

Mary McCarthy and Ecocriticism with Special Reference to *Birds of America*

Gulfam

Research Scholar
Department of English
Jai Prakash University, Chapra

Abstract

McCarthy's late fiction expresses a disillusionment with American, capitalist culture and a longing to return to a pre-industrial, pastoral past. Her indictment against postwar American culture is directed against mass production, the deterioration of Nature, and the failure of ethical and aesthetic values. Like many Americans, McCarthy's opposition to the war solidified in 1965 with the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. With the escalation of U.S. ground troops and increased air strikes, with a growing awareness of political instability in South Vietnam and the intransigence of the Vietcong, and with news of U.S. participation in war crimes, McCarthy became increasingly outspoken against the war in Vietnam. In 1967, McCarthy wrote a series of articles focusing on the corrupting influence of Western Capitalist culture on the South Vietnamese and indicting liberal intellectuals for their seeming collusion with U.S. policy makers in seeking a moderate solution to the crisis in Vietnam. Behind McCarthy's seemingly radical opposition to the war in Vietnam, lie a somewhat conservative critique of modern industrial society and a romantic longing to return to an idealized pre-industrial past.

Key Words: disillusionment, capitalist culture, pre-industrial, pastoral past, radical opposition

McCarthy defines herself as a conservative in the literal sense of wanting to preserve the past. McCarthy's indictment against mass society and mass culture and her will to preserve a more ethical and natural past are made explicit in a novel she wrote during the Vietnam conflict, *Birds of America* (1971). Despite McCarthy's opposition to the Vietnam War, she sides with most liberal intellectuals in her skepticism of the counter cultural movement and of the effectiveness of student protests. Her writings on Vietnam are an indictment against what she sees as the corrupting influence of American capitalist culture on a rural, agrarian folk culture. In her political writings of the 1960's and 70's, McCarthy combines a radical activism with a conservative impulse to return to an imagined golden age of the past. The depersonalization and mass culture of modern, industrial society has also led, in McCarthy's view, to the degeneration

of High Culture into the more vulgar and accessible form of Mass Culture.

In the radical and romantic tradition, McCarthy turns towards an idealized vision of a pre-industrial, pastoral society as embodying an ideal of ethical and communal values. McCarthy's later political writing threatens to undermine the very freedoms, both intellectual and economic, that enable her to speak and be heard.

Mary McCarthy's views on Nature and human life in a rapidly progressive contemporary world is reflected in her creative and critical writings too. In her essay "One Touch of Nature," (1970) bemoans the disappearance of nature from fiction. The absence of plot from the modern novel is often commented on, like the absence of characters. But nobody has called attention to the disappearance of another element, as though nobody misses it. We have almost forgotten that descriptions of sunsets, storms, rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys used to be one of the staple ingredients of fiction, not merely a painted backdrop for the action but a component evidently held to be necessary to the art. (McCarthy, p.189) It was a time when the skill of an author was felt to be demonstrated by his descriptive prowess: Dickens' London fogs, Fenimore Cooper's waterfalls, forests, prairie, Emily Bronte's moors, Hardy's heath and milky vales, Melville's Pacific. Yet in their day these were taken as samplings of the author's purest creative ore, his vein of genius- more even than character-portrayal or plot handling. In the old triad of plot, character, and setting, the setting, comprising Nature and her moods, supplied the atmosphere in an almost literal sense; it was the air the novel breathed, like the life-sustaining air surrounding Mother Earth.

To understand the disappearance of what might be called the normal outdoors- sunset, birds, trees, fields, pastures, waterfalls- from the contemporary novel, it is important to recall that it was not always an important presence. The great explosion of Nature into fiction occurred in the nineteenth century. Early in the century, descriptive writing had abounded not in prose but in the verse of the Romantic poets. It coincided with the Industrial Revolution, with the erosion of the countryside by the dark satanic mills. As everyone knows, the Romantic poets were fond of the common wild flower- the celandine, oxlip, field daisy, snowdrop of autumn leaves, larks and cuckoos, that is, of Nature in its most ordinary and minute particulars.

