

Trio of Water: An interpretation of Green Grass, Running Water from the Perspective of Material Ecocriticism

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Abstract

Canadian author Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* is a remarkable work of contemporary American literature. The novel contains the rich imagery of "water" to reveal its theme. Based on the theory of material ecocriticism, this study interprets the ecological views and social practices of the Indians and colonials embedded in the imagery of "water" in this book from three dimensions: matter's nonhuman agentic capacities, the meaning it generates and its narrative power. The study analyses the interaction between water and human beings, the reciprocity between water and plants, the unique position of water in Indian culture and discusses the ecological revelation brought to the readers. It is found that the text subverts the Western dichotomy and anthropocentric view of ecology and ecological practices, embodies the Indian culture's ecological view of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and its healthy ecological effects, warning that humans should have a deep respect for nature in order to maintain the ecosphere that must be protected for the healthy survival of the earth's inhabitants.

Keywords

Green grass; Running water; Material ecocriticism; The imagery of "water".

1. Introduction

Thomas King is a famous North American aboriginal writer in the twentieth century, with Cherokee, German, and Greek ancestry, as well as U.S. and Canadian citizenship. Because of his complex racial identity and insight into the clash of white and aboriginal cultures, Thomas King made an outstanding contribution to Canadian literature. His works not only show the rich traditional culture, including Christian, Aboriginal and white cultures, but also deeply analyze the relationship between human and nature, and sound the alarm of maintaining ecological balance.

Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* blends classic Western stories and Aboriginal creation myths with a unique narrative style and ironic humor, and provokes readers to think about history, culture, gender, and ecology. The novel juxtaposes two fictional story lines: the classic Western reality story and the ancient creation myth. The reality story linearly recounts the lives of five young Blackfoot men, Eli, Alberta, Lionel, Charlie, and Latisha, in white society and on the Indian reservation [1]. The slice-of-life episodes are interspersed with each person's recollections of their life experiences, splicing together the full classic Western storyline. The four mythological stories, on the other hand, are told in a circular narrative that repeatedly explores the origins of the world and the relationship between man and nature through the perspectives of the female Indian characters First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman, respectively. The two story lines intertwine and interpret each other at the end of the novel, indicating not only the colonizers' distortion and rewriting of Native culture, but also their ecological destruction.

Ecocriticism has gone through three major waves, and as the fourth wave, material ecocriticism combines new materialism and ecological postmodernism [2]. Two professors, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, have made outstanding contributions to the field of Material Ecocriticism [3]. In the book *Material Ecocriticism*, the two professors point out that material ecocriticism examines the interplay of diverse materials including “bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, biological entities” and humans, generating meaningful configurations and narratives [4]. Ecocriticism asserts that the world is material, and that both humans and nonhumans are materially constituted and have the capacity to enact things. Even tiny specks of dust participate in small-scale “ecological processes” to integrate into the larger environmental system and demonstrate their agency [5]. At the same time, material ecocriticism investigates the ability of matter to produce meaning and material narratives [6]. The close connection between matter and meaning reverses the dichotomy of traditional Western philosophy, in which all matter generates meaning through interaction. The narrative agency of matter is developed on the basis of the ability to give and generate meaning, which is mainly reflected in two aspects: firstly, focusing on the description and expression of non-human natural agency to give in narrative texts; secondly, the narrative agency of matter as a text that generates meaning through interaction [7].

2. Nonhuman Agentic Capacities of Water

Water is creative. It exists in various forms in the sea, rivers, ponds, lakes, rain, hills, and prairies, nourishing everything. Many such scenes are depicted in *Green Grass, Running Water*. “There were evergreens on the peninsula, dark and velvet against the lake and the mountains and white-trunked aspens and Saskatoon bushes” [1]. Evergreens, mountain poplars, bushes and other plants on the Indian reservation are nourished and fed by the lake and show a vibrant life. They intermingle to form a small ecosystem. Water as a natural element lives in harmony with other substances, transforming decay into life. At the same time, water is also the source of life for the cottonwood trees in the Indian Sun Dance ceremony. The roots of the cottonwood trees go deep into the earth, drawing minerals from surface runoff and groundwater, symbolizing that Indian nations are deeply rooted in this soil of the reservation, obtaining life-sustaining nutrients from the waters of nature.

