

An Eco-Critical Study of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* and *Random Harvest*

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Abstract—Eco-criticism is an environmentally focused literary study that seeks to uncover the root causes of environmental problems. It emerged as a revolt against human being's anthropocentric attitude of destruction, and suppression toward nature. James Hilton is one of the novelists whose writings unravel one of the vilest acts of human being. The devastating effects of warfare on humankind and environment are a key theme in his works. Hilton, in *Lost Horizon* and *Random Harvest*, depicts a world where war and armed conflicts have wreaked havoc on civilization and the ecosystem. Hilton expresses his concern about the destructive ways that humans treat the planet and emphasizes that destroying the environment will lead to the extinction of humanity. Through the critical lenses of eco-criticism, this study sought to examine the disastrous effects of warfare and armed conflict on humans and nature in the aforementioned novel.

Keywords— Eco-criticism, Environmental degradation, James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* and *Random Harvest*, Man's ego.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature and nature share a close relationship. Nature has always been a source of inspiration for poets and authors. Its beauty has enthralled not only authors, but all of humanity. In ancient times, humans relied significantly on nature to meet the majority of their needs. However, over the last decades, human attitudes have shifted from a biocentric to an anthropocentric perspective. As a result of the environmental degradations and Mother Earth's disintegration, a literary criticism known as eco-criticism was born. Eco-criticism is a protest against man's ego and his destructive and suppressive attitudes towards nature. Essentially, the goal of this literary theory is to discover the root causes of environmental problems (Phillips, 1999).

Eco-critics utilize literature to highlight global ecological challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, deforestation, air pollution, water contamination, and abuse of natural resources. It is concerned with the representation and analysis of environmental concerns, cultural issues relating to the environment, and attitudes toward nature. It investigates how people act and respond in their cultures to the environment and ecological challenges. In recent years, this form of critique

has received a lot of attention due to the growing social emphasis on environmental deterioration and technological innovations. One of the key goals of ecocriticism is to study how people in different cultures act and think about the environmental and ecological problems (Al Fawareh et al., 2023).

Lost Horizon and *Random Harvest* by James Hilton depict how humans have put the world at risk. Hilton's works portray humankind as a threat not only to themselves, but to the entire universe. The catastrophic consequences of warfare on both the environment and humanity are a central theme in the novels. Thus, reading and analyzing these two novels from an eco-critical perspective reveals the horrifying implications of warfare on both the natural world and humans.

The novels can be regarded as conveying the notion that human acts that have a negative influence on nature are not only hurtful to humans but also have a direct impact on the natural environment. In other words, nature and humans are inextricably linked, as Edward Wilson claims: "The relationship between human beings and the natural world is an innate relationship." (Wilson, 2009, p. 5). As a result, the novels imply that the negative repercussions of human actions on nature represent a dual threat, because they not only affect nature but also have a direct impact on humans, and likewise, any damage to humanity is thus a threat to the natural environment.

Typically, *Lost Horizon* and *Random Harvest* share some common themes. War plays a central role in both novels. However, the author incarnates the consequences of war differently. *Lost Horizon* was published in 1933. The story takes place in a war-torn city in China called Baskul. There are four westerners who try to escape the city due to the war and the political unrest in the country. Hilton mainly focuses on these four westerners; Hugh Conway, Charles Mallinson, D. Bernard, and Miss Roberta Berinklow. The novelist illustrates the terrible impact of war on society, individuals and environment. He depicts how violent actions, such as war, devastate the environment, displace people, and damage agriculture.

On the other hand, *Random Harvest* was published in 1941, however, it narrates the aftermath of World War I. The story revolves around an Englishman named Charles Rainier, who suffers from the aftereffects of war after being shelled in the Great War. Throughout the novel, the novelist changes his

focus from the aftermath of war on his characters to the natural environment. Thus, this can be interpreted as conveying the message that humans and nature are inextricably linked. Furthermore, the author draws the reader's attention to England's downfall and the failure of civilization as a result of armed conflicts.

The characters in both novels are war victims. Hugh Conway, the protagonist of *Lost Horizon*, is a war victim. He is an Englishman who has lived through numerous conflicts. Conway had previously been one of the greatest students at Oxford, but after the wars, he was a completely different person. Similarly, in *Random Harvest*, the protagonist, Charles Rainier, is a casualty of the conflicts. Individually, both characters, Hough Conway and Charles Rainier, have amnesia. They have memory loss as a result of the battles. In *Lost Horizon*, Conway and his companions evacuate Baskul due to the war. They are kidnapped and taken to the calm Shangri-La. In the same manner, Charles Rainier is a displaced character in *Random Harvest*. He had served in World War I, and after the war, he leaves London for the countryside, where he regains his memory and begins a new life.

