

A Brief Account of American Eco-criticism--Origin, Development Course and Reflection

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Abstract: Beginning in the 70s and 80s of the last century, American eco-criticism is the product of increasingly serious environmental crisis. It comes into researchers' view with various titles such as green cultural studies, environmental literary criticism, and natural history of reading and so on. Despite their diverse definitions, they still share some common characteristics. The main theoretical sources of eco-criticism are land ethics, anti-anthropocentrism and deep ecology. After experiencing different development stages, eco-criticism is gradually forming an open system during the process of scholars' continual reflection.

Keywords: American eco-criticism; definitions; theoretical basis; development course; reflection.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of American eco-criticism was put forward in the 1970s when global environment crisis became increasingly serious. Some American scholars, engaged in research on literature and culture, started developing literary criticisms and theories of ecological awareness which made their first appearances in those scattered published academic articles related to natural ecology and natural subject analysis. Joseph. W. Meeker in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* put forward the concept of literary ecology and made a survey on biological subjects appearing in current literature in 1972[1]. In 1978, William Rucker firstly used "eco-criticism" in his thesis "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Eco-criticism" and he proposed to apply ecology and concepts on ecology to literary research[4]. However, it's Cheryll Glotfelty, the leading advocator and sponsor of American eco-criticism who first advocated considering "eco-criticism" as a kind of literary criticism used to explore the relationship between literature and natural environment. She regarded eco-criticism as the application of the geocentric ideology to literary research so as to explore the relationship between literature and natural environment. However, eco-criticism doesn't show the same appearance all the time, for it always comes to researchers' views with various titles such as green cultural studies, environmental literary criticism and natural history of reading.

THE DEFINITION OF AMERICAN ECO-CRITICISM

Researchers have given various definitions to eco-criticism because of their different perspectives. As for Peter Barry, he said, that eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and natural environment. While Patrick D. Murphy [3] believed that eco-criticism is not so much a method as a sports team whose research contents include lots of widely divergent things: first, it needs to study works' manifestation to nature-these works can be words, films or TV series and so on and eco-criticism particularly focuses on the construction of nature in these patterns of manifestation. Another American eco-critic Lawrence Buell[2] hold the view that eco-criticism was often carried out under practical spirit of environmental movements; eco-critics should not only consider themselves as individuals engaged in academic activities, but also should pay close attention to current environmental crisis and involve in various environmental improvement activities so as to make contributions to comprehend and save environmental crisis with the literature and cultural research. In spite the vastly different definitions, they still share some common characteristics: firstly it applies ecological perspective to do the literary study; secondly, it focuses on how literature thinks of the relationship among humans, other creatures and the world around so as to find the influence which literature involving natural thoughts exerts on human behaviors.; thirdly, those definitions admit that eco-criticism involve the interdisciplinary literary research including literature, bio-ecology, deep ecology; fourthly, eco-criticism, full of strong ecological responsibility, takes it as duty to

improve ecological responsibility of all humanity; fifthly, they follows the eco-centric principles of the ecological holism.

With the rapid development of eco-criticism, only in the past few decades it has achieved great advance both in depth and width in its filed, even it has expanded to the whole literature. Up to now, eco-critics have gradually illustrated the unity of opposites between humans and nature from various angles such as deep ecology, eco-feminism, environmentalism, natural concept and description, the awakening of the relationship between humans and nature, which has greatly widened the eco-criticism's horizons.

THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF ECO-CRITICISM

The main influencing factors of eco-criticism are Aldo Leopold's thoughts of land ethics, Lynn White's anti-anthropocentrism and Arne Names' double ecology. These factors have established the theoretical framework of interdependence between humans and nature. And they have laid a solid theoretical foundation for the eco-criticism and provided theoretical discourse and patterns for the further development of eco-criticism.

