

Eco-critical Literary Theory

-Shen Dacheng's Short Stories as Examples to Illustrate Its Application

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Abstract: Eco-consciousness is abundantly reflected in Shen Dacheng's short stories, and the use of ecocriticism to interpret Shen's works is an important window for studying Shen Dacheng. The use of eco-critical theory in literary texts has achieved certain results in China and abroad. Shen Dacheng's short stories comprehensively reflect the thinking on the relationship between humans and nature, animal studies, spiritual ecological issues, and thinking on the way out, and creatively show the view that nature also needs human beings.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Eco-literary criticism, Shen Dacheng, Animal imagery, Alienation, Spiritual ecology

1. Introduction

Ecocriticism in the field of literature aims to re-examine culture through an ecological interpretation of literature. The purpose of ecocriticism is not only to return to nature but also to heal the spiritual ecological problems of human beings and alleviate the phenomenon of spiritual alienation of contemporary people. Literary works and literary criticism are interdependent. Using ecocriticism to interpret literary texts helps broaden the field and influence of literary studies.

2. Literature Review

Shen Dacheng is a contemporary Chinese writer. She has the short story collections *The Ones in Remembrance* (屡次想起的人), *The Asteroid Fell in the Afternoon* (小行星掉在下午), and *The Lost Man* (迷路员). There are currently no English translations of her novel. At present, there are relatively few literary and ecological studies at home and abroad on Shen Dacheng's works and the obvious ecological consciousness and ecological wisdom they embody.

Ecocriticism has many specific research approaches and perspectives. It is diverse and amorphous. However, studies have shown that the research perspectives when using ecocriticism on literary texts are mainly from the following six aspects: first, the discussion of the relationship between human beings and nature. Second, the study of industrialization. Third, studies from religious and political perspectives. Fourth, the study of animals. Fifth, the exploration of spiritual ecology.

2.1. Domestic Research

In 2007, Miao Fuguang published *Lawrence in Ecocritical Perspective*. This work is the first systematic study of D.H. Lawrence's ecological thought in China, and the first to use ecocritical perspectives to interpret literary texts [1]. The study found that the domestic practice of using ecocriticism is mainly in the following four aspects.

First, the translation and introduction of foreign literature that uses ecocriticism to study literary works. For example, Wang Nuo's *Ecological Literature in Europe and America* is the first academic work in China that systematically explains and introduces the concepts of ecological literary criticism in Europe and America. This article introduces how critics should use ecocriticism to analyze texts and point out that all texts can contain ecological meanings [2].

Second, the analysis of the relationship between humans and nature in the text is emphasized when ecocriticism is applied. For example, Chen Maolin & Qin Zhiyong 'In A Summary of Ecocriticism' provides a brief ecocriticism of Robinson Crusoe from an anti-anthropocentric perspective, in which the authors advocate rediscovering, reissuing, and reassessing literary works through an anti-anthropocentric viewpoint [3].

Third, ecocriticism is applied from the theoretical perspective of the natural, social, and spiritual ecology of Lushu Yuan. Lu Shuyuan is a pioneer of eco-literature in China. For example, Wu Jinrong applied Lu's theory to Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, analyzing the ecological consciousness in the text by discussing the distortion and destruction of the above three aspects [4].

Fourth, ecocriticism is used from the perspective of analyzing animal imagery. For example, XU Jin-hui & FAN Zi-an contend that people can gain new value perceptions by treating animals in different ways [5].

2.2. Overseas Research

In the 1980s, the study of ecocriticism emerged in the Western humanities. After decades of development, ecocriticism has gradually developed into an important discipline in the field of literary theory. The practice of ecocriticism abroad has been carried out in the following four aspects.

First, it explores religion and nature in literary works. For example, Paul Sanders Quick presents an ecocritical vision of McCarthy's novels from a religious perspective, in which he mentions that nature contains a divine spark and that nature is the most poetic text in the translation of the Bible that has been autonomously translated by humans [6].

Secondly, industrialization is used as an entry point for ecocritical practice. For instance, Paul Sanders Quick uses ecocriticism to read McCarthy's works, saying that technology makes people naively believe that they can transcend nature. They use technology but also abuse it [7].

