

Natural Writing and Environmental Ethics Reflection in Contemporary British and American Novels from the Perspective of Ecological Criticism—Taking *Silent Spring* and Other Novels as Examples

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Abstract: This article focuses on natural writing and environmental ethics reflection in contemporary British and American novels from the perspective of ecological criticism, taking *Silent Spring* and other representative novels as examples. By applying eco-criticism theory, it analyzes how novels construct natural writing systems and reflect on environmental ethics through multiple dimensions. It is found that besides *Silent Spring*, works like *The Overstory* and *Oryx and Crake* demonstrate diverse natural writing modes, such as symbolic natural imagery, narrative-driven scene descriptions, and dialectical depictions of human-nature relationships. These novels collectively criticize anthropocentrism, advocate ecological holism, and appeal for environmental justice, enriching literary expressions of ecological themes and inspiring practical ecological awareness. This study highlights the significance of literary works in promoting environmental ethics both in literature and reality.

1. Introduction

At the moment when the global ecological crisis is becoming increasingly severe, ecological problems have become a major challenge faced by all mankind [1]. As an important carrier reflecting social reality and human thoughts, literature plays an indispensable role in the discussion of ecological problems [2]. Eco-criticism, a literary criticism school, came into being, aiming at excavating ecological thoughts from literary works and revealing the internal relationship between literature and natural environment [3]. Contemporary British and American novels, with their rich themes and profound thoughts, have become an important text source for eco-criticism research, among which natural writing and environmental ethical reflection are worth exploring in depth.

From a historical perspective, the description of nature in British and American literature has a long history. Nature in early literary works often appears as a background or symbol, bearing human emotions and ideals [4]. With the changes of the times and the deterioration of the ecological environment, writers began to re-examine the relationship between man and nature, and the natural writing in contemporary British and American novels gradually shifted from simple description to profound reflection on ecological issues [5]. This change reflects the development of literary creation, but also reflects the increasing attention of society to the ecological environment. Eco-criticism theory provides a new perspective for the interpretation of contemporary British and American novels [6]. It breaks through the traditional mode that literary criticism is limited to the internal analysis of the text, closely combines literary research with ecological environment issues, and emphasizes the important role of literary works in the dissemination of ecological awareness and the shaping of ecological values [7]. From the perspective of eco-criticism, we can better understand the multiple connotations of nature writing in contemporary British and American novels and the environmental ethics thought contained in it.

As an important part of contemporary British and American novels, natural writing has rich forms of expression and profound significance. Writers describe the natural landscape and shape natural images through delicate brushstrokes, and build a literary natural space closely connected

with the real world [8]. These natural writings not only bring readers beautiful enjoyment, but also become an important medium to convey environmental ethics. In contemporary British and American novels, nature is no longer just the background of human activities, but has independent life and value, which together with human beings constitute an organic ecological whole. Reflection on environmental ethics is an important mission of contemporary British and American novels in the ecological context. Faced with the increasingly serious ecological crisis, writers deeply reflect on human behavior, criticize anthropocentrism and advocate ecological holism and environmental justice with keen insight and strong sense of social responsibility in their works. The purpose of this study is to deeply analyze the natural writing and environmental ethical reflection in contemporary British and American novels by using the theory of ecological criticism, and to reveal its significance in literature and reality. Through the interpretation of the relevant novel texts, it is expected to provide new ideas for the study of ecological literature and contribute to the popularization of ecological awareness and the construction of environmental ethics.

