

Ecological View from Images in Marianne Moore's the Fish

Ziyan Zhao*

Department of English, Harbin Normal University, Harbin, 150028, China
olivia_zhaoziyan@163.com
*Corresponding author

Abstract: Marianne Moore is a staunch advocate of the theory that writings are for conveying truth. Her animal poetry is frequently regarded as an allegory of humanity's weakness or barbarism, displaying her contemplation of the natural world. This paper focuses on the images in Marianne Moore's "The Fish" to explore her ecological view. It tries to find out Moore's basic views about nature by analyzing the images that she depicts and the way that she arranges them. It also demonstrates how Moore perceives the relationship between human beings and nature through the analysis of the symbolic meanings of "sea" and "cliff", by which Moore calls attention for ecological peace.

Keywords: ecological view; images; nature; relationship

1. Introduction

It seems strange to state that Moore, who studied in Pennsylvania and later stayed in New York for most of her adult life, should be considered a nature poet. However, trained in biological sciences by many nineteenth-and twentieth-century naturalists, Moore "spent most of her career pondering her relation to nature and the proper way to view and render the earth's creatures"^[1]. Her deep engagement with plants and animals in her poetry indicates an ethical and aesthetic stance toward the natural world, which burdens her ecological view. Recent decades have witnessed quite a few increasingly severe global environmental problems. It's an urgent duty for every Earth citizen to re-identify nature, to reconsider the relationship between human and nature, and to find a way out of ecological moral confusion, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak. The paper tries to explore Moore's ecological view by analyzing the images in "The Fish", which comes closest to imagism among her poems.

2. Basic Views about Nature

The fish swim through the "black jade" sea, under which hundreds of mussel shells open and close like injured fans. Barnacles in the waves are illuminated by the ever-searching shafts of sunlight that delve into the crevices of the turquoise sea. The ocean water attacks the cliff as hard as iron, while the creatures in it slip and slide over each other, such as the starfish which look like pin rice-grains, the jellyfish splattered with ink, the crabs like green lilies and submarine toadstools.

As Moore herself says, she values an effect of naturalness and feels that the notion of composition should reinforce the meaning and make it cumulatively impressive.^[2] In this poem, various images of animals and plants are combinations of elegant presentation and fancy imagination, creating a poetic ecosystem. While immersed in the imaginary world stacked with images, readers are imparted Moore's views about nature.

2.1. Nature is Colorful and Dynamic

The sea is "black jade" when it is calm and becomes "turquoise" while waving. The mussel shells are "crow-blue". The starfish are "pink". The jelly-fish spouts black "ink". The crabs are "green". Various colors are endowed with different organisms in the sea to build a colorful natural world.

The fish "wade through" the sea. The mussel shells are "opening and closing", thus "adjusting" the ash on themselves. The barnacles block off light by spreading over the sea surface, but the sunshine sometimes penetrates into the sea along with waves, "illuminating" it like a swiftly moving spotlight.

Other small organisms “slide each on the other”. The world is in constant flux. All these images demonstrate that the natural world in her eyes is lively, colorful, and dynamic.

2.2. Nature is Phantasmagoric and Dangerous

Apart from beauty, there is also a mysterious danger in nature. The associability of images that are reminiscent of fear, danger and death exerts a significant effect. With barnacles acting as a light blocking layer, the sea is dark inside, which indicates the mystery of nature. Only when the water waves can the sun get into the sea through the crevices. The flickering light in the dark creates a phantasmagoric environment.

Moore also uses many metaphors to stimulate these relative imaginations. She compares the sun to a “spotlight” connected with crime, fear and so on, mussel shells to “injured” fans and the sea to “bodies” alluding to death. While the concepts do not intrude upon the imagined beholding, many of the metaphors introduce qualities extraneous to the objects themselves. That the mussel shell is not injured, though it may look like an injured fan and that the sea is not dead while the poet uses the word “bodies” both suggest a sort of burial ground. These components create phantasmagoric surroundings and present the dangerous part of nature before readers.