Overall, in both novels the protagonists are war victims. In order to recover, they are taken to a place where there is no war or strife. Furthermore, the author deftly intertwines human life and the natural environment. As a result, Hilton creates another world in which the protagonists can live a happy and peaceful life. This could be interpreted as the author's condemnation of the nations' warfare policy, which produces environmental devastation and results in the annihilation of human kind.

II. WAR AND VIOLENCE: NATURE VS. CULTURE

Numerous acts of violence have occurred over the course of human history. War has a long-lasting history as one of the most aggressive behaviors. War and other violent acts have existed since the beginning of humankind, as shown by a review of human history. Human lives and the ecosystem are under jeopardy due to these violent acts by humankind. Nowadays, in addition to human suffering, warfare's trenches have caused environmental devastation.

The story of Adam and Eve's children, Cain and Abel (known as Habil and Qabil in other versions), is viewed as the origin story for human violence in many religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Cain, according to the story, becomes envious of Abel and murders him, committing the first act of murder (Hakim, 2020, Leaman, 2006).

The topic of warfare and violence can be studied from a variety of perspectives, but one intriguing angle is to consider the relationship between "nature" and "culture". David D. Gil (1989) and Björkqvist (1997) argue that war and violence are natural human tendencies and are biologically determined. This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of competition, violence, and territoriality in determining human behavior. According to this viewpoint, warfare and violence are not so much the result of specific cultural or societal elements as they are of underlying biological urges that are impossible to eradicate altogether.

Many people, on the other hand, argue that war and violence are mainly cultural phenomena influenced by factors related to society, politics, and the economy. This vantage point emphasizes the influence of ideologies, social norms, political institutions, and economic systems in promoting or discouraging violent behavior. According to this viewpoint, war and violence are preventable or at least reducible if the underlying cultural or societal forces that cause them can be changed (Nordstrom, 1997).

According to James Hilton's novels, there is something that urges nations or human beings to wage wars against one another. Hilton calls it 'the will to destroy,' as he argues "The nations strengthening not in wisdom, but in vulgar passions and the will to destroy" (1933, p. 191). This reference highlights that war and other violent acts are the consequence of what Hilton calls lack of wisdom and the will to destroy. Basically, Hilton expresses his critique against the nations' strategy. The lack of wisdom results in the will to destroy as Daniel Hillel (1991) argues that through wisdom and knowledge, we can protect our world.

The historical background of *Lost Horizon* elucidates that at the time Hilton wrote the novel the world was on the brink of destruction due to the First World War, which resulted in environmental devastation. Similarly, In *Random Harvest*, James Hilton reveals that human beings tend to destroy for no obvious reasons, as he states "Wishing to destroy for the sake of destroying" (1941, p. 192). Hilton unveils the dark side of human beings. The obnoxious wish of human beings to destroy brings about the question of man's ego or greediness. Furthermore, the author wonders how humankind's ego causes the annihilation of themselves and their natural surroundings. Overall, Hilton condemns this human tendency since it leads to the extinction of human beings and the devastation of the natural environment.

III. CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE EAST

Lost Horizon tells the story of four westerners in an eastern country, China. Three of them are British, and one is an American, as the war breaks out, they try to escape the country. They are taken to a place far away from civilization. Throughout the book, the author highlights the conflict between the west and the east. In some ways, the book could be regarded as a critique of the ideology and policy of the western countries. A firm archetype would be "Vulgarity in the Western ideal" (1933, p. 50). Basically, Hilton censures the western countries that have destroyed the world. During that period, the western countries had occupied the majority of the east. Therefore, the novelist creates an idyllic world called Shangri-La for Conway and his other three western companions, a world which is free from war and destruction. Shangri-La is the tranquil world for the people; there is no war, and its people live in harmony. In addition to this, people are grateful for the beautiful nature around them. Despite the fact that Shangri-La is an idyllic setting, one of the major characters rejects such a way of life.