Third, similar to the domestic perspective, there is a strong focus on regarding animals as an entry point to study literary texts using ecocriticism abroad. For example, Paul Sanders Quick points out that animals are as important as humans in McCarthy's novels, and animals are the continuation and extension of human narratives in the scenes [8]. Also, Mohammadreza Dabirnia, in a comparative study of the poetry of Robert Frost and Sohrab Sepehri in the field of ecocriticism, analyzes the symbols and characteristics of birds in different cultural contexts from the poet's expression in his poetry and suggests that the poet turns the bird into a biological model of man [9].

Fourth, ecocriticism is applied from the perspective of human self-identity, a point that has greater similarities with Chinese scholar Lu Shuyuan's theory of spiritual ecology. For instance, Paul Sanders Quick applies ecocriticism from the perspective that people need to find their own identity and sense of belonging through their understanding and appreciation of nature, emphasizing that the way of life

of people in McCarthy's works reflects their subconscious understanding of nature in its truest sense [10].

In summary, the study of Shen Dacheng's work is at the stage of fragmented research. As for the use of ecocriticism in literary texts, research on human and nature, and animal studies has been relatively mature, but there are still new perspectives that deserve to be discovered and explored. Shen Dacheng's short stories comprehensively reflect the thinking on the relationship between humans and nature, animal studies, spiritual ecological issues, and thinking about the way out, and creatively demonstrate the idea that nature also needs humans. So it is of great research significance and value to interpret Shen's works from the perspective of ecocriticism.

3. Research Methodology

This paper uses the literature research method, the case study method, and the inductive method, thus taking Shen Dacheng's short story as an example to illustrate the different manifestations of ecological literary criticism in literary texts.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Relationship between Humans and Nature in Shen Dacheng's Short Stories

The stories under Shen Dacheng's pen are beyond the limitations of nationality and geographical factors, but a broader, neutral narrative world, and her stories are universal. The relationship between humans and nature in Shen Dacheng's novels is reflected in three main dimensions: the reinvigoration of nature, the dependence of humans on nature, and the need for nature to be human as well.

In Shen Dacheng's writing, the charm of nature is shown in a fantastic form. For example, in "The Man Who Knew the Mysteries of the Universe", The protagonist considers himself called and given a mission by the universe, so he gives up his old life and devotes himself to the charm of nature and the mysteries of the universe [11]. Shen Dacheng internalizes the protagonist (human) in the imagery of nature, and in front of the compound charm of nature, human is attracted to nature and thus further develops the desire to explore it.

Secondly, the dependence of human beings on nature cannot be ignored. In "Driving at the End of the World," Shen Dacheng depicts what the three people in the cab on the afternoon when the asteroid is about to destroy the earth see and hear; they are fond, and reluctant and resigned [12]. As they recall the past, they can't help but feel a sense of attachment and love for the earth, but this love is born out of guilt for nature. Another article by Shen Dacheng, "Funeral," is about a mother who had one of her arms converted into a mechanical limb decades ago. After the mother died, the crematorium returned her mechanical limb to her son, who looked at the still-living limb, but understood that these technologies could never replace his mother's natural life [13]. It is true that humans can use technology to create alternative conditions for natural life, but the technology created by humans can never change the essence and meaning of natural life.

The fact that nature also needs humans is one of the unique features of Shen Dacheng's work. The concept of "The Dermatologist" is very clever. After a short trip, the protagonist suffers from a strange skin disease, and on his way to the train platform to get some air, dermatitis "skin" peels off his arm and he finally realizes that it is a plant seed. The main character realizes that he is a spreader of seeds requisitioned by nature, just like the wind, the bees, the bears, and the employees sent by the company on business trips. The will of the seed drives him to the spot where the seed is satisfied and eventually rolls off his body into the area he has chosen to grow [14]. Sometimes nature needs to acquire natural properties and identity through humans. Although this is also a reflection of the vulnerability of humans themselves, the perspective imagined by Shen Dacheng is very novel.

4.2. Animal Imagery in Shen Dacheng's Short Stories

XU Jin-hui and FAN Zi-an propose that animal imagery is a kind of incarnation of nature, one of the symbols of life in nature, and also part of the ecological whole. Nature and animals are not a backdrop for human activities, but equal and independent living individuals with humans [15]. The essence of nature is embodied in animal imagery, which also maps contemporary life. Animals appear in literary texts as aesthetic imagery, as a way to clarify the correspondence between animals and nature. Animal imagery appears more frequently in Shen Dacheng's works, and her works mainly write about animal imagery from the following two perspectives.