Aldo Leopold's Land Ethics Ideology

Land ethics ideology, created by Aldo Leopold has become one of the three significant components of current eco-centrism environmental ethics. The ideology advocates that the real environmental ethics is the inner value of nature, not its significance to the existence and welfare of humans. Besides, our humans have ethical responsibility for the natural world. After having reflected mankind's civilization, Leopold believed that the real civilization is the interdependent cooperation between humans and animals, plants, soil. And the real ethic is the land ethic that regards humans as a member of creatures and voluntarily maintains the ethics of land community. Apart from the systematic statement of ecological ethical theory, Leopold also argued that the basis value criteria of this theory is when a thing is helpful to maintain the harmony and stability of the bio-community it's right, and if not, it's wrong.

Lynn White's Anti-anthropocentrism Philosophy

Another significant theoretical basis of the eco-criticism is anti-anthropocentrism which is the core word that differs essentially from other general literature. Anti-anthropocentrism, opposite to the anthropocentrism, requires rational humans must abandon the narrow-minded anthropocentrism to constraint themselves and assume the responsibility for constructing and preserving the eco-household. Just as its name implies, anthropocentrism is to apply the interests of humans to explain and deal with the whole

world. That is to say, it maintains that only humans have the intrinsic value, while other existence just has instrumental value. Lynn White in the history root of our ecologic crisis sharply indicated that the anthropocentrism of Jewish Christians is the ideological and cultural origin of ecological crisis. And it has laid the foundation of our beliefs and values; it instructed the science and technology; it encouraged people to treat nature with rulers' attitude. White believes that Christianity is the most anthropocentrism religion of the world, and Christianity has exploited possibilities provided by nature in order to ignore the feelings of natural objects. Therefore, from the perspective of the eco-critics, the main task of eco-criticism is to explore the ideological origin of ecological crisis, and they have found that anthropocentrism is one of the largest and deepest ideological origins for ecological crisis.

Arne Names' Double Ecology

Double ecology, put forward by Arne Names, also plays an important part in theoretical foundations. It's raised as a concept compared with shallow ecology in the western ecological philosophy. As the contrary to deep ecology, shallow ecology explains those ecological problems faced by humans from the narrow-minded anthropocentrism point of view because it is restricted to anthropocentrism environment and resources protection. However, deep ecology emphasizes treating the relationship between humans and nature from the perspective of the whole biosphere and it advocates dealing with ecological problems on the basis of the overall interests of ecosystem. Besides, deep ecology is committed to maintaining the stability of the ecosystem and biological diversity. The reason why the deep ecology is "deep" lies in that it regards all the existence of the biosphere to have internal deep connections and existent values. So it emphasizes not only from the standpoint of humans but also from the whole ecosystem and the unified relationship between humans and nature to recognize and solve ecological problems. The appearance of deep ecology is the time marker of modern human environmental protection movements, especially the transformation of ecological ideology from shallow level to deep level.

THE DEVELOPMENT COURSE OF AMERICAN ECO-CRITICISM

By 1970s, American eco-criticism has experienced three key development stages in the several decades.

The Expression of Nature and Environment in the Literature

From the late 1970s to early 1980s is the first stage of American eco-criticism which is also called "characterization stage". The task of this stage is to study how literature expresses nature and the relationship between humans and nature. Lots of eco-critics pointed out that many works applied the same

old modes to describe nature during that stage. In other words, nature was described either as an idyllic place, malaria wetland or a ruthless moor. Of course, the description of nature isn't the only expressed contents of this mode, for it also includes those frequently appearing subjects in other natural literature such as border areas, animals, towns and Indians.

Attention to the Literature of Nature

The second stage of American eco-criticism is from the end of 1970s to the early 1990s called "rendering age", which devoted to exploring the literary works and writers of nature and mainly focused on literary works and writers of nature that have been ignored for a long time. It especially tried to deeply explore some aspects of American natural works such as their history, development, achievement, style. In American, works of nature were mainly created in the form of non-fiction. Since the beginning of 1990s, almost 20 literary works of nature had been published by America. Leopold and Karson enjoyed great fame in that period. Leopold's eco-criticism ideology became the law of environmentalism and Karson's representative work *Silent Spring* opened a new era of eco-criticism, which to some extent can be treated as the milestone of American eco-criticism because it's the significant symbol of human eco-consciousness awakening. However, in 1996 the book *Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm was published which symbolized that the development of eco-criticism had come into systematization, theorization and diversity.