2.3. Everything Interacts and Concerts in Nature

Moore uses many examples of one thing moving through another, sometimes placidly, sometimes with violence. The fish “wade” above the mussel shells and under the barnacles through the sea, the sunlight moves into the crevices “in and out,” and the water “drives a wedge”. In this way, the creatures in the imagined ecosystem are connected with each other, displaying the complicated interweaving relationships in real nature. This motif implies that the creatures all live together, interacting and intersecting, sometimes symbiotically, other times violently. Everything in nature is in concert with everything else; there are no arbitrary separations, hierarchies, or categories.^[3] It is an organic, amorphous world where every creature has a close relationship with other creatures to some extent.

3. Relationship between Human and Nature

The sea drives water as strong as iron to assault the cliff, and all the creatures like starfish, jellyfish and crabs slip and slide over each other. Attacked over and over again, the cliff, which features the marks of accidental abuse and ravaging such as hatchet strokes and dynamite burns, stands still.

Critic Thomas Lisk accounts for the poem’s theme of opposing forces as well as “change and stasis,” commenting that it is the relationship between the sea and cliff that gives the poem its beauty. He suggests that “The Fish” is an ecological poem that is not about the ocean nor the cliff alone, but about the way in which a poem can beautifully accommodate the relationship between them.^[4] The sea attacks the cliff over and over again, but the cliff endures. Their relationship can be defined by duality, including the exploited and exploiting, the dependent and independent, mortality and eternity.

As the one that is most close to imagism among Moore’s poems, it is not surprising that the poem is not merely about conflict between the sea and the cliff. Here the complex relationship between the sea and the cliff highlights Miss Moore’s attempts at diversity in her presentation of eternal truth for fresh truths. Different symbol meanings can be carried according to different people’s interpretations. Next this essay tries to interpret it based on the ground that the sea and the cliff allude to humans and nature, which coincide with the characteristics.

3.1. Exploitation

The “water drives a wedge / of iron through the iron edge / of the cliff” brings the physical conflict between the cliff and the sea to the fore. In this unceasing war of attrition, the sea is the exploiting class. It is full of “bodies” and the water is like “iron” as it rams against the cliff. The creatures within it “slide each on the other” as if they were weapons of the sea with no volition nor consciousness. The sea moves and flows endlessly, indicating its unsteadiness and destructive power.

Clearly, the cliff is the exploited class. It endures the never-ending violent strikes. If there is just a vague hint about the referential meaning of these two images until this line, the next two stanzas seem to directly point out the concerns of the poet. “External marks of abuse are presented on this defiant edifice,

all the physical features of accident—lack of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and hatchet strokes, these things stand out on it.” The slow and casual rhyme created by piling discrete images suddenly becomes intense and fast as these complete prose-like lines jump into the readers’ minds, contributing to achieving an emotional function. These particularly emphasized lines illustrate that the sturdy edifice standing firm against the sea bears numerous and various destructive marks made by humans. Human beings intrude into the ecosystem with abruptness. It’s unclear whether the loss of its “cornice”, the top part of the cliff, is blamed on the bombs and the hatchet or not. They ignite dynamite here, leaving grooves and burns on the cliff and they cut the cliff, causing “hatchet strokes”. The cliff is in a perilous situation due to both sea attacks and human torture, and then an edge blurry appears between the sea and humans. Their characters are mixed up to some degree, achieving shifts of attention from the relationship between the sea and the cliff to that between humans and nature.

Each and every eternal mark of abuse presented on the edifice represents a kind of exploitation of nature by human beings. First and foremost, “cornice” implies the expansion of human beings’ habitation. A cornice is “generally any horizontal decorative molding that crowns a building or furniture element—the cornice over a door or window, for instance, or the cornice around the top edge of a pedestal or along the top of an interior wall” (Wikimedia Foundation). Moore uses metaphor to compare the lost top part of the cliff to the cornice of humans’ buildings. It implies the severe reality that more and more land is being conquered by humans to make space for modern construction. Second, “dynamite” suggests the damage of wars. Humans have a strong impetus and a crazy preference for war. With the rapid development of science and technology, they are, at the time, updating and inventing more vicious weapons of war. The products are put into use in wars without considering the catastrophic consequences. Third, “burns” refers to the burning of fossil fuels. During the first half of the twentieth century, people’s concerns about overusing fossil fuels drastically increased as relevant environmental issues sprang up. Fourth, the “hatchet strokes” are associated with disafforestation. So many forests are permanently removed by means of logging for commercial timber and clearing for agriculture and human settlement.

