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Are We Destroying the Space That Nurtures and Embraces Us? Eco-critical Reading of Environmental Pollution in Kelly Roper's Selected Poems*

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Abstract

This paper examines in the selected poems of Kelly Roper from different points of view how the pollution problem seriously risks human life. In so doing, it is divided into two parts. First, the paper accounts for what eco-criticism is, how it developed and then how it deals with the relationship between literature and environment in general, between literature and environmental pollution in particular. Secondly, it tries to show the downside impact of industrialization on the environment and then identify the pollution problem and the types of pollution from different angles in Roper's selected poems - *A Choking Sky*, *The Stream Where I Played*, *Glimpse of a Polluted Future*, and *Perspective on Pollution*. In these poems, she, as the paper argues, compares and contracts the condition of the environmental space in the past with that in the present, and she strives not only to raise awareness of how human being has devastated his beautiful environment by polluting it day by day but also to teach us what we should do in the future to protect the environment from the pernicious pollution and create a clean, liveable space for living.

Keywords: Industrialisation, Pollution, Ecosystem, Eco-criticism, Human health.

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This paper examines in the selected poems of Kelly Roper from different points of view how the pollution problem seriously risks human life. In so doing, it is divided into two parts. First, the paper accounts for what eco-criticism is, how it developed and then how it deals with the relationship between literature and environment in general and between literature and environmental pollution in particular. Secondly, it tries to show the downside impact of industrialization on the environmental space and then identify the pollution problem, along with the types of pollution from different angles in Roper's selected poems - *A Choking Sky*, *The Stream Where I Played*, *Glimpse of a Polluted Future*, and *Perspective on Pollution*. In these poems, she, as the paper argues, compares and contracts the condition of the environmental space in the past with that in the present, and she strives not only to raise awareness of how human being has devastated his beautiful environment by polluting it day by day but also to teach us what we should do in the future to protect the environmental space from pernicious pollution and then create a clean, habitable space for living.

Throughout human history, there had been a very close, harmonious and interactive relationship between human being and nature (environment/ecology) in that nature has always nurtured and embraced human being. In turn, human being had looked after the well-being of his environment with a great care making sure that they could pass their well-kept nature (environmental space) to their children and grandchildren in even much better form than they received it from their predecessors. This friendly relationship was strikingly represented in literary works from the early ages of human history such as myths, rituals, legends and fairy tales, as well as in the genres of pastoral literature during the renaissance period and of the romantic literature, particularly in the poems of William Wordsworth during the last quarter of the eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth centuries, even finding its voice in the present time as discussed below in the poems by Kelly Roper (Miah, 2012; Ramazani & Bazregarzadeh, 2014 and Morton, 2017).

However, this centuries-long talisman was spoiled when particularly the last quarter of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries witnessed in the western world a radical shift in the processing and manufacturing methods of goods called as the "Industrial Revolution", which later spread the entire world and obviously replaced the traditional ways of production of goods. The Industrial Revolution has two facets. On the one hand, it has aimed at achieving a better quality of life and prosperity for everyone in various ways through the introduction of new methods of manufacturing goods. As a result, many new factories in urban space were established, leading to the growth of modern metropolitan cities with many facilities of easy production, cheap prices, and dramatic increase in job opportunities, as well as of health, transportation, communication, education, scientific advancement and so on. On

