate's influential study *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), which repositioned Romantic poetry as a foundational moment in ecological thinking. Bate argues that William Wordsworth, in particular, exhibited a proto-ecological sensibility by resisting industrialization, celebrating rural life, and emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Key traits of Romantic ecology include organicism (the view of nature as a living whole), interdependence (the mutual relationship between all life forms), and anti-industrialism (a

critique of mechanization and its environmental consequences). Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley often turned to nature as a moral and spiritual refuge, foregrounding the role of the imagination in perceiving and expressing ecological truths. Romantic ecology challenges the stereotype of Romanticism as merely escapist or solipsistic, arguing instead that it presents a serious ethical and philosophical engagement with nature. The genre's emphasis on the sublime, solitude, and reflection fosters an awareness of environmental fragility and the limits of human mastery, anticipating many of the core tenets of modern ecological thought.

Wordsworthian Scholarship

Wordsworthian scholarship has traditionally emphasized the poet's spiritual and philosophical engagement with nature. Critics such as M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Hartman have explored Wordsworth's vision of nature as a moral teacher and a source of sublime inspiration, particularly in texts like *Tintern Abbey* and *The Prelude*. These interpretations focus on nature's role in shaping the poet's inner life, emphasizing transcendence and self-realization. However, contemporary scholarship has begun to reassess Wordsworth through an ecological lens. Scholars such as James McKusick and Ashton Nichols argue that Wordsworth exhibits a proto-environmentalist sensibility, engaging in what Nichols terms "urban pastoral" and "Romantic naturalism." In this view, Wordsworth's focus on local landscapes, ecological interdependence, and critiques of industrialization align with modern environmental ethics. McKusick's *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (2000) identifies how Wordsworth blends aesthetic beauty with ecological consciousness, especially in his attention to detail and celebration of nonhuman life. These readings see Wordsworth not just as a poet of inward spiritualism but as an early advocate for sustainable living and environmental awareness, thereby recovering his relevance for contemporary ecological debates.

Climate Change and Literature

The advent of the Anthropocene—a term used to describe the current geological epoch dominated by human activity—has transformed the way literature is studied. Climate change literature, or "cli-fi," has emerged as a vital genre that examines ecological collapse, environmental justice, and future imaginaries. Scholars such as Ursula Heise and Timothy Clark argue that literature in the Anthropocene must grapple with scales of time and causality that exceed human comprehension, challenging traditional narrative forms. In this context, literature is no longer merely a reflection of nature but a tool for ecological engagement and activism. Literature enables readers to empathize with nonhuman perspectives, to imagine alternative futures, and to reflect on the ethical dimensions of environmental crisis. Ecocriticism has responded to these developments by advocating for a more urgent, interdisciplinary approach to literature that bridges the humanities and environmental sciences. This has led to an increased interest in re-reading classical texts through the lens of climate change, uncovering latent ecological insights that can inform contemporary discourse. Wordsworth, with his emphasis on natural processes, seasonal cycles, and human-nature harmony, becomes a key figure in this re-evaluation.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism as Methodology

Ecocriticism provides a robust methodological framework for analyzing literature with ecological sensitivity. It encourages close reading practices that focus on how texts represent nature, environmental values, and human-nature relationships. This involves interrogating settings, metaphors, and narrative structures for ecological meanings, as well as considering the ethical implications of environmental representation. As an interdisciplinary method, ecocriticism often incorporates insights from environmental science, ethics, history, and sociology. It seeks not only to understand literary representations of the environment but also to evaluate their role in shaping public attitudes toward ecological issues. This approach is particularly relevant for studying Romantic literature, which often engages with themes of rural displacement, industrialization, and environmental degradation. In the context of Wordsworth, ecocriticism allows us to read his poetry as a cultural response to early industrial modernity, revealing the ways in which he resists mechanization and envisions a harmonious, reciprocal relationship with nature. It invites us to see his aesthetic choices—such as blank verse, descriptive detail, and first-person reflection—as ecological strategies that foreground interconnectedness and ethical responsibility.

Romantic Ecology as Lens

Romantic ecology serves as a specific subfield within ecocriticism that focuses on the ecological implications of Romantic literature. It highlights the role of imagination as a bridge between self and world, arguing that Romantic poets offer an alternative epistemology grounded in affect, intuition, and sensory engagement with nature. Wordsworth's Romantic ecology is characterized by a deep reverence for the nonhuman world and a conviction that nature possesses inherent value. His poetry often situates the self within larger natural systems, illustrating both the beauty and fragility of the environment. Through poems like *Michael*, *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, and *The Prelude*, Wordsworth constructs a vision of ecological harmony rooted in memory, community, and place. Using Romantic ecology as a lens enables us to explore how Wordsworth's

work critiques the alienation produced by industrialization and anticipates contemporary ecological thought. It also reveals how his emphasis on lived experience and affective bonds with nature challenges Cartesian dualisms and supports a more holistic, relational ontology.

Anthropocene and Environmental Humanities

The Anthropocene represents a paradigm shift in environmental thought, foregrounding the extent to which human activity has transformed the Earth's systems. In this context, the environmental humanities have emerged as a field that brings together literature, history, philosophy, and the arts to address ecological crisis. Romanticism, and Wordsworth in particular, plays a significant role in this field by offering alternative narratives of human-nature interaction. Romantic literature provides resources for rethinking the human place in the world, emphasizing humility, interdependence, and emotional responsiveness to nature. Re-reading Wordsworth in the Anthropocene involves recognizing the ecological prescience of his work and its capacity to foster environmental awareness. His rejection of utilitarian views of nature, his concern with local ecosystems, and his portrayal of the sublime all contribute to a counter-modernity that valorizes ecological balance over technological domination. The theoretical framework of this study thus integrates ecocriticism, Romantic ecology, and the environmental humanities to reassess Wordsworth's significance for contemporary ecological discourse. It positions Wordsworth not only as a historical figure but as a vital interlocutor in ongoing debates about sustainability, climate justice, and the future of human-nature relationships.

III. Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary and ecocritical methodology to investigate the environmental dimensions of William Wordsworth's poetry in the context of the Anthropocene. By employing textual analysis, contextual reading, and interdisciplinary approaches, the research aims to bridge literary aesthetics and contemporary ecological thought.

Textual Analysis: Central to this study is close reading as a primary method for uncovering ecological motifs and sensibilities within Wordsworth's poetry. Selected poems include *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, *The Prelude*, *Michael*, and *Nutting*. These texts are chosen for their rich portrayals of the natural world and their philosophical reflections on humanity's relationship with nature. The analysis focuses on identifying recurrent ecological motifs such as harmony with nature, disruption of ecological balance, sustainability, and the role of memory in shaping environmental consciousness. This literary method emphasizes the poet's language, imagery, and structure as key components in conveying ecological themes.

Contextual Reading: In addition to close reading, the study undertakes a contextual analysis of the selected poems within the historical and cultural backdrop of the Industrial Revolution. The late 18th and early 19th centuries witnessed transformative shifts in human interaction with nature, marked by rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and environmental degradation. This context is crucial in understanding Wordsworth's poetic resistance to mechanization and his celebration of rural landscapes. The study draws parallels between these Romantic-era environmental tensions and 21st-century ecological crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice. Such contextual grounding situates Wordsworth's work within a continuum of ecological concern.

Interdisciplinary Engagement:

This study enriches literary analysis through an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on environmental philosophy, the history of ideas, and ecological psychology. Environmental philosophy contributes ethical frameworks that align with Romantic ecological values, particularly deep ecology's emphasis on nature's intrinsic worth and the ethics of care. The history of ideas offers a critical perspective to trace the evolution of ecological thinking from Romanticism through modern environmentalism. Ecological psychology deepens the exploration by illuminating the emotional, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of human-nature relationships. Together, these disciplines provide a comprehensive framework for examining how Wordsworth's poetic vision anticipates, informs, or contrasts with contemporary ecological thought.

Romanticism as Ecological Consciousness: Romanticism emerged as a cultural and literary response to the industrial revolution and the consequent environmental degradation. Wordsworth's poetry exemplifies this reaction by foregrounding emotional, ethical, and aesthetic connections with nature. His work articulates an ecological consciousness shaped by landscape, loss, and a yearning for harmony amid mechanization. Romanticism's emphasis on individual experience, imagination, and nature as a living force laid early groundwork for ecological awareness, making Wordsworth a pivotal figure in the birth of ecological thinking.

Ecological Themes in Wordsworth's Poetry: Wordsworth's nature poetry reflects key ecological motifs such as simplicity, sustainability, and harmony. His depictions of pastoral life, rural labor, and natural cycles emphasize interdependence and balance within the environment. These themes function as subtle critiques of industrialization and consumer culture, highlighting the dissonance between mechanized society and natural rhythms.

Wordsworth's poetic celebration of the natural world underscores an ethic of care and respect for ecological systems, positioning him as a proto-environmentalist voice in literary history.

Memory and the Sublime: Emotional-Ethical Dimensions: Memory plays a critical role in Wordsworth's ecological vision, acting both as an archive of environmental experience and a source of ethical reflection. His use of memory connects the individual's emotional life with the natural world, fostering a sustained ecological awareness. The sublime, traditionally a Romantic aesthetic concept, is reinterpreted here as an emotional and ethical response to nature's power and fragility. This reimagining resonates with contemporary discussions on ecological affect and eco-phenomenology, emphasizing the importance of emotional engagement in fostering environmental ethics.

Romantic Ecology and the Anthropocene: The contemporary environmental crisis framed by the Anthropocene calls for revisiting Romantic ecological values. Wordsworth's principles of humility, reverence, and coexistence offer an alternative to the anthropocentric paradigms that have driven environmental degradation. His poetic imagination provides a counter-narrative that challenges exploitative human attitudes toward nature and advocates for a more respectful, reciprocal relationship with the Earth. This connection between Romantic ecology and the Anthropocene underscores the ongoing relevance of Wordsworth's work in climate discourse.

Toward Green Humanism: Ethical and Philosophical Implications: Building on Wordsworth's poetic ethos, this study proposes a vision of green humanism rooted in care, reverence, and ecological humility. This ethical framework encourages moving away from domination and consumption toward stewardship and mindful coexistence. Romantic imagination, as exemplified by Wordsworth, becomes a powerful resource for cultivating ecological awareness and promoting sustainable living. This model emphasizes the potential of literature to inspire ethical transformations and deepen our ecological responsibility in the face of global environmental challenges.

IV. Conclusion

Re-examining Wordsworth's poetry through an ecocritical and Romantic ecological framework uncovers a nuanced engagement with nature that transcends its historical moment. His celebration of natural landscapes, memory, and the sublime articulates a vision of interconnectedness and respect that resonates deeply with contemporary environmental concerns. Wordsworth's work anticipates the ethical dilemmas and emotional responses central to today's ecological crises, offering valuable insights for rethinking human relationships with the environment. This study affirms the importance of literary scholarship in environmental discourse, positioning Romanticism not merely as a historical movement but as a living resource for ecological imagination and green humanism. By bridging past and present, Wordsworth's poetry inspires renewed environmental awareness and ethical care vital for navigating the Anthropocene.

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