

Analysis on The Horse Whisperer from the Perspective of Environmental Justice Ecocriticism

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the characteristic of environmental justice ecocriticism. To make it clear, the author set the example of the Horse Whisperer to emphasize the interdisciplinary part of ecocriticism and insists that ecocriticism should be established on the solid base of science to construct a biology-oriented, especially a Darwin evolutionary biology-oriented format of ecocriticism.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, Literature, Biology*

1. Environmental Justice Ecocriticism and Its Key Characteristics

In 1972, Joseph Meeker put forward the notion of Literary Ecology in his book, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. This book was regarded as the beginning of the trend of ecocriticism by most of the scholars in the field of ecocriticism at that time[1]. Not for long, ecocriticism developed into a widely accepted format of literary criticism and witnessed its fast development well until the middle of 1990s. However, from the perspectives of both history and reality, ecocriticism at this stage didn't fully get to the real cultural root source of ecological crisis, and the cultural remedy that it offered had its own imperfections and was not able to cure all the social and cultural illnesses effectively. On the contrary, it was confronted with skepticism and challenge from those in favor of grassroots environmental justice movement. At the same time, the ecocentric philosophy, the key ideological foundation of ecocriticism, with its radical branch, deep ecology, faced denials and severe challenges from disadvantaged groups, the third world and even the critics from the inside of the environmental philosophy. All of a sudden, ecocriticism seemed to fall into a predicament with no way out.

Severe academic crisis led to universal academic anxiety and insecurity in the circle of ecocriticism. In order to weather this crisis successfully, ecocritics strived to reexamine their own academic grounds, evaluate pressures from all sides, summarize their gains and losses and make fundamental academic adjustments. Under this situation, in late 1990s, some ecocritics brought the idea of environmental justice into their literary activities, thus pushing it forward to a new stage of development: environmental justice ecocriticism. In 1997, T.V. Reed brought up the term for the first time[2]. Against this backdrop, American ecocritic scholar Lawrence Buell concluded in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, that western ecocriticism has gone through two ecological waves/stages: one can be generalized as biocentrism ecocriticism, and the other is environmental justice ecocriticism[3].

In China, although the ecological awareness appeared in the 1970s, it is not until the middle of 1990s that ecocriticism got its widespread attention. In more than ten years time, ecocriticism quickly evolved into a prominent subject of literary criticism and made outstanding achievements. Ecocriticism at this time focused mainly on the ideological basis of ecocentrism to explore the relationship between literature and environment, and lash out at anthropocentrism. This meant that ecocriticism and philosophy walked into the wilderness hand in hand, and there they stayed. From an overall point of view, China's ecocriticism at this phase had a long way to go to produce more real works, and it still had its shortages both in theoretical construction, academic practice, academic momentum and academic scale. One of the shortages is that our critics did not have due interdisciplinary, cross-culture or even cross-civilization awareness, which prevented the ecocriticism from its in-depth development in China, and left our study on the outside of the field. If this situation continued to worsen, the ecocriticism would be swallowed by the flood of ecological civilization and lost its power of academic judgment and cultural construction. and the outcome would be that it would not yield its contribution to the construction of ecological civilization, and may even brought about severe crisis for the existence of ecological study, which was already deteriorated by ecological anxieties.

In 2003, pioneer of American ecocriticism and world-renowned ecocritic Glen A. Love published his new book, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment*. This book was regarded as a representative publication of the second wave of ecocriticism since it contains many key characteristics of environmental justice ecocriticism[4]. First, Love highlighted the characteristic of “interdisciplinary” to a new and prominent place and thought that interdisciplinary should be the most significant characteristic of ecocriticism, in his words: “an interdisciplinary ecocriticism as best representing the theory and approach of its namesake, the scientific field of ecology”. In Love’s opinion, ecocriticism strongly requests that its participants are also involved in the fields of interdisciplinary science. Literature is about interrelationships and our ecological awareness may enhance and deepens our sense of interrelationship to the extent of covering both human and non-human contexts. In order to carry out interdisciplinary research more effectively, it is of great necessity that ecocritics should try to learn scientific knowledge about the ways that this world runs as much as possible, because “if ecocriticism is to ground itself in ecology—that is, ecology as a science rather than as a buzzword—, it needs to come to terms with questions about the place and worth of science in our lives. I believe that as students of literature and the environment, we have much more to gain than to fear from the company of the sciences, particularly the life sciences.”