the other hand, Industrialization has had several negative effects on life. Among these negative effects, the pollution of space – the environmental pollution, air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution and so on - occupies an important place due to its inevitable serious risk to human health and space where human and non-human live. The pollution is obviously caused by the insensible overuse of the world's resources to gratify human selfishness and greediness. "The massive industrial processes carried out in factories", as Diego I. Murguia discusses, "create large amounts of waste that contaminate the resources of the environment in different measures. If not properly treated, these wastes can contaminate all of biosphere's elements: water, air, and soil, sometimes in an irreversible way" (2006, p. 1289). This massive industrial activities gained speed increasingly during the twentieth century and have become widespread on a larger scale since World War II in both developed and developing countries. As a result of these massive industrial activities, the industrial wastes, mainly chemical and radioactive wastes, untreated sewage water, industrial gases and carbon dioxide, which come out of factories, have visibly given rise to severe environment pollution, air pollution, water pollution, radiation pollution and so on, not only seriously threatening human life and health but also endangering the next generation's future across the world (Yang, Yuan, & Sun, 1975; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Coupe, 2000; Gerrard, 2004; Leonard, 2006 and Cherniwchan, 2012). As for the threat of these types of pollutions to the balance of environment – exaction of species, reduction in genetic diversity, the destruction of habitat and devastation of sustainable life styles - as well as to human health such as lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, lower respiratory infections, asthma attacks, cholera, typhoid fever, chronic kidney disease and so on, for example, Jasdeep Kaur Dhani, Harminder Singh and Manish Gupta maintain that "In modern era, the environment has emerged as a major area of concern. Pollution is the major threat in most of the developed and developing economies" (2013, p. 19). For Dhani, Singh and Gupta, while economic progress is passing through different phases of development and growth, it also results in the environmental degradation and imbalance. In the view of Habibullah Magsi, the reason behind the environmental degradation and imbalance is "the weak governance system, which is taking important place in the economic, social and environmental science literature":

In fact, there are many flaws to the way of industrial management system. Even though we can currently do things much more efficiently than before, but the cost of this efficiency may seem inexpensive in many ways, however we do not realize that the cost of these new technologies do not just include money, time and labour, *but it also costs us our wellbeing as well as earth. This is also a fact that rapid industrial growth has made water, air and hazardous waste pressing environmental problem in many areas of the developing world.*

Industrial emissions combine with vehicle exhausts caused extensive air pollution, while concentrations of heavy metals and ammonia loads are often high enough to cause major threat to life down-river from industrial areas. The lack of hazardous waste facilities compounds the problem, with industrial wastes often discarded on fallow or public lands, in rivers, or in sewers designed to carry only municipal wastes (2015, p. 24; emphasis added).

These major industrial threats to environment and human health have caused leaders and civil rights groups such as Green Peace, Earth-Justice, and Right to Clean Air Platform and so on to get into panic since the 1960s. In this respect, many national and international conferences have been organized not only to draw attention to the urgency of the environmental threat but also to find comprehensive solutions to the pollution problem which visibly menaces human and non-human life alike. For example, the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 was the biggest international conference with 25.000 attendees, and the Kyoto protocol was signed by most industrial countries in Kyoto, Japan on 11 December 1997 and entered into force on 16 February 2005. The protocol aimed at reducing the emissions of six gases, and the main one was carbon dioxide which causes serious air pollution, yet the USA, “a country that in 1997 emitted about one-fifth of total global greenhouse gases, decided to quit the protocol in 2001” (Murguia, 2006, p. 1291) with the intention that it “would impede the nation’s economic development” (Dearing, 2006, p. 574). Of course, the attempts to reduce the risk of pollution, re-create and raise awareness about an environment-friendly sustainable space and life style have been going on in various fields with a lot of words.

Eco-criticism thus becomes part of these active attempts to represent critically these harmful effects of industrialization on the environmental space and human health. It also “deals with the environmental concerns and awareness among the general masses and thus helps preserve ecological balance. As a scientific discipline, it entered into the literary world when the critics tended to evaluate a work of literature from eco-scientific perspective applying the term ‘eco-criticism’” (Miah, 2012, p. 1793). First coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay, ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism’, his aim was to examine “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert, 1996, p. 107). Eco-criticism started developing in the 1990s and still remains on the agenda today in the first decades of the twentieth-first century. As for its definition, it is “the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyse texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature” (Wikipedia). At the beginning, it was solely related to American literature, and eco-critics found their Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996, p. xviii), which holds “biennial meetings for

scholars who deal with environmental matters in literature. ASLE publishes a journal—*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*—in which current international scholarship can be found” (Wikipedia. See also Tošić, 2006). In his *The Eco-criticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines eco-criticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, (1996, p. xviii), and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to recoup professional dignity for what Glotfelty calls the “undervalued genre of nature writing” (p. xxxi). For Lawrence Buell, “eco-criticism” is a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (1995, P. 430). Simon C. Estok debated that “eco-criticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, first by its ethical stance of commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an *object of thematic study* and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections. Eco-criticism may be many other things besides, but it is always at least these two” (2005, p. 198).