Hilton presents the conflict between the east and the west through one of the central characters; Mallinson, an Englishman. Mallinson rejects the beautiful and tranquil life of the utopia of Shangri-La for being far away from civilization

“We shall pay for anything we have, and we should like to hire some of your men to help us on our journey back. We want to return to civilization as soon as possible” (1933, p. 70). In this reference, Mallinson represents the western society. He rejects the peaceful life of the lamasery for being away from western civilization. Moreover, one of the rulers of Shangri-La; Chang, tells the westerners what they would gain in the peaceful and harmonious world of Shangri-La. He informs them what they have lost due to the wars and what they would gain if they lived in a world free of wars and other violence actions:

You will achieve calmness and profundity, richness and wisdom and the clear enchantment of memory. And, most precious of all, you will have Time---that rare and lovely gift that your Western countries have lost the more they have pursued it. Think for a moment. You will have time to read [...] You have also a taste for music here. (1933, p. 188)

This reference highlights the conflict between Chang, an eastern ruler of Shangri-La, and a group of kidnapped westerners. Chang tells them they will gain what they have lost. Because as mentioned earlier, the novelist claimed that the western countries have lost wisdom. According to Hilton, lack of wisdom urges the west to destroy the world. The quote brings about the conflict between the west and the east. Overall, Hilton voices his concerns over the destruction brought by the western countries due to the cataclysm of the First World War.

Furthermore, by exploring the conflict between the eastern and the western ideologies, the Hilton accentuates the philosophy of life. For instance, Mallinson rejects the peaceful and tranquil life of Shangri-La. Meanwhile, his other companions enjoy the lifestyle of Shangri-La. Hilton states that there is lack of wisdom and knowledge among western nations; however, in Shangri-La people are enriched with knowledge and wisdom. This conflict brings to light the philosophy of how people live. Hilton argues that due to lack of knowledge and wisdom, the westerners do not live happily and cannot enjoy the tranquil life of Shangri-La. On the contrary, he portrays that the people of Shangri-La are enriched with knowledge and wisdom, as he states “The world’s best literature was there” (1933, p. 118). This argument brings to light the theory of Plato or Platonism, Plato believes that “Evil is due to lack of knowledge” (1981, p. 3). According to Platonism, to live a good life, you must get some knowledge. As a result, James Hilton personifies the residents of Shangri-La, who have wisdom and understanding and thus enjoy a wonderful and happy life. Furthermore, they preserve rather than destroy the natural world.

In *Random Harvest*, the conflict between eastern and western philosophies has dissipated. However, the novel is preceded by an epigraph from German Official Report; it claims “According to a British Official Report, bombs fell at Random” (1941, p. 1). This preface could be interpreted as the author’s critique against the First World War. It highlights the ego of politicians because they never admit their faults; according to them war takes place at Random. Thus, Hilton voices his concern against the politicians, the nations and their will to destroy. He epitomizes how the world is ruined and crumbled. Hilton’s *Random Harvest* also raises the question of whether war can be avoided: “And war coming to all of them. Do you think there’s still a chance of avoiding it? There’s always a chance of postponing it” (1941, p. 220). This quote is also the epitome of

‘the will to destroy’ by nations and politicians. Throughout the novel, it becomes obvious that no one could avoid war. It finally happened and it brought numerous horrific consequences to the world and nature. In *Random Harvest*, Hilton also mentions reading, knowledge and wisdom:

My father was not a great reader, but he had a curious knack of reading the right things. One day he read that some pine forests in Hampshire were supposed to be healthy to live amongst so he promptly bought several hundred acres of them. (1941, p. 35).

IV. WAR AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

The impacts of war and armed conflicts are devastation; they result in several catastrophes. War does not only cause the elimination of humanity but the biosphere, the ecosystem, and the natural world. The environment has always been one of the ignored casualties of war and armed conflicts. Eco-criticism as a newly-formed theory aims to bring all the environmental problems to the forefront of the study. It is a voice for the voiceless and the ignored ecological problems. War as one of the most destructive acts leaves nothing undamaged. It destroys every valuable thing. James Hilton’s novels portray the long-lasting effects of war and armed conflicts on the land, nature and environment. By exploring the story of the wars, Hilton voices his concerns over the devastating consequences of war.

