

Ecocritical and Eco-social Reading of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*

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Abstract: *An Enemy of the People*, though is read as one of Ibsen's plays that express freedom of speech, can be read from a new approach—ecocriticism. Ecocriticism studies the prevalent relationship between literature and environment and responses different attitudes of human beings towards nature. *An Enemy of the People* displays how human beings exploit nature for their own interest and forget their inescapable position—human beings are an inseparable part of nature, and they are not superior to and/or different from nature. Doctor Thomas Stockmann, the eco-friendly man in the play, discovers a latent threat in the baths water, which is polluted because of the commercial waste; he suggests its immediate recovery. In contrast, his brother, the Burgomaster, is unwilling to rectify the problem, because it will need a huge amount of money, and a close up of the baths will affect the town's economy. This paper will try to address such an ecologically sensitive issue in the light of ecocriticism and eco-socialism. The reading will focus on the stances that the doctor and the Burgomaster uphold in their attitude towards nature.

Keywords: Baths, ecocriticism, ecosocialism, nature, pollution, water

I. Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, on the surface, showcases a common conflict between the society and an individual who challenges the conventional society, and ultimately finds himself or herself ostracized. In other words, this play presents a man who believes in freedom of speech. Yet, a conscious re-reading opens up an avenue for different interpretations. Such a reading problematizes Dr. Thomas Stockmann's stance in favor of decontaminating the baths' water. There comes the question if he is concerned with anything other than the potential health risk of the people; does he advocate the purification simply from an anthropocentric perspective, or does an ecocentric viewpoint direct him? One can enquire of the reason of his sacrifice for the town, where he, along with his family members and friends, experiences a sort of ostracism. On the other hand, Peter Stockmann, the Burgomaster, strictly disregards Thomas' recommendation in the excuse of the town's economy. However, his take deserves further examination, because there appears the question whether the financial welfare of the town is his only apprehension. Likewise, different standpoints of the secondary characters, regarding this problem, can be addressed at length. However, ecocriticism—the prevalent relationship between nature and human beings—can facilitate one in responding these issues. Additionally, eco-socialism, an offshoot of ecocriticism, can contribute further in examining the position taken by different characters, as for the environmental pollution in *An Enemy of the People*. An attempt, hence, has been made, in this paper, to read this play in the light of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks—ecocriticism and eco-socialism.

Ecocriticism In *An Enemy of the People*

Ecocriticism, an emerging critical discipline of thinking, is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii) [1.a]. It tries to find out the way nature is connected with culture, and accordingly, to evaluate those connections. To quote Glotfelty (1996) again, “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (xix) [1.b]. Therefore, ecocriticism is an “avowedly political mode of analysis” (Garrard 3) [2.a] that examines all kinds of human attitudes towards nature and vice versa. This school of thinking does not occur in isolation, rather it is a multidisciplinary field of study, and expands its territory towards a wider perspective. Garrard (2004) argues that:

... ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. Developing the insights of earlier critical movements, ecofeminists, social ecologists and environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns. (3) [2.b]

To contextualize Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, one notices that apart from different layers of interpretation this text allows a fresh explanation of human beings' diverse attitudes towards environment—the pollution of the baths and the complex politics towards it. ‘Pollution’ is, as Garrard believes, “an ecological problem because it does not name a substance or class of substances, but rather represents an implicit normative

claim that too much of something is present in the environment, usually in the wrong place" (6) [2.c]. The contamination of the baths in the play is, then, purely an ecological issue, and, accordingly, the possibilities to evaluate different human beings' approaches towards the pollution from an ecocritical point of view remain open. There is a triad association of human beings with the ecological issue—the pollution occurs because of the industrial waste that humans throw into water, they suffer from diseases that results from the contamination, and as for purifying the water, they possess contradictory views, both in favor of and against the sanitization. An ecocritical reading of the matter focuses on the implied interaction between two of nature's elements. It helps "to define, explore, and even resolve ecological problems in this wider sense" (Garrard 6) [2.d].