Secondly, water is the subject that holds the kinetic energy and has the initiative. This breaks through the perception of the uniqueness of the human subject. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, water itself has life and vitality, and the water in the mythology is often able to communicate with the Indian female characters, demonstrating the ability to administer things. When Thought Woman walks to the river and wants to bathe in it, the river stops flowing and allows Thought Woman to walk into it. When she complains that the river is tricky and deceives her about the warmth of the river, the river tells her that it will be much warmer if she walks into the middle. Afterward, Thought Woman falls asleep in the river, and the water flows so fast that the rocks and trees remind her to wake up quickly. As we can see, both water and nature are subjects of action, capable of active self-regulation and cooperating with each other in a holistic way.

In addition to this, the water also possesses perception and has a temperament of its own. When the young man walking on the water yells at the raging waves and rocking boats, Old Woman, in a change from her usual human ways, sings to the waves. “Boy, says those Waves, that is one beautiful song. We feel real relaxed” [1]. “Those Waves stop rising higher and higher, and everything calms down” [1]. This reflects the fact that non-human substances are on an equal footing with human beings, rather than in a relationship of domination and domination. Humans cannot override non-human natural substances and tame them by command alone. This is consistent with the material ecocriticism. Man and nature are indistinguishable from

each other, and non-natural matter and nature are one and the same in human life and nature [7].

What is more, matter is not immutable, and its ability to act is often exercised through “interactions” between human and non-human matter [8]. If the cooperation between human beings and matter is severed and nature is controlled with arrogance, it will eventually cause ecological imbalance and bring about destruction. The stores, towns, and dams in the novel are all symbols of capitalism’s authoritarian rule over the aborigines and nature. Through unscrupulous mining, farming, and building, the whites step by step test the boundaries of the natural ecosystem. They built the “the Grand Baleen Dam” on the reservation. In order to succeed in convincing the Indians, they used the words of experts to convincingly show that one year after the dam was in full operation, the tribe would have earned two million dollars. It seems that the construction of the dam could be of great benefit to the Aboriginal people, but the truth is that the white man is the real profiteer in this benefit. On the one hand, the image of a coyote is used as a metaphor for this dam. Eli, when describing the dam to several Indian elders, points out that the government built the dam to help the Indians, but Hawkeye replies “It doesn’t look like an Indian dam” [1]. At this moment, the coyote told the truth. “Perhaps it’s a Coyote dam” [1]. In Indian culture, the coyote is a combination of good and evil. They represent the “mischief-maker” who loves to cause trouble and mischief, and are “one of the main characters of Indian creation legends” with supernatural powers [9]. The image of the mischief-maker coyote as greedy and unethical, bringing mischief for his own selfish desires fits right in with the white man’s motives. A colonizer’s prank in the face of nature is bound to bring unforeseen disaster. On the other hand, “the combination of the force of Indian resistance, the supernatural power of the coyote and the natural force of the water” caused the dam to collapse [10]. Nature is in constant motion, and under the cumulative ecological damage caused by whites, cracks develop at the base of dams. Even though stress fractures are common in dams, sinking can easily occur with the early age of the cement. The Native Eli fought hard against the construction of the dam and continued to voice ecological concerns.

In contrast, contemporary white Western culture has severed the connection or unity of materiality and agency and unilaterally emphasized the antagonism between the two, thus causing tension and deterioration in the relationship between human beings and nature. They do not realize that non-human substances have their own needs like human beings and are active agents. White people see natural substances as objects for economic gain, and control and utilize them indiscriminately, as short-sighted actors who do not care about the survival and sustainable future of human beings and other forms of life. They are indifferent to all the early warnings of environmental problems and the constant ecological imbalances that exploitation of nature may cause. In the end, the coyote induces an earthquake by dancing and singing. “In that instant the water rose out of the lake like a mountain” [1]. The dam collapsed in an instant. The flood engulfed the car, submerged the cabin, and caused Eli’s death. And this is the result of the constant change and generation of matter.