The first is the equality between animals and human beings and the anti-conquest. For example, in "The Cat That Scares the Feeder", the main character's cat suddenly becomes less submissive to him and always tries to rebel against him. He found that the cat would use the lamp to send Morse code to curse himself as a "fool". Finally, he had to choose to find a new home for the cat [16]. Shen Dacheng gives a certain sense of subjectivity to the animal, which seems to be actively attracting the attention of humans strangely. There is no doubt that Shen Dacheng's narrative is absurd and bizarre. A perfectly ordinary domestic cat eventually expels its owner. The way animals express themselves to people may be strange, but it is this kind of truth that shatters human assumptions about animals. Such an animal is ill-behaved, even frightening. There are times when humans must admit that they want animals to get along with them in a way that people are happy with. But ecology and nature should be equal and anti-conquest.

Secondly, the value of animals feeds back to human beings. In Shen Dacheng's works, animals always bring enlightening thoughts and feelings to human beings. In her texts, she discusses the relationship between humans and animals and the influence of animals on humans, urging humans to explore different value meanings. In Shen Dacheng's short stories, the change of emotions between humans and animals reflects a distinctive aesthetic experience and chemical reaction. From the fear and rejection of animals, to the care and protection of animals to the final letting go and fulfillment. This process is also a reconciliation between human beings and nature, as well as the author Shen Dacheng's literary concern for the spirit of ecology. In "Voice Actor", the male actor accidentally becomes the dog he usually voices, and he accompanies her completely in the form and habits of a dog. During this time, he feels the dog's soundness when drinking and the calmness and stability when sleeping. The actress also relaxed her nerves with the sound of the dog's purring, and she was willing to talk to her neighbors about her family's "dog". In the end, the actor returned to the human image, but the original boring voiceover life became a little different [17]. Animals play an indispensable role in human life. Humans can gain strength from animals, thus breaking free from indifference and loneliness and gaining a different life experience. In Shen Dacheng's novel, humans sense the heartbeat of nature by feeling the scent of animals. As spokesmen of nature, animals heal human pain and loneliness, and they give vitality to people. From another perspective, the animal imagery in Shen Dacheng's novels reflects, to a certain extent, the reality of the lack of ecological awareness in modern human life.

4.3. Reflections on Spiritual Ecology in the Writings of Shen Dacheng and the Way Out

Chen, Mao-Lin, and Qin, Zhi-Yong argue that the essence of the ecological crisis is the crisis of human nature, the crisis in people's way of life, value orientation, and view of nature [18]. Eco-criticism focuses on deconstruction as well as construction.

In "The Cuttlefish Man," A young man suddenly squirted ink outward like a squid, and the security guards tried desperately to catch him like a monster. The youth wanted to explain that he didn't mean to do it, but he could only puff out the squid juice, and finally, he disappeared into the subway station. The station manager, from the beginning of the dislike, and rejection of the Cuttlefish Man, to the

end even quietly gives the youth food. Such a change is very worth pondering [19]. When more natural elements are added to a person's body, others react by rejecting or even wanting to attack it.

Regarding the construction of a healthy spiritual ecology, Shen Dacheng implicitly implies in the novel that humans can return to their natural bodies only by assuming animals. In "The Garden Office," a new employee takes over the position of a missing old employee, who is told by his colleagues that the old employee never came back because he always loved to go for walks in the garden. The new employee is equally absorbed in the natural beauty of the garden. One day later, he finds a white cat that looks a lot like his missing colleague. At the end of the story, the new employee is still hesitant to walk into the depths of the garden and become a cat as well [20]. Shen Dacheng uses fiction and exaggeration to create a class of humans who live in symbiosis with animals. There is a more obvious naturalness in these people, but they are also free from the constraints of modern society. However, the Cuttlefish Man is hunted by people, and old colleague is talked about by others. When a part of a human's natural state is returned, the social pressure they need to bear is not negligible. Shen Dacheng also chooses to suspend the question of the spiritual ecological way out for human beings in the contemporary social context. She does not give a clear answer in the essay but only uses exaggeration to show the reader her contradictions and reflections.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the ecological consciousness and ecological thinking in Shen Dacheng's short stories can be analyzed mainly by taking the relationship between humans and nature, animal imagery, and thinking about spiritual ecological issues and the way out as entry points. The study complements the perspective of ecocritical interpretation of literary texts in the past literature and introduces the new view that nature also needs people. There is still much room for research on the spiritual ecology of Shen Dacheng and other writers, and it is an area worth exploring and studying in the future.

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