2. Multi-presentation of natural writing in contemporary British and American novels

In the creative context of contemporary British and American novels, natural writing is integrated into it in a rich and diverse form, which is not only a literal outline of natural scenery, but also closely intertwined with the theme, characterization and narrative structure of the novel, becoming an important medium to convey ecological concepts and humanistic thinking. The construction of natural images plays a key role in the natural writing of contemporary British and American novels. With the clever use of words, the writer endows all kinds of natural images with unique symbolic significance. The image of forest often carries rich implications. In some works, it symbolizes the uncut original vitality of nature, mysterious and full of unknowns, just like a treasure house with endless mysteries, attracting readers to explore the secrets. In other novels, the forest can be regarded as a metaphor of wildness and instinct in human subconscious, suggesting that the deep part of human nature has not been fully domesticated by civilization. Ocean images also have multiple interpretations, sometimes symbolizing vast expanse's freedom, giving people infinite reverie and the desire to pursue freedom; Sometimes it implies a profound and unpredictable fate, symbolizing the unpredictability and uncertainty of life journey.

The description of natural scenes plays a vital narrative role in contemporary British and American novels, and it is by no means a simple background filling. It can rely on its own changes, effectively promote the development of the story, create a rhythm that fits the plot atmosphere, and firmly grasp the readers' heartstrings. In the exciting adventure novels, the stormy sea scene echoes the hero's thrilling sea voyage plot. The rough waves and the thunderous sky make the whole story atmosphere more and more tense, and the tension of the plot is pushed to the extreme. The reader seems to be there, feeling the sense of urgency of life and death with the hero. The description of natural scenes also has the unique function of setting off the psychology of characters. The quiet grassland full of sunshine often reflects the inner joy, peace and yearning for a better life of the characters; The dark and gloomy ancient forest implies the inner fear, confusion and uneasiness of the unknown.

The delicate depiction of the relationship between nature and characters is also a highlight of nature writing in contemporary British and American novels. Writers show the complicated relationship between characters and nature through vivid brushstrokes. Some characters can live in harmony with nature and draw strength, wisdom and spiritual comfort from the embrace of nature. In some pastoral novels, the protagonist works at sunrise and rests at sunset in the quiet countryside, and realizes the true meaning of life in close contact with nature, thus gaining inner peace and self-growth. On the contrary, some characters hold a predatory attitude towards nature, regard nature as a tool to satisfy their own desires, and finally suffer the consequences. Figure 1 clearly shows the characteristics of multiple representations of natural writing in contemporary British and American novels.

Figure 1 intuitively shows the manifestations and functions of natural writing in contemporary British and American novels in different dimensions, showing the rich levels and diverse meanings

of natural writing in all directions from images to scenes to relationships between characters. This pluralistic presentation makes contemporary British and American novels more stereoscopic and profound in ecological expression, and guides readers to think deeply about the complex relationship between man and nature.