The creative, perceptive and destructive nature of water in *Green Grass, Running Water* is an important expression of the active exertion of the natural substance. Indian culture follows the laws of nature, treats human beings and water substances as closely linked perpetrators, and takes care of natural ecosystems such as lakes and rivers with a sense of responsibility. Man and nature are in a harmonious state of intertwined interaction and coexistence. While the white culture is influenced by “anthropocentrism”, which believes that human beings are the only subject to influence and change the world. They constantly develop and transform nature, excessively demanding and destroying water resources to meet their own needs, which ultimately leads to the ability of natural substances to exert their power to rebel and retaliate with devastating disasters such as floods.

3. The Meaning it Generates

Matter and meaning are intertwined and inseparable. Material ecocriticism sees matter as possessing “the potential to generate meaning and to participate in the process of symbolization” [4]. On the one hand, material kinetic energy creates meaning based on its own behavioral goals, and on the other hand, the construction, interpretation and elaboration of meaning cannot be separated from certain material symbols [3]. The material world does not exist static, but is in a process of continuous generation and dynamic development. The ongoing intrinsic interaction of humans with non-human matter not only embodies the capacity for material implementation, but also creates meanings, generates events and leaves far-reaching impacts.

The water in *Green Grass, Running Water* carries a double meaning. First, the water cycle represents the power of nature, which has a strong life force and generates the Indian concept of the “sacred circle of life”. The Indians believe that the power of all things in the world is in the form of a “circle”, including the sky and the earth, which are all in the form of a ring [11]. Therefore, mankind and nature are interlocked, and all things in nature are closely connected, interdependent and interacting with each other, constituting a dynamic and equal world. In the real-life plot of *Green Grass, Running Water*, the two story lines of the mental hospital garden and the dam on the reservation are developed side by side, and the ecological routes of both eventually form a circular trajectory. The gardens of the mental hospital, built for the European colonists, still present a lush landscape of grass and trees before the four Indians leave. But after the Indians left, the trees in the garden were infected with blight, and the elms all died, and it was not until they came back from repairing the world that the garden grew new leaves and regained its former vitality and vigor. This insinuates that the Indian nation, which originated from nature, has an unbreakable blood relationship with the forces of nature, and the return of the Indian nation brings regenerative vitality to the garden of the asylum, allowing natural creatures to coexist in harmony. Everything on the reservation also forms a complete “circle of life”. When the colonizers built dams on the reservation, Native lands were encroached upon, houses were destroyed, and the circle of life was disrupted. The imbalanced river ecology was transformed into other forces of nature through the water cycle. Jones, Alberta, Charlie, and others find their cars flooded by unknown puddles and ask “Where did all the water come from?” [1]. And Lionel, Eli, and the others are on their way to Bursum’s store when a sudden storm falls. The inexplicable overflow of water from the ground and the heavy rainfall from the sky, along with the water suppressed by the dam, create a water cycle. The puddle and the storm become a form of regeneration of the forces of nature. The floods released by the collapsing dams during earthquakes are another form of regeneration of the power of the suppressed water. The car that disappeared in the real-world plot of the novel ends up on the lake and floats towards the dam. Eventually, the dam collapses and the river’s water is reborn. In the valley, the water was tumbling just as it had for a thousand years. The construction of the dam, its collapse, and the tumbling of the river form a complete “circular” trajectory. In addition, human and non-human materials are interconnected. The flood caused by the collapse of the dam kills Eli. At the same time, Alberta becomes pregnant. Death alternates with new life, creating a cycle that culminates in the novel’s plot. King’s ingenious design of the titles of each volume of the novel is also deeply in line with the concept of the “sacred circle of life”. He named the four chapters East, South, West, and North, symbolizing that the existence of human beings and living creatures is accomplished in the form of a natural chain of “birth-growth-maturity-age-death”. These human and non-human material development trajectories all reflect the Indian “circular culture”: the world is a unified whole, everything, as well as the Indian people are in the cause and effect connection. Only by following the divine law and order and developing together with the natural environment can human beings maintain the integrity of the “sacred

circle of life". With this belief, the Indian nations have developed and passed on their knowledge of natural life from one generation to the next.