As seen in the definitions and debates above, there seems close relationship between eco-criticism and literary works in which eco-critics assess the value of literary texts “from an interdisciplinary perspective where all subjects [human and non-human] come together to analyse the environment and find out possible solutions to the current environmental issues” and crisis under discussion by moving from the anthropocentric view of nature to the view of non-human environment (Miah, 2012, p. 1793). By studying “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” in any piece of literature which portrays nature as a beautiful, peaceful, harmonious, and liveable place, eco-criticism strives not only to deliver a message to the reader by making them bold in their vision about any kind of environmental pollution, which threatens human life and health, as well as the balance in nature, but it also tries to raise awareness about the environmental pollution and urge policy-makers and leaders not to talk too much but to take action at once before it is too late. In this context, Kelly Roper might be entitled as an environmentally conscious literary preacher, since many of her poems are about a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (Buell, 1995, p. 430).

Kelly Roper is a contributing writer and topic expert with LoveToKnow.com and has been with the company since 2006. She has more than ten years’ experience as a professional writer and editor and has covered a wide variety of topics such as nature, music, food, addiction and recovery, kids and teens. She currently lives in Ohio with her husband and four children, trio of Jack Russell Terriers, a small flock of parrots, and several backyard chickens.

Roper’s following poems about the pollution of the environmental space are taken from the web page: http://greenliving.lovetoknow.com/Poems_About_Pollution. In her ensuing poems,

she focuses upon various aspects of distressing pollution and draws attention to them. In her *A Choking Sky*, for example, Roper personifies and metaphorically and strongly represents the sky in a way that it cannot breathe the same as a human being due to the “smoke stacks” which comes from the factory chimneys:

Watching smoke stacks choke the sky
Always makes me want to cry.
I just can't help but wonder why
The factories won't even try
To find a safer, better way
To put their poisonous waste away.

In her short poem, Roper draws our attention to two significant points linked to the primary source of environmental pollution. First, she represents the level of industrialization in that factory chimneys release a huge amount of “smoke” into air which covers the whole sky, making it “choke.” It is a metaphoric death of “the sky” like the sky of Beijing, China, which Roper represents to indicate the tremendous level of danger caused by industrialization (Babones, 2017). Normally speaking, the sky represents a vast space, and thus it is not easy for smoke to cover it, yet the amount of “smoke stacks” seems so high and dense that they bring about serious air pollution. In fact, the air pollution means the pollution of almost everything – the pollution of the whole living organisms. The “smoke”, which comes out of factory chimneys, contains some poisonous but invisible gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), carbon monoxide (CO), sulphur dioxide (SO₂), nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and ozone. Both human beings and animals breathe oxygen, yet it is polluted by CO, SO₂ and NO_x which are also poisonous. CO₂ is a special problem on its own since it is mostly responsible for what we call the “greenhouse effect” and “global warming.” According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that watches over the levels of chemical release from industrial processes that menace natural resources:

Air pollution levels rose 14 percent from 1990 to 2008. This trend reflects the amount of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions in the air...Factories pollute the air through fossil fuel emissions. These emissions include carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. Combustion creates these toxic pollutants. While all of these are naturally-occurring substances, it is the high levels of emissions which are of concern. Industrial processes will

also emit manmade emissions such as fluorine-containing gases such as hydrofluorocarbons (How Do Factories Pollute the Air?, 2015).

As seen in both poems and quotations above, the “smoke” which “chokes” is very poisonous and dangerous in several ways. The “smoke” contaminates the air (oxygen) which both human beings and animals breathe, giving rise to serious health problems such as lung cancer, asthma, COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), heart disease, and stroke and so on. Besides, when there is rain or snow, the poisonous gases inside the smoke fall down as in the form of acid rain and result in the pollution of soil, plants and vegetables on the earth. Human beings and animals eat these plants and vegetables which grow up in the polluted soil. Once the amount of poisonous gases increase above certain level in the body of human beings and plants, certain health problems start at once, so that the speaker of *A Choking Sky* is wondered about the picture of “the sky” covered with “smoke stacks.” As seen, there is an intertwined relationship between the factory “smoke” in “the sky” and health issue: that is, they reciprocally affect each other in negative and positive ways.