2. Environmental Justice Interpretation of *The Horse Whisperer*

2.1 Main Line of *The Horse Whisperer*

It is a story about “to save and to be saved”. *The Horse whisperer* tells us a moving story about a successful career woman, Annie Graves, who refuses to admit any defeat and failure in her whole vocational and family life, succumbs to giving up her job and status and everything fancy in the cosmopolitan city to drive long distance across the entire United States to visit the so-called horse whisperer in Montana, who is said to be in the possession of unique skills and can get to the souls of horses and solve their problems. In the hope of saving the seriously injured horse, Pilgrim, and in the greater hope of preventing the life of her daughter, Grace, from sliding into chaos, Annie tucks up her pride and prejudice, drives the trailer alone, spends nights in small, lousy motels, cries secretly to herself in the dusk light, and changes every way of the usual habits that she once had in New York. During the process of curing the horse, it turned out that every character in the story, especially Annie Graves and Tom Booker, has their own deep-hiding and deep-rooted sufferings, mostly mental ones. Though they come to the realization of their own problems at different stages of life, they both touched their souls in the approaching and understanding of the same animal, the horse, and found their own solution to the problems and got saved.

Horses are a kind of prey animal, which always live in a state of danger and are always ready to flight for life, and phobia inflicted by maltreatment and distrust can instill lasting damage to their life. An abused, frightened horse is said to be of great risks and will potentially harm those who are around. So are the human beings. In *The Horse Whisperer*, Annie Graves had a happy and loving family when she was young, then all of a sudden, things changed overnight. Her diplomat father died, and her mother remarried to another man, so she had to be sent to the home of an aunt, who turned out to be a mean woman, and abused her with different methods, using all kinds of ridiculous excuses. With no one to turn to, Annie choked down the maltreatment, both mentally and physically, for a long period of time. But deep in her heart, she told herself that she had to be excellent in every aspect in order to make herself strong enough and protect herself from being abused and ridiculed by others again, just like her life model, her father did. So when Annie grew up old enough to survive on her own, she kept herself a best and nervous student, editor and went to Africa to help those injured and poor people. However, due to the abuse and insecurity from childhood experience, Annie still lived a split life. Even when choosing a husband, she selected Robert MacLean, out of a sense of security instead of love. When she gave birth to the girl baby, Grace, Annie temporarily spent a period of mother-daughter life, but she soon returned to her career life and left her daughter in the care of her husband, only soothing her inner regrets by providing her daughter with a strict life schedule and abundant materials, even a horse. The horse, pilgrim, stands not only for the love a mother gives her daughter, but also stands for the love the mother owes her daughter. It was not until the accident that Annie realized that she owed her daughter too much, and that she can never let the evil in her continue to bring harm to her beloved ones and hurt herself any longer. So, she started her own pilgrimage to save herself in the name of saving the Pilgrim. The underlying intention is to seek a way for the evils to get out and return to the peaceful life and let her own soul rest still.

2.2 Environmental Injustice against Annie Graves and Her Redemption

Annie, like the horse Pilgrim, is also in need of help and unable to get rid of her heavy psychological burdens, even with her many successes, seemingly flawless marriage, and social and economic status. Since the death of her father, Annie had been living in a state of fast pace and uneasiness, which sheltered her from void and restlessness. The car accident became the last straw on her back. When the pain reached its climax, Annie turned back and decided to face up to it and she was not going to fright and flight anymore.