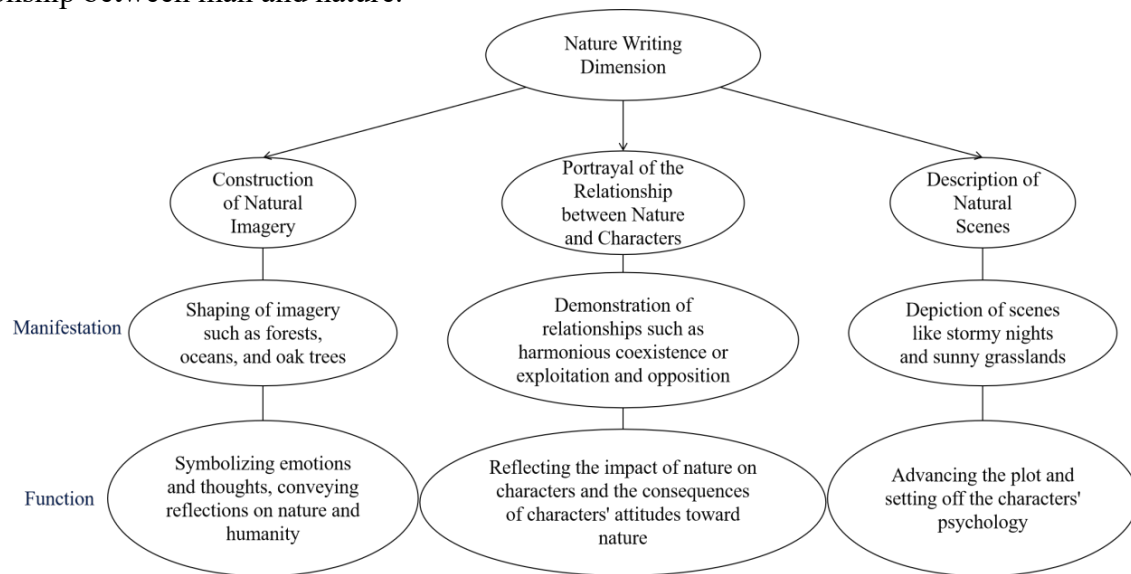


Figure 1 Characteristics of the Diverse Presentation of Nature Writing in Contemporary British and American Novels

2.1 Construction of Natural Imagery

In contemporary British and American novels, natural imagery carries rich symbolic meanings. For example, in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, the forest is depicted as a “communal consciousness,” where trees like the American chestnut and Douglas fir communicate through root systems and fungal networks. Powers writes, “The chestnut’s roots send out warning signals when attacked by blight, creating a silent dialogue beneath the soil” [9]. This imagery symbolizes nature’s interconnectedness, challenging human-centered perspectives. Similarly, in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, the ocean becomes a metaphor for ecological collapse. The novel describes “dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico, where red tides bloom from agricultural runoff,” depicting the ocean as a victim of human exploitation [10]. These images reflect how nature is both a victim and a survivor in the face of ecological crisis.

2.2 Narrative Function of Natural Scene Description

Natural scenes in novels actively drive plot development and character psychology. In *The Overstory*, the logging scene of a 1,500-year-old redwood tree is described: “The chainsaw’s roar splits the forest, and the tree’s fall creates a vacuum, sucking the air from the surrounding woods” [9]. This scene not only advances the conflict between environmentalists and loggers but also evokes a sense of ecological loss. In Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*, the description of a polluted river—“fish with deformed fins floating past plastic bottles”—serves as a narrative device to reveal the consequences of industrialization, highlighting the urgency of environmental issues [10]. Such scenes transform abstract ecological concepts into tangible literary experiences.

2.3 Depiction of the Relationship between Nature and Characters

Novels often portray complex human-nature relationships. In *The Overstory*, characters like Patricia Westerford form a spiritual bond with trees, as she “decodes the chemical signals of aspens, realizing they are a single organism across miles” [9]. This harmonious coexistence contrasts with the exploitative relationship in *Oryx and Crake*, where the character Crake genetically engineers “pigoons”—hybrid animals for organ harvesting—leading to their uncontrollable reproduction and ecological chaos. Atwood writes, “The pigoons’ squeals echo in the abandoned labs, a testament to humanity’s hubris” [10]. These depictions illustrate the dual consequences of human attitudes

toward nature: cooperation versus domination.

3. Anti-thinking degree of environmental ethics in contemporary British and American novels

In the creative vision of contemporary British and American novels, environmental ethical reflection occupies an important position. With the aggravation of global ecological crisis, writers deeply analyze the relationship between human beings and nature, reflect on traditional concepts and advocate new environmental ethics in their works, aiming at arousing readers' attention and thinking on ecological issues.

3.1 Criticism of anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism has long dominated the attitude of human beings towards nature, believing that human beings are the masters of nature and everything in nature is used by human beings. Contemporary British and American novels have profoundly criticized this concept. In many works, writers reveal the serious consequences caused by human self-centered over-exploitation of nature. Under the influence of *Silent Spring*, some novels depict the scenes of bird extinction, river pollution and ecosystem collapse caused by the abuse of chemical pesticides, and show the great damage to nature caused by human short-sighted behavior. Through these plots, the novel warns people that anthropocentrism puts human beings in an isolated position, ignores the laws of nature, and will eventually suffer the consequences. This criticism is not a simple accusation, but guides readers to reflect on the real position and responsibility of human beings in nature.