The second view linked to *A Choking Sky* is that Roper complains of lack of action to reduce the danger of smoke coming out of factory chimneys. By this view, she might accuse the decision makers, local, national and international responsible people, of not taking necessary action to minimize the threat of the “smoke” to environment and health:

I just can't help but wonder why
The factories won't even try
To find a safer, better way
To put their poisonous waste away.

Normally speaking, those in charge often abstain from installing necessary equipment to reduce smoke emission. The reasons behind may be the following views. First, it is allegedly claimed that the equipment such as filter and scrubbers is too expensive, and maintenance also equally costs high when they break down, so that the factory owners are reluctant due to the fear of losing money. On the other hand, national authorities are also unwilling to drive factory owners to corner because of the fact that the national economy gets harmed. Thus, there is always such a vicious circle going on across the world, even though some measures have been taken recently. In Roper’s “worry” and “cry”, what I see is that she indirectly and artistically implies a clean environmental space where health human life are more precious than the economic development since economy is visibly supposed to serve human well-being.

In her next poem *The Stream Where I Played*, Roper compares and contrasts the period of her childhood and that of her present life to show the reader difference between the clean environmental space when she was a child and the polluted one in the present:

I played in this stream as a child,
When the ravine seemed so endless and wild.
The water was clear and smelled so clean,
It was so long ago that it seems like a dream.

What Roper writes in this stanza resembles William Wordsworth's poem *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* (1807), in which Wordsworth writes about his enjoyment when he recalls his childhood memories of "daffodils", which "floats on high o'er vales and hills...[like] A host of golden daffodils...Beside the lake,/ beneath the trees, /Fluttering and dancing in the breeze..." Similarly, Roper, like Wordsworth, recalls her own childhood time and how she walked by the bank of the "stream" and enjoyed its clean water "as a child." The water was so clean that its flow and scenery charmed her fabulously; it made her happy and peaceful in her life. What she witnessed in the nature still haunts her and heals her "worry" and "cry" in her current life.

But now Roper comes to realize that "It was so long ago that it seems like a dream" now in the present time. What she enjoyed years ago in the nature has been gone for ever:

Now this stream is too dirty for my child.
The water is scummy and smells vile.
The place where I played seems so foul and decayed,
And I shed the first tear as the dream starts to fade.

Water is of vital importance for life – human and non-human; its cleanness, freshness and availability give us life, nurture and protect the health of human and non-human alike. As Christ Woodford argues, "over two thirds of Earth's surface is covered by water; less than a third is taken up by land. As Earth's population continues to grow, people are putting ever-increasing pressure on the planet's water resources. In a sense, our oceans, rivers, and other inland waters are being 'squeezed' by human activities—not so they take up less room, but so their quality is reduced" (2016, *Water Pollution: an Introduction*, Para. 1). The quality of water has been lowered everyday by pollution in various ways. As debated above, water pollution is a serious problem today because the non-stop development of industrialization

has polluted water immeasurably, affecting negatively the whole biosphere – human, plants and organisms living in the water. Woodford points out:

Most water pollution doesn't begin in the water itself. Take the oceans: around 80 percent of ocean pollution enters our seas from the land. Virtually any human activity can have an effect on the quality of our water environment. When farmers fertilize the fields, the chemicals they use are gradually washed by rain into the groundwater or surface waters nearby. Sometimes the causes of water pollution are quite surprising. Chemicals released by smokestacks (chimneys) can enter the atmosphere and then fall back to earth as rain, entering seas, rivers, and lakes and causing water pollution. That's called atmospheric deposition. Water pollution has many different causes and this is one of the reasons why it is such a difficult problem to solve (para. 5).

Polluted water is obviously harmful not only to human species and population but also to the natural biological communities on the earth.

Hence Roper is worried that she feels pessimistic and even unable to pass on the clean “stream” to her children because its water is “too dirty”, “scummy and smells vile.” This polluted water is not only undrinkable, but it also makes its environmental space “so foul and decayed.” The speaker thus sheds tears on the disappearance of the clean “stream” and “water”, along with the destroyed environmental space. In her another one-stanza short poem *Perspective on Pollution*, Roper expresses more or less similar view about the pollution of the river and its water owing to the heavy industrialisation:

Rainbow colours on the water's surface
Look so beautiful when you see them up close.
But step back from that rainbow and you'll see
It's really an ugly oil slick fouling a once pristine shore.