3.2. Dependence

Though human exploitation is prominently emphasized, humans are doubtlessly dependent on nature. While the sea is considered to represent human beings, its opposite, land, the standing ground of the cliff seems to be positioned as nature. In the first five stanzas, Moore uses metaphor to endow the sea with the defining elements of the land on purpose. The poem begins with the image of a fish not swimming but wading through the water. To wade means to walk through relatively shallow water, all of which is a movement only made by animals living on land. The description of water as “black jade” also adds the solidity of land to the flowing sea. The mussel shells, starfishes and crabs are respectively compared to injured fans, pink rice-grains and green lilies, which are objects or organisms on the land. Close associations with land are indicated by these images.

It conveys that human beings are closely related to and dependent on nature. What we live on, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the artificial or crude objects we use, all come from nature. It’s nature that nurtures humans.

3.3. Eternity and mortality

“Repeated /evidence has proved that it can live /on what can not revive/ its youth” The sea attacks the cliff over and over again but the cliff endures; humans can cut up the cliff but it endures. The cliff is a positive image of solidity, tenacity, power in the face of formidable oppression and also eternity. In the lasting war, it isn’t the cliff that will vanish from the world, though it bears so many injuries. On the contrary, “the sea grows old in it”. Its waves after waves are just like human beings’ generations after generations, causing swiping strikes to the cliff, but the cliff will remain, just like nature will exist forever.

4. Call for Ecological Peace

Capitalism in Europe and America was highly developed, bringing such high degree of material civilization to the people that most of them rejoiced in the convenience and affluence without being aware of the incessant emergence of ecological problems. Science and technology separated human beings from nature while causing devastating damage to nature at the same time, just as Thoreau had predicted. The silver lining was that some scholars did notice the tragedy unfolding. Albert Schweitzer claimed the “reverence for life” in 1915, saying “to the truly ethical man, all life is holy, even that which appears to

us from the human standard as the lowest". That was the reality in which Moore wrote this animal poem, in the guise of which we see her aspirations for ecological peace.^[5]

Approximately one hundred years after Moore's warning, according to the latest annual report from the Global Ecosystem and Environmental Observation Analysis Research Cooperation, the global ecological and environmental problems caused by excessive consumption and irrational utilization of resources are becoming increasingly prominent, such as climate warming, ecological degradation, environmental deterioration, frequent disasters, public health emergencies and other problems, which not only affect the sustainability of the global economic and social development, but also threaten the foundational life and health of human beings.^[6] As one example, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken more than six million people's precious lives in less than two and a half years, as reported by the New York Times. A COVID-19 working group of medical experts released a report online stating that the COVID-19 crisis highlights the links between environmental changes and the emergence of infectious diseases. That is the reality in which we are living, as same as the situation in the wake of failure to maintain ecological peace that Moore had warned. Her call for ecological peace, at the core of which is the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, deserves more attention.

As critic Darlene Williams Erickson writes, these two entities, the sea and the cliff, are locked in a mutually nurturing and mutually destructive embrace. While being the source of life, the sea is capable of destructing them at any time. The same is true of nature, which demonstrates Moore's concern about the moral problems of how men relate to the natural world. She signals a warning of the urgency to maintain ecological peace between human beings and nature. In her view, animals are beings in their own right, worthy of respect and capable of instructing humans on the finer points of how to live harmonious and humble lives.^[7] A kind of interpretation of "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" is that it signals her dissatisfaction with modern notions of human engagement with animals and nature to fit society's ends. Under such circumstances, Moore advocates that man would do better to respect and emulate nature than to seek dominance and subdue it.

5. Conclusion

"The Fish" is a celebration of nature's variety and resilience and a disdain for humanity's rapacity in exploiting nature. Through the antagonistic and interdependent relationship between the sea and the cliff, Moore suggests that humans should cautiously establish a relationship with nature based on their worship of its destructive power and awareness of their dependence on it.

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