The term ecocriticism is derived from the two Greek words Oikos and Kritis and in tandem they mean "house judge," which may surprise many lovers of green, outdoor writing. The concept of the oikos, as developed by W.J.Everett in his essay "Work, Family and Faith: Reweaving Our Values" (35-44), is a useful tool for analyzing our society and its culture. The oikos, which means household/habitat in Greek, had been the basis of a holistic society in which human beings, Nature and the sacred were close-knit. Human beings can never be isolated from the environment in which they live, the culture which they adopt, the language which they are accustomed to, the people with whom they are acquainted with and the Nature which shapes them and their behaviour. They rest on the lap of the splendid Nature, whenever they feel disappointed, or in need of comfort. The human beings find pleasure in Nature through literature. Nature is a solace for them. Writers like Thoreau want to be one with Nature and lead their life

amidst the deep woods. Their happiness depends up on the external elements that surround them. The 1970's were frequently referred to as the 'Decade of the Environment,' initiated by the first 'Earth Day' on 22 April 1970.

Ecocriticism is the youngest of the revisionist movements that have swept the humanities over the past few decades. It began to gain momentum, first in the US and in the UK, as more and more literary scholars began to ask what their field has to contribute to our understanding of the unfolding environmental crisis. Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary situation. Ecocriticism is often associated with the association for the study of Literature and environment (ASLE). It is the branch of literary criticism. It is the study of Nature or natural things in literature. It means to focus on the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. William Rueckert may have been the first person to use the term Eco-criticism. He published an essay titled "Literature and Ecology" (1978) and experiment in Eco-criticism. Ecocritics give importance to writings that mainly deal with landscape which comprises not only the collection of physical phenomena but also the history and geography of that place. A total understanding would be realized and felt only if we belong to the place. Evernden in *Beyond Ecology : Self, Place and Pathetic Fallacy*, quotes Paul Shepherd's saying 'Knowing who you are is impossible without knowing where you are from' (Glotfelty101).

Eco-criticism tries to integrate and identify human participation in nature that enriches and enlarges the mind and spirit of man. This involvement would help to revamp the deserted places and foster in us a sense of sympathy and belonging, of knowing and of being a part of that particular place. Ecocriticism is not only a response to the aesthetic achievement of American Nature writing but also tries to create an awareness in the society for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental pollution, damage and destruction. Environmental crisis arises when human beings fail to recognize the interconnectedness of all things. The *Ecocriticism Reader* (Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm.) is an important entrance into a field of study fully engaged with the most pressing contemporary problem the global environmental crisis. Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evidenced in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in all departments of knowledge and development. The literary critics, tries to study how this close relationship between Nature and society has been textualized by the writers in their works. In recent years, ecological consciousness has gained wide attention and grown in prominence as a subject of study all over the world. Since eco-criticism also assumes that Nature and human culture are mutually influential, texts that explore this mutual influence are supposed to embody an ecological consciousness.

Ecocriticism as a concept first arose in the late 1970s, at meetings of the WLA (the Western Literature Association). Ecocriticism, as it now exists in the USA, takes its literary

bearings from three major nineteenth century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). Three of them were members of the group of New England writers, essayists and philosophers known collectively as the transcendentalists, the first major literary movement in America to achieve 'cultural independence' from European models. Emerson's first, short book *Nature*, first published anonymously in 1836, is a reflective essay on the impact upon him of the natural world, often voiced in words of powerfully dramatic directness: Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. (38) Fuller's first book was *Summer on the Lakes*, During 1843, which is a powerful written journal of her encounter with the American landscape at large, after a period as the first woman student at Harvard. At Niagara, for instance, she writes: For here there is no escape from the weight of a perpetual creation; all other forms and motions come and go, the tide rises and recedes, the wind, at its mightiest, moves in gales and gusts, but here is really an incessant, an indefatigable motion. Awake or asleep, there is no escape, still this rushing round you and through you.