Through her representation of the conditions of the “stream” and “water” both in the past and in the present in her poems *The Stream Where I Played* and *Perspective on Pollution*, Roper determines the current situation and then expresses her disappointment and hopelessness “as the dream starts to fade.” Nevertheless, she artistically attracts attention to the grave issue of water pollution and attempts to raise awareness about the pollution problem. She simply shows us the gravity of issue and then sends a message not only to each of us individually but also to authorities and leaders across the world to take necessary actions before time runs out. Otherwise, she denotes that it may be too late: she just warns all of us about the impending danger and threat to human health.

The warning Roper makes even becomes much stronger once she asks us in her next poem *Glimpse of a Polluted Future*. Simply, she tells us what will happen if necessary actions are not taken at once: she guides and makes us aware of the hazard of the environmental pollution. As in her previous poems, she compares once again the past and present in the first part of the poem as for the situations of the environmental space. She asks the questions to make her point more vivid and striking:

Where are the birds that used to dot the sky?
They're not here anymore, and I have to wonder why.
Where are the fish that used to swim in this stream?
I can't see them anymore. What does that mean?
Where are the frogs that used to croak around this lake?
I can't hear them anymore. There must be some mistake.

In this part of *Glimpse of a Polluted Future*, in fact, Roper gives her answer to her poem *Choking Sky*. The “sky”, which is entirely choked with the “smoke stacks”, does not allow any living organisms to survive. That is, in this poisonous “smoke”-covered sky, “the birds” cannot live; they either die or travel to the other places. This situation destroys the balance of ecology. Again Roper asks, “Where are the fish that used to swim in this stream? / I can't see them anymore. What does that mean?” as discussed above, water pollution destroys life in the river and causes “the fish” to die or to disappear like the birds. Likewise, she continues to ask: “Where are the frogs that used to croak around this lake? / I can't hear them anymore. There must be some mistake.”

In conclusion, as seen in Roper’s three poems, air pollution, water pollution and environmental pollution caused by the heavy industrialization obviously reduce the quality of life on the earth. As a sensitive person to the risk which both jeopardizes human health and balance of nature, she questions and invites us to pay attention to this bitter situation: “There must be some mistake”, or she is trying to ask: why is the entire world indifferent to this serious problem? Hence Roper wants to escape from this unsettling problem, as well as from the gloomy picture of the present into the memory of the past and forget the current situation with the nostalgia of the beauty of nature in the past: “I wish there was a clock whose hands I could rewind”. Then she accuses each of us of not saving the lives of “the birds”, “the fish”,

and “the frogs”, and the other “animals are disappearing at an alarming rate”, it is time to say, “stop” “damaging our Earth.” Now Roper calls on everyone to take action against the ways the nature is quickly destroyed knowingly or unknowingly. It is time we noticed the gravity of danger and damage done to “our Earth”: “Time to make people see how we're, / Time to realize what it all was truly worth. / If we don't finally band together, it may really be too late.” These three lines are of vital importance for the message Roper is striving to make the entire world see and be aware of the truth – the truth that we are “damaging our Earth” which nurtures and embraces us. In a sense, she begs the entire world – individuals, authorities, leaders and civil rights groups – to do something before it is “too late.” Why the strong action and decision is not taken quickly is because of “the weak governance system” across the world, which is unable to show strong willpower to reduce the level of pollution due to several reasons such as political, economic and so on as in the case of the USA, so that there is an urgent need for a robust determination which will give more priority to human life than anything in life. Finally, Roper also teaches us how we should act: for her, the individual attempt is no longer enough to stop the way the earth leads in terms of the pollution and destruction of the environmental space; instead, she recommends us to “finally band together”: she suggests a powerful collective consciousness, awareness and action, which, she believes, will exert a great deal of influence over those who are able to stop or reduce the gravity of damage to the earth with a full consideration; otherwise, we will continue to destroy the clean space which nurtures and embraces us.

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