Secondly, the second meaning of water goes beyond the material, reflecting the dichotomy of identity and environmental consciousness between Aborigines and whites. The phrase "As long as the grass is green and the waters run" appear three times in the novel. The first time it appears is in the Western, where the captive white woman falls in love with the chief, who makes the vow "As long as the grass is green and the waters run" [1]. This mimics the words of the government expressing good faith when signing treaties with the Indians, a pledge of sincerity, simplicity, reverence for nature. In sharp contrast, the white man's promise was a strategic fraud dominated by economics and profit. From 1870 to 1921, the Canadian government signed 11 treaties with the Indians [12]. Behind the seemingly egalitarian treaties, there was a deception of the Indians and the oppression of the local ecosystem. The creation of the dam in 1876 cut off the river and dried up the grass and trees. The buffalo population, on which Cree depended for their survival, was drastically reduced. At this point, the oath seems so absurd and ridiculous, which alludes to the colonizer's unscrupulousness in order to achieve profits. The second time is Eli's response when Bursum persuades Eli to remove the cabin. Eli's whole life has been torn between Aboriginal and white culture. He had his heart set on becoming white and worked his way up to become a college professor, but in the end, he realized that he could not separate himself from his Native American membership and give up his feelings for the reservation. He left social life and returned to the reservation to guard the cabin left by his mother. He expresses his adherence to his identity by saying "As long as the grass is green and the waters run" [1]. Even though he knows that the dam could bring catastrophic destruction to his people, he still believes that as long as the land is still there, the roots of his race are still there. "As long as the grass is green and the waters run" appears for the third time when Gabriel is asked to sign a document with the wrong white paper. Gabriel claims that is a contract between the white man and the native people and show the sincerity of the white man, but in fact, it's a deception and colonists want to completely erase the civilization of the Indian nations and achieve domination. The three occurrences of "As long as the grass is green and the waters run" not only allude to the colonizer's hegemony and oppressive control over the aborigines, but also reflect the semantic multiplicity, the imposition of power politics, and the arduousness of the cause of ecological conservation.

The water in *Green Grass, Running Water* is not only dynamic, but also generates meaning through active participation in the interaction between substances. On the one hand, the circulation of water represents the vibrant life, which is in constant motion and coordinates all forces for creation. On the other hand, the amorphous form of water symbolizes freedom, and the diversity and balance of all things nourished by water. Human beings should respect life and freedom and coexist with each other under the laws of nature.

4. Narrative Agency of Water

Material ecocriticism emphasizes that humans and non-human nature are not only subjects described in texts. They are texts themselves, possessing narrative capabilities, that is, the ability to generate stories [2]. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, water engages in an intrinsic interaction with humans in both mythological and contemporary dual spaces, thereby generating stories.

Both Western Christian and Indian creation stories contain an element of "water". In the Genesis story of the Bible, God created all things in the world, including the sky, land and oceans, and granted humans the right to govern these non-human materials. This has led to the formation of a Western dualistic worldview, where humans and non-human materials are in opposition. White Christians used this view to dehumanize and even animalize the physically

different Indigenous peoples when they first arrived in North America [13]. They believed that indigenous peoples were the opposite of whites, the objects of domination and annihilation, and therefore the white people's invasion of the Americas was legitimate [14]. In the 1760s, Canada became a British colony. To gain more living space and profits from the fur trade, these colonizers occupied Indigenous lands and slaughtered a large number of wild animals. Nasty Bumppo in *Green Grass, Running Water* says, "Whites are particularly good killers" [1]. While stranded on the island, Changing Woman encounters the whale hunter Ahab from *Moby Dick*. Changing Woman questions the reason for whaling. Ahab's answer is that this is a Christian world, and they only kill things that are useful or things they don't like". These details reveal the Christian dualistic perspective, providing an excuse for the colonizers' indiscriminate killing of animals. In their eyes, natural beings, including water resources, are merely objects to be conquered and materials to be exchanged for money and profit. However, in the end, Ahab's ship is pierced by the great white whale, *Moby Dick*, which illustrates that being at odds with nature will ultimately lead to one's own downfall.