In our view, Dr. Stockmann is concerned not only for the prospective health risk, but also for the deterioration of one of the elements of nature—water. He is an ecologically conscious man who knows that human beings' lives on earth are entirely dependent on nature. Nature is benevolent enough to provide humankind with all necessities of life. He believes that "nature clearly is not utterly indifferent to the accomplishments, values, and prospects of human beings" (Crosby 141) [3.a]. At the same time, he is careful enough in human beings' treatment towards nature, because they do not have overall domination on nature; they are simply a part of nature. Dr. Stockmann, in this respect, accepts:

We [human beings] must find ways to cease disrupting and destroying our natural home and to build harmonious relations with all of its creatures. We must set aside and preserve wild places for their own sakes and to remind ourselves of the abiding significance and value of that nature of which we are part. (Crosby 143) [3.b]

Dr. Stockmann's discovery of the pollution has a twofold significance. On the one hand, he finds out humankind's disruptive treatment of nature; they are destroying nature—here by emitting commercial garbage into water—for their temporary wellbeing. On the other hand, he finds that the town people are vulnerable to serious health disorder. He argues that the water is "absolutely noxious to health, whether used internally or externally" (Ibsen 1.125) [4.a]. However, if the authority pay heed to his advocacy they would be able to save nature and human lives simultaneously. From an ecocritical point of view, Stockmann's discovery, "reflects the ambivalent role of science as both a producer of environmental hazards and a critical analyst of them" (Garrard 8) [2.e], that is to say, in the play the commercial industry owners, tanneries for example, are polluting water, and creating severe risk for public health—it is a scientific mastery over nature. Likewise, Dr. Stockmann's findings and suggestions are another form of scientific progression, though not a mastery over nature. Now, the question is which one the decision makers would follow.

One notices that the authority, which includes Peter Stockmann, the doctor's brother, disavows both the two options that Dr. Stockmann offers to cease the maltreatment towards environment. Neither do they stop discharging trash from their tanneries, nor do they replace the water system of the baths. In both the cases, the logic behind their stance is purely economic. They engage themselves in a complex politics in this regard. Peter Stockmann, the Burgomaster and the chairperson of the baths committee, argues that the expenses of the modification of the baths "would probably mount up to several hundred thousand crowns" (Ibsen 2.145) [4.b], and that "we [the town people] should be left stranded. We should probably have to give up the whole costly undertaking; and so you [Dr. Stockmann] would have ruined your native town" (Ibsen 2.145) [4.c]. Peter considers only the economic interest of the town, and disregards the ecological safety. He seems to be indifferent to the consequences of the deliberate flawed operation of the baths. He, ultimately, takes a project to prove that Dr. Stockmann is a threat to the town. He finds, in this ironical mission, a number of companions who supports him finally, though, earlier, they were in favor of the doctor. Here lies a question of ethics, and this is directly related to human beings' intentional malice towards nature. Roach (2003), in this regard, thinks that "...environmental degradation is a major contemporary form of human badness and one that is even, arguably, the greatest individual and societal "sin" whose consequences now threaten humanity and the planet as a whole" (93) [5]. As for sin, human beings anthropocentric outlook is permissible in no religious view. Garrard (2004) argues that the "pre-existing ways of imagining the place of humans in nature ... may be traced back to such sources as Genesis and Revelation, the first and last books of the Bible" (2) [2.f]. Similarly, the teaching of Islam makes people accountable for any ill-treatment towards nature. Therefore, any aggression towards nature challenges human beings' ethical and religious stance, apart from the ecological consciousness. However, humankind's anthropocentric attitude towards nature, in fact, is a great flaw, because such anthropocentric stance can bring havoc towards them. In this play, the "extraordinary cases of illness among the patients—both typhoid and gastric attacks—" (Ibsen 1.124) [4.d] is, in our opinion, a slow revenge on the exploiters, because nature avenges all the maltreatments towards it. Therefore, the Burgomaster, along with his companions, takes the position of an "anti-ecological-consciousness" (Yan 167) [6], who destroys the purity of nature, and gradually draws a problem for people—severe diseases.