In *Lost Horizon*, warfare causes starvation and famine due to the destruction of land and the collapse of agriculture as stated; “After all, we have no food, and, as you can see for yourselves, the country isn’t the kind it would be easy to live on. In a few hours we shall all be famished” (Hilton, 1933, p. 65). This statement brings about the ever-lasting consequences of war on one of the most important sectors. Agriculture has always been a vital source of livelihood for humans. However, in wartime, agriculture collapses, as the farmers leave their lands. Furthermore, Agriculture is a peaceful occupation but during wars this process fails. Even when the war ends its impacts would still remain; for instance, there could be landmines and other explosive substances. Thus, all these reasons hinder agriculture and finally jeopardize the life of human being. James Hilton acutely intertwines the agricultural costs of war with the presence of human being. The above quote serves as a cautionary message to the human beings; it denotes that any damage to the natural world and environment results in the fear or the annihilation of humanity. Regarding the impact of war on agriculture, Raphael L. Djabatey (1992) claims that one of the disastrous costs of war and armed conflicts is the collapse of farming and agriculture. He also argues that any threat to agriculture will put humanity at stake because agriculture is one of the essential sources of livelihood for many countries.

On the other hand, although *Random Harvest* was written after the end of the First World War but its concentration remains on the consequences of war. Due to the war, the economy was in recession, and most of the agricultural land was destroyed. The novel mentions the arrival of the German war machines and claims; “The Germans had crossed the Polish frontiers at many places; the war machine was already clanking into gear” (1941, p. 223). This quote unearths another havoc

impact of war on nature, land and environment. In other words, the author brings to light the impacts of military activities on the biosphere and ecosystem. War machines and other military operations cause several environmental problems. In this regard, Merrill Singer argues that “The war machine causes extensive damage to environments and creating danger zones” (2010, p. 18). War machines and military operations cause many other ecological crises including the global warming, air pollution, water contamination and many other problems. John Lawrence in an article takes the US military as an example to elucidate how military operations contribute to the global warming:

The US military consumes huge amounts of oil so that it may preserve strategic access to oil in order to get the oil it needs to preserve strategic access to oil and so on in a never ending loop. Insatiable militarism is the single greatest institutional contributor to the growing natural disasters intensified by global climate change (2014, p. 1).

The US military and the other superpowers’ militaries consume so much energy. Thus, every military operation contributes to the global warming. Military operations cause gas emissions due to the huge amount of oil they need. They also cause the air pollution and many other ecological problems. In *Random Harvest*, Hilton also mentions the use of bombs during war “German air raider had dropped a solitary bomb in a meadow” (1941, p. 149). This quotation is another archetype of the environmental degradation in wartime. It proves that besides human beings, nature is another victim of war.

Furthermore, the Hilton acutely interweaves the story of war with different aspects of life. On an individual level, he presents it on; Charles Rainier, the central character. Before the war, Rainier was a politician and a businessman. However, after the war, he lost all his fortune, and he suffered from amnesia. It took him several years to recover from a loss of memory and regain his fortune again. And on a larger scale, he mentions “Collapse of England” (Hilton, 1941, p. 20). England was heavily affected by the war. There were an economic recession and many environmental damages. Furthermore, Hilton describes all of these issues as “The failure of civilization” (1941, p. 20). He is well aware of the havoc impacts of war; therefore, he intertwines it with different aspects and stories.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, James Hilton in *Lost Horizon* and *Random Harvest* explores the devastating impacts of war and armed conflicts on mankind and the natural world. War has jeopardized the humanity and the ecosystem. Hilton acutely intertwines the aftermath of the war with the life of mankind and the natural habitat. Firstly, he epitomizes the impacts of war on mankind, because he considers human as the source of the troubles. Throughout the novels, the author elucidates that due to lack of knowledge and wisdom nations tend to destroy the natural world. In addition, he claims that man’s ego is another factor for the destruction. According to *Lost Horizon* and *Random*

Harvest, war is the outcome of lack of wisdom and man’s ego. Furthermore, the author also questions the anthropocentric attitude of human beings toward nature. By exploring the impacts of war on his central characters, the author censures this trait of human beings. He portrays that mankind sees himself superior to every other organism. Secondly, he demonstrates the horrific consequences of warfare on the environment and ecosystem. In the novels, warfare has caused havoc; the agriculture is collapsed and the environment is destructed. Due to the collapse of agriculture, people suffer from starvation and famine. Moreover, the novelist unveils the ecological disaster of the military operations. it causes global warming, air pollution and so forth. Ultimately, *Lost Horizon* and *Random Harvest* not only highlight the need for preserving natural resources but also bring to light the consequences of neglecting the environment. Hilton’s novels encourage readers to reassess their relationship with environment and to live a more sustainable lifestyle. They remind us that the survival of humanity is dependent on the well-being of the entire planet, and it is our duty to protect it.

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