Nicolas Evans is telling his own life story in the name of Annie Grace. The sudden family breakup and following maltreatment bring lasting harm on Annie Graves and instill a mix of bitterness, resent and hysteria in her character, leaving her in a state of constant fear, and Annie used her success to disguise this inner phobia from others to protect her from getting hurt again. And every bizarre move she took in her later, grown-up life, both in her study and her career, can find its trace back in her teens. Annie Grave might not consciously realized this phenomenon at first, but when she, from time to time, would think of her father and the wonderful time they spent together, a feeling of void would swell up in her heart. Like Pilgrim, Annie, with her own unspeakable pains and sufferings, is also a soul constantly crying out for help, but no one answers her calls, until she came across the mysterious horse whisperer.

Annie's redemption will not happen if the car accident had not occurred. For over twenty years, Annie made do with her life successfully. She was a capable executive, bringing a dying magazine back to life; her lawyer husband loved her more than she loved him, and her daughter, though a little bit rebellious, behaved just as she wished her to be. Even though her miserable childhood had always posed as a hindrance for her inner peace, and she still occasionally tormented by dreadful dreams and insomnia, her life had been quite satisfactory and bearable until now. However, when the car accident took away one of her daughter's legs, and the whole world came falling down, Annie blamed herself for not being able to be there and could not get away with the guilt. Fearing that something in her daughter would die equally if the horse was going to be put down, Annie took the responsibility on her own and set out on the pilgrim to the west to find the horse whisperer to save the horse and the girl, which turned out that it was her who truly needed to be liberated and readopted. Annie is like a horse facing life threats, and she decided to face up to it, instead of flight.

3. Environmental Responsibility for the Society

Nicolas Evans is a writer of acute ecological awareness and responsibility of social problems. In the novel, many social crises were intertwined together by the writer in the Roberts family, which was an overview of the actual conditions of our modern industrial society. There are crises between husband and wife, mother and children, employer and employee, urban and rural, and the list still goes on. Nicolas Evans directly pointed out his awareness of worsening social crises at the very beginning of the novel: "There was death at its beginning as there would be death again at its end. Though whether it was some fleeting shadow of this that passed across the girl's dreams and woke her on the least likely of mornings she would never know. All she knew, when she opened her eyes, was that the world was somehow altered"[5]. On a snowy winter morning, two girls went out on a horse ride, no one anticipating that death was going to happen and a tragedy was about to fall upon them, and also upon those who were related. An exhausted and repeatedly provoked truck driver might be the seemingly direct cause of the whole incident, but the fact was that the burdens that had been laid heavily upon those people were becoming more and more unbearable and it would explode any minute. After the tragic accident, all those who were involved began to face their respective nightmares in their lives. Sadly, no one could find out the underlying causes of their sufferings, and they just found themselves in chaotic and bewildered quarrels and blamed each other for what had happened. Anthropocentrism could never provide them with a final, clear answer.

As a writer of acute awareness of social and ecological awareness, Nicolas Evans tactically guided his readers to the source of all these troubles people experienced in society, phobia. The definition of phobia goes as follows according to the Wikipedia: "A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder, defined by a persistent fear of a situation or object, and if the feared object or situation cannot be avoided, the affected person will have significant distress". In the novel, Annie Graves was haunted by the sudden death of her beloved father during late night, deserted by her mother, and abused by her grandparents. This dark childhood became the source of her offensive behaviors in her whole life. In order to protect herself and show to others that she was not weak, she strived to be the best in every job she took, and

even took this lifestyle into her family life, which should be full of love and respect. Her husband, Robert, who was actually a successful lawyer who should be proud of himself, did not think he was good enough for his wife, and belittled himself by loving his wife more than she loved him. Tom Booker, who, in the eyes of those wounded horses and equally wounded owners, was the last man in the world whom they could turn to, had his own unexplainable distresses. In addition to the breakdown of the old farm and the breakup of his once loving family, Tom, since the divorce with his first wife, could not find out his way out of the darkness and get back home from the wild. He left his ranch to go to the outside world for a bigger place to settle down, but no place was more suitable for him than the ranch. What absurd enough is, his wife vowed to leave the industrial cities to be with him on the ranch, but found out that the city life was just what she needed most.