Dr. Stockmann, on the contrary, upholds an ecofriendly notion who suggests a permanent repair of the baths. He believes that natural degradations do not occur in isolation, rather human culture contributes a lot in

such incidents. He wants to create consciousness among the people about the pollution, and to fix the problem. The doctor, then, supports Donald Worster's argument:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding. (qtd. in Glotfelty xxi) [1.c]

In the same way, Dr. Stockmann is unable to reform the water system of the baths, yet he can contribute a lot in creating awareness through his understanding. Though at the primary level he thinks that he is successful in his project—to convince the authority in taking immediate action, gradually he realizes that he is unable to do that. Moreover, he experiences an acute enmity from the majority of the town because of sharing such an insight. He, along with his family, suffers a lot for holding an environment-friendly approach. In spite of facing such problems, he disregards the Burgomaster's offer to revive the former's position by declaring a counterfeit statement. The following dialogue clarifies the doctor's position in response to such an offer further:

DR. STOCKMANN. And I am to give myself the lie in a public declaration?

BURGOMASTER. We consider it absolutely necessary that you should issue a statement in the terms indicated.

DR. STOCKMANN. And if I don't obey?

BURGOMASTER. Then we shall ourselves put forth a statement to reassure the public.

DR. STOCKMANN. Well and good; then I'll write against you. I shall stick to my point and prove that I am right, and you wrong. And what will you do then? (Ibsen 2.152) [4.e]

He strongly resists his brother's proposal because, according to Steinhauer (1932), he possesses an "honest determination to fight for the truth, even if it brings about his financial ruin and social ostracism" (84) [7]. In our view, his fight for the truth is not everything, rather his fight is for any type of ecological justice. However, earlier the Burgomaster promises to decontaminate the polluted health resort "at some future time" (Ibsen 2.144) [4.f], which the doctor refuses, because he realizes that this guarantee is nothing but a lip service.

Matos (2008) argues that Dr. Stockmann's single-minded aim to replace the baths' water system is a hubris, and also a "culturally significant, recently refreshed, boundless and seemingly unshakeable confidence" (360) [8]. Additionally, Yde (2015) thinks that "Stockmann is intoxicated by the sense of his own power, has no fear, and is insanely driven" (167) [9]. To our opinion, the doctor definitely has a self-worth, because he believes that "a man of science must live in some style" (Ibsen 1.113) [4.g]; this is not, in a sense, a tragic flaw that the traditional tragic heroes possess. Rather, it is a sense of morality and/or responsibility towards human beings and, therefore nature.

An Eco-social Approach Towards *An Enemy of the People*

Another appropriate tool to address the ecological issues presented in *An Enemy of the People* is eco-socialism. It is a critical school of thinking which claims that the recent ecological calamities have their roots in human societal tribulations. The believers of eco-socialism think that one of the consequences of capitalist system is ecological degradation. This environmental problem often creates serious havoc, i.e. physical disorder, for any livings. All types of supremacy over nature—with the help of modern techniques—are a matter of concern for the eco-socialists. Han (2010), in this respect, mentions Grundmann who thinks that:

Among the many ideas which have shaped the debate about ecological problem in recent years, the issues connected to the notion of 'mastery over nature' or 'domination of nature' have been of great importance. A unifying element among ecologists is the belief that the Promethean project of mankind and modern attitude towards nature are the ultimate causes of ecological problems. From this assumption, they [eco-socialists] proceed to a rejection of the modern attitude towards nature and tend to embrace an eco-centric outlook. In their [eco-socialists'] view mankind's attempts to master nature have resulted above all in a destruction of the natural environment. (qtd. in Han 18) [10.a]

One notices that, in the play, the majority of the town work with a capitalistic project. They want to garner the highest possible profit from the baths without taking the least care for the water—a component of nature. They do not pay any heed to Dr. Stockmann's intense pleadings to purify the baths' water; "all the water-pipes will have to be re-laid" (Ibsen 1.126) [4.h], because "[t]he intake is too low down" (1.126) [4.i], and there is the "presence of putrifying organic matter in the water—millions of infusoria" (1.125) [4.j]. On the contrary, the townspeople, lead by Peter Stockmann, uses the baths as "a little gold-mine for the town" (2.138) [4.k]. In addition, they do not see that "there is really any such imminent danger" (2.146) [4.l] as the doctor suggests. Therefore, they are controlling nature for their own betterment, by leaving nature at risk; they are inviting their own danger also.