Contemporary novels critique anthropocentrism through vivid examples. In *Oryx and Crake*, the character Jimmy works for a biotech company that creates “BlyssPluss,” a pill promising eternal youth but causing global extinction. Atwood satirizes human arrogance: “Scientists believed they could play God, never imagining nature’s retaliation” [10]. Similarly, *The Overstory* criticizes the logging industry’s mantra: “Trees are just resources, replaceable like widgets,” highlighting how this mindset leads to the destruction of ancient forests [9]. These critiques echo Carson’s *Silent Spring*, emphasizing the danger of treating nature as a mere tool.

3.2 The manifestation of ecological holism

Compared with anthropocentrism, ecological holism emphasizes the interdependence and harmonious symbiosis of all things in nature. Contemporary British and American novels actively display this idea, and regard nature as an organic whole, of which human beings are only a part. In some novels, the author describes the delicate ecological balance between animals and plants in the forest, such as woodpeckers killing insects for trees and trees providing habitats for woodpeckers, and expounds the fact that all elements of nature are interrelated and indispensable. Furthermore, the novel also advocates that human beings look at nature from a holistic perspective and respect the right of survival of each species. The presentation of this concept urges readers to re-examine the relationship between man and nature and realize the importance of maintaining the overall ecological balance for human survival and development.

Novels advocate ecological holism by depicting nature’s interdependence. *The Overstory* weaves together the lives of trees and humans, showing that “a single tree’s death affects the entire forest’s microclimate, altering rainfall and soil composition” [9]. In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood describes the “Gardeners,” a group that worships all species equally: “They believe bees are as important as humans, for without pollinators, ecosystems collapse” [10]. Such narratives reinforce the idea that humans are part of a larger ecological web, not its masters.

3.3 Environmental justice demands

Environmental justice focuses on the fairness of different groups in the distribution of environmental resources and the consequences of environmental damage. Contemporary British and American novels keenly capture this issue and reveal the social inequality behind environmental problems. In some works, it depicts that poor areas or vulnerable groups are forced to bear more harm caused by environmental damage because of lack of resources and discourse power, such as

industrial pollution, which causes their health to be damaged and their living environment to deteriorate, while the rich class can avoid it by virtue of their resource advantages. These descriptions call for the establishment of a fair and just environmental order, emphasizing that everyone should enjoy the right to clean the environment equally and share the responsibility of environmental protection.

Figure 2 combs the anti-thinking degree of environmental ethics in contemporary British and American novels:

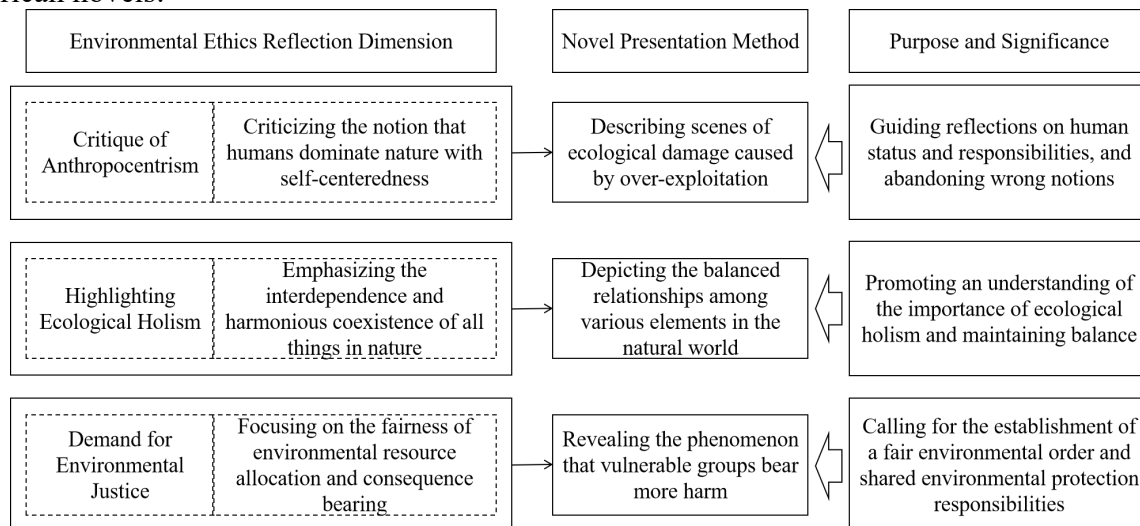


Figure 2 Dimensions of Environmental Ethics Reflection in Contemporary British and American Novels

Figure 2 systematically presents different dimensions of environmental ethics reflection in contemporary British and American novels. From the criticism of anthropocentrism to the manifestation of ecological holism, and then to the appeal of environmental justice, these dimensions are interrelated, which together constitute a rich and profound system of environmental ethics reflection in contemporary British and American novels. Through the literary form of novels, writers vividly show the environmental ethics to readers, causing widespread concern and in-depth thinking, hoping to promote the positive change of human concepts and actions in environmental protection and realize the harmonious coexistence between man and nature. This kind of reflection enriches the connotation of literary creation, and has an important enlightening effect on the promotion of ecological consciousness and the construction of environmental ethics in real society.

Novels highlight environmental inequality. In *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, the poor live in “urban wastelands” where toxic waste dumps border their neighborhoods, while the rich reside in gated communities with clean resources. Butler writes, “The poor breathe poison, while the rich buy air filters—justice has no place in environmental policy” [11]. Similarly, *Oryx and Crake* depicts how corporate pollution disproportionately affects marginalized communities: “Fishing villages near chemical plants suffer higher rates of cancer, but their complaints are ignored” [10]. These stories call for a fair distribution of environmental burdens and benefits.

4. Conclusions

Based on the perspective of eco-criticism, this article makes an in-depth discussion on natural writing and environmental ethics reflection in contemporary British and American novels, aiming at revealing its important value in literary creation and real society, taking *Silent Spring*, *The Overstory*, *Oryx and Crake*, and other works as examples.

In contemporary British and American novels, natural writing presents diverse and rich patterns. In the construction of natural images, forests, oceans and other images bear the author's deep feelings and thoughts, such as forests symbolizing primitive vitality and mysterious unknowns, and become an important medium to convey ecological ideas. The description of natural scenes is not a

simple background, but an active participation in narrative, which enhances the tension and appeal of the story by promoting the development of the plot and setting off the psychology of the characters. The relationship between nature and characters is described in detail, showing a variety of relationships such as harmonious symbiosis and predatory opposition, and profoundly embodying the influence of nature on the minds of characters and the consequences of characters' attitude towards nature. These diverse natural writing forms add unique ecological charm to the novel and provide readers with multiple perspectives to understand the relationship between man and nature.

Reflection on environmental ethics is another important dimension of contemporary British and American novels. The novel strongly criticizes anthropocentrism, reveals the ecological disaster caused by human self-centered over-exploitation of nature, and urges readers to reflect on human roles and responsibilities in nature. Furthermore, it actively demonstrates the concept of ecological holism, emphasizes the interdependence of all things in nature, and advocates human beings to look at nature from a holistic perspective. In addition, the novel also appeals for environmental justice, paying attention to the injustice suffered by the disadvantaged groups in environmental issues and calling for the establishment of a fair and just environmental order.

From the point of literary significance, the natural writing and environmental ethical reflection in contemporary British and American novels enrich the connotation of literary creation, expand the field of literary expression, and make literature more profound and diverse in the expression of ecological themes. On the practical level, these novels arouse readers' attention to ecological problems with vivid narratives, guide the public to reflect on their own behavior, and inject impetus into the popularization of ecological awareness and the construction of environmental ethics. In short, the value of contemporary British and American novels in the ecological field needs to be further explored by more scholars to promote the common development of ecological literature research and realistic ecological protection.

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