In Indian mythology, water is seen as the beginning of all things. In the Iroquois legend, the Sky Woman, who fell from the upper world onto the back of a turtle, used the power of animals to extract soil from the water, which later evolved into land [15]. In Crow mythology, the coyote lived in a place where at first there was only water, and he created the world with other animals [16]. Although the Indian creation myths vary, they all share a common feature: before the world and humans were created, the material of water had already existed, and the world was created by divine natural beings, not by the ruling God. Viewing "water" as the "origin of the world" reflects the distinctly different ecological values of Indians from Christians: at the beginning of the world, all things are interconnected and blended. All natural things are divine in themselves, and humans should coexist harmoniously with them. "In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water" [1]. The novel begins by subverting the Christian legend of God's creation, replacing the original chaos of the Bible with a watery world, and portraying God as a dream of the coyote. The plot where First Woman encounters classic characters from the Bible further expresses this rebellion against Christianity to the extreme. First Woman fell from the sky into the water world, where there were various animals. They created the land and built a garden. In the garden, there are no so-called rules of Christianity, and the most primitive living conditions of Indians are restored. The sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, lakes, and birds and beasts are in a harmonious and unified network of relationships. Humans coexist equally and interdependently with these natural beings. In the mythological stories of the novel, King constantly revises the narrative of Christian authority, uses personification to elaborate the agency of water and its equal interaction with human beings, and shows the ecological values of Indians opposed to Christianity.

Water also plays a key role in Indian sun dance culture. It nourishes the cottonwood trees used in the indigenous Sun Dance ceremony, narrating the traditional culture of the Native people as a witness. The Sun Dance is the oldest sacred ceremony of the North American Indians for the "renewal" of the world, held annually during the midsummer period [17]. In a traditional ceremony, dancers sing and dance around a "sacred dance pillar" poplar tree. During the dance, the dancers gaze at the sun, praying for its renewal of life and blessings for the earth. During the eight days of the ceremony, Indians also dedicate a day to praying for their families and tribes. The Sun Dance ceremony closely connects people with nature, individuals with tribes, and all things in the world, demonstrating the holistic unity of ecology. It reveals not only the Indians' reverence for nature but also becomes the cultural root of the tribal nation, with water being the lifeblood of culture. "if the river doesn't flood like it does every year, the cottonwoods will die" [1]. "And if the cottonwoods die, where are we going to get the Sun Dance tree?" [1]. The dialogue between Eli and Harry emphasizes the importance of water for the Sun Dance. Each year, the river floods, washing and depositing nutrients for the growth of the cottonwoods,

which are of great significance to the indigenous Sun Dance ceremony. Under the rule of colonialism and the threat to the indigenous culture, the Sun Dance ceremony still survives tenaciously, with water playing a key role. As long as the grass is still green and the water is still flowing, these natural substances will serve as narrators to tell the stories and cultures of the indigenous people for a long time.

5. Conclusion

The creation story that “water is the origin of the world” articulates a material ontology that stands in stark contrast to the Christian “anthropocentric” ecological values, emphasizing the narrative power of matter itself. In contemporary narratives, “water is the source of life for the aspen trees needed for the Sun Dance” reexamines the relationship between humans and nature, revealing how matter participates in the construction of Native American culture and continues the civilization of the Natives.

Interpreting *Green Grass, Running Water* from a material ecocritical perspective can reveal three aspects of water: as an agent of action, a generator of meaning, and a narrator in both mythological and contemporary dual spaces. Water has a tremendous capacity to create and destroy under the two diametrically opposed ecological views of reverence for nature and social practices of egoism. It is a symbol of life and vitality, continuously generating in cycles, following the laws of nature. The pattern of the water cycle is also the way of harmonious coexistence of man and nature. At the same time, the author also uses personification to correct the distorted history of the Natives by the colonizers and to re-narrate the Native culture. Now, as an important member of the community of life, humans should correctly understand the interdependent relationship between humans and non-human matter, comply with the laws of nature, and maintain ecological balance.

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