Han (2010) further analyses Marx's perception of 'mastery over nature'. He distinguishes the notion in two contradictory concepts: "absolute domination" (18) [10.b] and "mastery with responsibility" (19) [10.c]. As for the first one, he asserts,

It is an arbitrary attitude of humanity towards nature that humans define their roles like the autocratic monarch to domineer over nature, attempt to dominate nature and make nature subordinate to themselves. . . . Whatever they do towards nature and no matter how they exploit nature is not subject to moral constraints. (18) [10.d]

He thinks, for the second notion, that it shows the full respect for natural laws. . . . To be more obviously, human beings are just the administrator rather than the dominator of the earth. As the administrator, we have to take on the corresponding responsibility of management, including the managed objects' welfare. (19) [10.e]

Han again attempts to clarify Marx's probable aim behind propounding the concept of 'mastery over nature'. To him Marx's aim "is to meet the needs of all people under the precondition of maintaining the ecosystem in balance rather than to satisfy the 'money-making' purpose of small group ruling class" (22) [10.f]. According to Han's theorization of Marx's concept of 'mastery over nature', Dr. Stockmann is the upholder of the second categorization—"mastery with responsibility" (19) [10.g]. Outwardly, the focus of his concern is on the health risk of the townspeople, he is concerned also for the deserved respect and welfare of nature. He dreams of "an ecological vision in opposition to the prevailing and destructive industrial organization of society" (Graham 72) [11]. However, this vision would not see light because of the stern opposition that the townspeople show. In contrast, the Burgomaster, along with his comrades, follows the first classification—"absolute domination" (Han 18) [10.h]. They exploit nature, and additionally, do not consider themselves responsible for such a degradation of nature. They, literally, turns the environmental pollution "into a fresh source of profit" (Kovel 176) [12]. The town earns a lot of money from the polluted baths. Any type of shut down of the baths will cause a great financial loss, and during the close up the neighboring towns may establish such a health resort, because the baths have already earned much popularity. According to the Burgomaster, those towns would "at once set to work to divert the full stream of visitors to themselves" (Ibsen 2.145) [4.m], and therefore, this town's health resort will not shine in future, and the town's economy will face an acute hazard. However, the attitude of the Burgomaster's group towards nature, in a sense, is anti-ecological. Yet, their stances show that they fit into the eco-social criticism, as David Pepper (2003) summarizes it:

Eco-socialism is anthropocentric (though not in the capitalist-technocentric sense) and humanist. It rejects the bioethic and nature mystification, and any anti-humanism that these may spawn, though it does attach importance to human spirituality and the need for this to be satisfied partly by non-material interaction with the rest of nature. (232) [13]

Hooti and Davoodi (2011) assert that *An Enemy of the People* "is like a battle between the two concepts" (202) [14.a]—"responsibility" and 'manipulation', and classify the doctor and the Burgomaster as the upholders of those respectively, we think that this text says beyond this traditional interpretation. The Burgomaster, a representative of the ruling class, manipulates the common people, and draws them in favor of him, yet he lacks all the ecocentric notions. Definitely, he is a craftsman in manipulating people, as Hooti and Davoodi argue that "the ability to manipulate the truth is vivid in the Mayor's character" (202) [14.b]. He successfully transforms the ideologies of the people, i.e. Hovstad, the editor of the "People's Messenger", and Aslaksen, a printer, who were, earlier, in favor of Dr. Stockmann—to be precise, in favor of reality. They supported the doctor because the latter was able to arouse a sense of morality and an ecocentric consciousness in their minds. However, their position changes only when the Burgomaster brings the issue of the town's economy into fore. It proves that they are concerned only with economy, and therefore, treat nature as a commodity.

II. Conclusion

In conclusion, we think that in *An Enemy of the People*, the two contradictory characters—Dr. Stockmann and Peter Stockmann—posit themselves into two pole of an ecological conscious. A critical study of their attitudes towards nature helps one to "see how theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute not only to consciousness raising but also look into the politics of development and the construction of 'nature'" (Nayar 241) [15]. Dr. Stockmann, by suggesting the healing of the pollution, in a sense, tries to protect the environment, yet he remains unsuccessful before Peter's politicized and strict position in favour of law. One can see Peter as an anti-ecological agent, even though he does not spoil nature directly; the doctor remains an ecofriendly person who sacrifices a lot for showing sympathy towards nature—even though by planning a quick solution of the contaminated water. This play of Ibsen, additionally, leaves a scope to associate its ecological problem with the contemporary ecological problems.

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