It is in this way I have most felt the grandeur- somewhat eternal, if not infinite. (71) Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is an account of his two-year stay, from 1845, in a hut he had built on the shore of Walden Pond, a couple of miles from his home town of Concord, Massachusetts. It is, perhaps, the classic account of dropping out of modern life, and seeking to renew the self by a 'return to nature.' These three books can be seen as the foundational works of American 'ecocentred' writing. *Birds of America*, is written during the Vietnam War. Although the war is present in the background, the primary theme of *Birds of America*, is the pernicious way this century's culture has come to be dominated by technology. It is the story of a woman searching for fulfillment as an artist, a wife and a mother, and of her restless, seeking, idealistic teen-age son. Ranging from America to the capitals of Europe, it is a nostalgic lamentation for the pristine Nature since we remain surrounded by the shoddy and the plastic, which is fast eradicating the pure and natural. In an interview with William F. Buckley, McCarthy says, "I think that capitalism is the most successful deteriorator of society- of human life." (130) Here she equates capitalism with modern industrialization, the destruction of Nature, the massification of culture, and the alienation of the individual. In her view the destruction of Nature has led to an ethical crisis in modern man.

The massification of culture and society and conflict between social equality and aesthetic values are explored by McCarthy in her late fiction. In a radio interview with Eric Rhode, McCarthy laments the disappearance of nature from the novel and from our lives. And if we lose nature, in the form of trees and farms and animals, then it seems we also lose some criterion of the natural, which is a moral criterion. . . if you don't have a tree, or some everlasting form of nature- or at least more lasting than man- and if your're not in contact with that, nor with the seasons, but only with frozen food, how can you hold onto a concept of the natural as a moral

value in human life? (Eric Rhode, p.95) The disappearance of Nature has further led to an aesthetic dilemma in which quality has been exchanged for quantity. McCarthy observes a “sort of Gresham’s Law” operating in the area of mass production, where bad bread drives out freshly baked, good bread. McCarthy, in an interview with Jean Francios Revel openly says that “I don’t like frozen food” I think that in general bad products drive out good. (116) She is caught in the liberal dilemma between her egalitarian principles- making bread, or art, or literature accessible to the masses- and her aesthetic values- her preference of High Culture over popular culture. McCarthy’s interest in the question of social equality versus individual expression dates back to her childhood and her upbringing by strict, Catholic guardians.

In her autobiography, *Memories of a Catholic Childhood*, she recalls how she and her brothers were forbidden to own their own toys or to read outside books on the grounds of fairness. Such “equitable” treatment taught the young McCarthy that “equality was a species of unfairness” and hardened her resolve to distinguish herself as an individual. *Birds of America*, is set in America and Paris during the student protests of the 1960’s charts a 19- year old boy’s search for common morality in the modern, industrial world. Like McCarthy, her protagonist is also confronted by the moral failure of mass, industrial society and seeks to restore a natural and ethical past. His egalitarian principles are tested by the mass industry of tourism and in particular the mass consumption of art. In this novel McCarthy exposes the conflict between liberal values and social reality. *Birds of America*, like much of McCarthy’s fiction had a political inspiration. Although *Birds of America*, is set in a political context, McCarthy subsumes the political beneath the philosophical. The war in Vietnam, the student protests, and the civil rights movement provide a forum in which to discuss issues of equality, morality, and the decline of modern, industrial society.

References

- Brower, Brock. “*Mary McCarthyism.*” *Esquire* 58. July 1962.
- Caffi, Andrea. “*Violence and Sociability.*” *Politics* 4 January 1947.
- Cook, Rev. Bruce. “Mary McCarthy: One of Ours?” *Catholic World* 199 1964.
- Crowley, John. “Mary McCarthy’s *The Company She Keeps.*” *The Explicator* 51 Winter 1993.
- Hamilton, Andrew. “Dinners without Drudgery.” *Popular Mechanics*. April 1947.
- Wald, Alan M. *the New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.
- Blumenthal, Sydney. “The Epic Errors of Robert Caro.” *New Republic*. June 4, 1990.
- Brightman, Carol. Letters to Mary McCarthy, January 31, 1985, and July 28, 1988. Mary McCarthy Papers, Vassar College Library.