Of all the phobias that people are facing, the most important one is that modern society could not find the roots of its fears. As a writer of rich biological understanding, Nicolas Evans took advantage of the natural horsemanship and explained the root reasons by depicting the behavioral activities of a prey animal, a horse. In this regard, man and horse are the same in that they are both prone to be the victims of violence, especially woman. In the world of horses, the dominant question of their everyday life is life or death. To solve this problem, the horse, like all the other prey animals, devises a mechanism of their own, fight or flight, which is actually the only two ways of protecting themselves from being eaten by their predators. In other words, the horses are living in a constant condition of fearing being killed. The natural horsemanship, instead of bringing horses to submission through violent methods, insists that a safe environment should be the first priority in the training of young horses, and trust and communication with no violence should be the right way to train them. As to the remedy of abused horses, the right step is to take them to a new, non-threatening environment, find out the cause of their phobia, relieve them of the phobia and reestablish the trust of the horses in human beings.

From the afore-mentioned analysis and comparison of Annie, Tom and Pilgrim, it is probable for the readers to understand that the novel is filled with knowledge of natural horsemanship, and the root reasons of the character's torments are various phobias that our industrial society have imposed upon them.

4. Conclusion

It has been more than twenty years since the production of *The Horse Whisperer* and its introduction into China for the first time. In these two decades, numerous studies have been devoted to its reviews and appreciation from many a perspective. The overall reviews of the novel can be roughly divided into three stages. One was the period of landslide praise of the bold pursuit of love by man and woman while they are facing their marriage crises in their mid-forties. Another was the stage of fierce debate over family ethics of marriage crises and the philosophical argument of its fundamental causes. The third stage was the time when critics reviewed the novel from an ecocritical angle to discuss the in-depth relationships between society and nature, and the ways to ensure the harmonious coexistence between the two sides. The movie version of the novel brought it to a larger audience and aroused a wider and more heated debate over the theme that the writer was to deliver. However, the movie version made a great difference in the expression of the novel by cutting off the horse training and the last part of the printed version. In the eyes of many readers and critics, the last paragraph of the novel was a surprisingly unexpected, but also a seemingly anticipated part of the novel. Though there was a flow of suffocation and dissatisfaction in the last paragraph, the long-lost and new-regained tranquility and forgiveness that make people feel respected and settled was overwhelming, even though it's kind of a compromised one.

Of all the literary reviews, seldom concentrate on the tranquility and forgiveness that the writer conveyed in the novel and still less was that none was focused on the understanding of the novel from the angle of biology, to be specific, animal behavior. What Glen Love suggested in his book was surely a vital fountain of inspiration for this article, who pointed out that "Memorable literature is not necessarily possessed of environmental correctness or rectitude, or even of any obvious environmental content. But rewarding interpretive opportunities often open up for the student or critic who chooses to read "against the grain" of a text's apparent or primary interests, shifting critical attention from the anthropocentric to the biocentric[6]". With the notions of environmental justice ecocriticism, this article aimed to apprehend the novel from the perspective of the science of animal behavior, and with the help of the much-developed principles of natural horsemanship, strived to establish a connection between man and nature. And this article went on to details by analyzing phobia, of which they are both a victim when facing dangers as prey animals, and also by analyzing the common reasons why man and animal

would react in a similar way and why they have to be rescued or redeemed in the same way. And most important of all, this article also focused on the Buddhism ideology that the writer used in the creation of the novel, and boldly put forward that the core idea that the writer wanted to convey is to invoke an inner void for his readers and expect them to pursue the oneness of things.

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