An Attempt to Create Eco-poetics

By the end of 20th century, American eco-criticism had entered into the third age that is also called "theoretical stage". The central issue of this stage is constructing theoretical system itself, which means investigating the symbolic structure of species. In this stage, American eco-criticism emphasized applying literary language to rebuild the human world. That is to say, it tried to construct eco-poetics system, to emphasize natural ecosystem and to strength human cognitions towards natural ecological environment, thus constructing structure and system of social value on the eco-criticism. Moreover after inheriting those ideas of environmental ethics and philosophy, eco-critics in this stage criticized anthropocentrism and dual-division theory, thus pushing eco-criticism into a new level. For example, ethics that Taylor advocated to extends moral concern to the whole ecosystem, deep ecological ideology by Arlen Ness and subjective values raised by Holmes Rolston as well as objective values that was put forward by J. Baird Callicott, all of which have laid a solid theoretical foundation for American eco-criticism. And based on current ecological philosophy, Leonard D. Scigaj and other scholars have constructed eco-

poetics in which they put forward that with the highly development of science and technology, environment deterioration is a fact that eco-poetics must face. Therefore they advocated abandoning the traditional dual-division theory in order to facilitate the unity of natural ecology and human society. Besides, in the work *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate explained the connotation of romanticism eco-poetics and indicated that the nature of deep ecology is to return nature.

REFLECTION ON THE AMERICAN ECO-CRITICISM

As a new critical perspective, eco-criticism has released its own shortcomings when showing its vigorous vitalities. Therefore, on the one hand, eco-critics actively deal with questions and interrogations from all parties, and on the other hand, they automatically and deeply carry out self-examination.

Because of the worry that eco-literature will become tools used by environmentalists to get their interests and eventually descend to certain political slogan of justice, British representative eco-critic Jonathan Bate in his book *The Song of the Earth* maintains that eco-poetics shouldn't be descended to environmental protection. In fact, this book is the continuation of phenomenology strategy of his previous book *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* published in 1991. The strategy redefined the poetics of romanticism in the way of Heidegger. Bate believes that eco-poetics should serve for reflecting the meaning of coexistence, not hypotheses or suggestions of environmental issues. His proposals reveal the ideal to construct the theoretical structure of eco-criticism from the meaning philosophy. However, some scholars think once eco-literature breaks completely with hypotheses or suggestions of environmental issues, it will certainly lose the social realistic significance at the same time. Then Patrick Murphy appeals eco-critics to list more ethnic writers and international writers into their research with more openness. Based on race and gender, Murphy's research emphasizes on diversity, heterogeneity and diversification. Besides, he also appeals to keeps highly vigilance on the hegemonism of the eco-criticism. Both Bate and Murphy make their reflections through examining their self-development, which is really positive and beneficial to the benign development of the whole team.

As for the future development of the eco-criticism, a common agreement has been reached. For one thing the focus area should be expanded from nature to human society, culture and human spirit. It attempts to put eco-criticism into human ecosystem to investigate and affirm the unity of mankind existence, for another, eco-criticism should reinforce the fusion of horizons

with other subjects. Only when integrating with each subject including art and other humanities, it can become dynamic academic research, so as to understand all problems faced by human society.

CONCLUSION

Eco-criticism has become a significant branch of literary criticism schools. More and more domestic and foreign scholars start to turn their attention to its development and engage in its research. With the continuous deterioration of global environment, eco-criticism, a new vision to literary criticism of natural extension, can release the concept of man into ecosystem holism to criticize the anthropocentrism ideology that focuses on conquering and controlling nature as well as profligately abusing natural resources. Its aim is to awaken the numbness of mankind who are willing to become tools under the drive of utilitarianism and people's awe of nature and life so that the increasingly serious ecological crisis can be relieved.

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