

## **The Role of Environment in Captain Marryat's Novels and Victorian Culture**

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**Abstract:** The environment is one of the salient issues that continues to challenge the political and cultural aspects of the society. The question that interrogates this paper is whether environmentalism is a modern phenomenon or has existed from the past? The paper also exposes the importance of the environment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its relation to politics. By focusing on two novels by Captain Frederick Marryat, a conservative and right-wing writer, the paper shows the approach to environmentalism defended by Tory governments in the Victorian period. Addressing also the topic of youth education through narrative fiction, the example of Captain Marratt's *The Children of the New Forest* (1847) and *Masterman Ready* (1841) offers insights into the relationship between education, sustainability and collective memory. **Keywords:** Conservatism, Children's fiction, Environmentalism, Monarchism, Nature, Politics, Victorian culture.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The matter of environmentalism has hitherto challenged politics, cultural issues and literary criticism. The term, environmentalism, is used omnipresently and has entered ethical discussions. The real question, however, is that whether the definition and its application to literature is a modern phenomenon or it has prevailed since the past. There can certainly remain no doubt that caring for humans' green environment, the landscape and the sceneries is a part of human nature.

However, if something is stated based on speculation, it cannot be accounted more than an unproven hypothesis. For every matter that is stated, there should be evidence. The question is how we can prove that people in the past also cared for their surroundings? The answer as so often is to offer a close reading to texts. After focusing minutely on

Victorian literature, Charlotte O'Neill reminds us that the notion of environmentalism is not a new phenomenon. In her "Victorian sustainability in literature and culture", she states, "although Victorians did not use the word 'sustainable' in an environmentalist sense, we can see the term's contemporary connotations 'lurking around the edges' of Victorian thought" (2018:1).

Environmentalism and its definition seems to have always favoured the left-wing politicians. The right-wing flank of politics has always been accused of negligence towards the environmentalist issue. Jennifer Fuller in her "Seeking Wild Eyre: Victorian Attitudes towards Landscape and the Environment in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*" reflects on some of those accusations towards the traditional and conservative Victorian Britain by saying,

At first glance, the idea of the Victorians as environmentally considerate seems farfetched. After all, this was the age of railroads, mills, coal mining, the exponential growth of industries and cities, and territorial expansion abroad. (2013:15)

She explains that such a notion appears because of the huge industrialisation that commenced before the Victorian era. Further to this statement, she explains that such an accusation is erroneous and that in *Jane Eyre*, there "provides a glimpse into the views that rural Victorians, seemingly disassociated from the sweeping changes taking place in cities or in colonies abroad, held towards the landscapes that influenced their lives on a daily basis" (2015: 152).

In today's thinking, the right-wing politicians are normally accused of neglecting the environmental issues. In "For You Pollution.' The Victorian Novel and Human Ecology. Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*", John Parham opposes this stereotype by saying,

We find Egremont, prior to first meeting Gerard and his daughter Sibyl, enjoying a 'perfection of solitude [ ... ] which rendered him far from indisposed for this loneliness' (88). Gradually, though, Egremont, 'his sympathies [ ... ] more lively and more extended' ( 170 ), understands that these turbulent social and environmental crises require action, and he resolves to work towards this in his capacity as a Conservative Party MP (2015:30).

Parham exemplifies Disraeli, who was a Tory Prime Minister, as an epitome of the Conservatives' concentration on environmental issues. Disraeli's novels are replete with his passion for a traditional Conservatism.

Captain Frederick Marryat was also a Conservative writer. According to his daughter and biographer Florence Marryat, he was the son of a famous politician, Joseph Marryat who was a Member of Parliament for the borough of Sandwich (1872: 13). He stood as a Conservative Candidate for Parliament but lost to the Whig candidate in Tower Hamlets (1872: 62). It was in 20 December 1834 that the *Spectator* newspaper reported that, "Captain Marryat, Alderman Pine, and a Mr. Crossland, from Bethnal Green, are mentioned as candidates: they had better all stay at home" (1834: 6).

As Marryat was a writer who also contributed to children's literature, his novels can be related to teaching environmentalism to the children of the future generations. Kathy O'Brien in "Increasing Environmental Awareness through Children's Literature", says, "Children's literature can be used to teach environmental education" (1987:14). Thus, Marryat as a children fiction writer can be implemented in literary curriculum to spread the cause.

Another important matter in Marryat's works is the voice of the young generation in the novel. Marryat uses the term 'children' in one of his novels to refer to the impact that the nature can have on the young generation. It shows that young voices can have a meaningful role in the discussion of environmentalism and that this study can be connected to current young voices like Greta Thunberg.

#### *THE CHILDREN OF THE NEW FOREST:* IMPLEMENTING NATURE FOR SPREADING MONARCHICAL PASSIONS THROUGH CHILDREN

*The Children of the New Forest* is known as Marryat's masterpiece. The narrative of the novel is about a family who are loyal to King Charles I of England. Marryat calls the Beverleys as Cavaliers to offer a historical tinge to the novel. Thus, he commences the novel by sympathising with the King. He starts the novel by saying,

The circumstances which I am about to relate to my juvenile readers took place in the year 1647. By referring to the history of England, of that date, they will find that King

Charles the First, against whom the Commons of England had rebelled, after a civil war of nearly five years, had been defeated, and was confined as a prisoner at Hampton Court. (1847:1)

The beginning of the novel can obviously affirm that Marryat's work is to support the monarchical cause.

In the novel, Mr Beverley is slayed by the Parliamentary troops (Roundheads) and a few months afterwards, Mrs Beverley dies out of grief. (1847: 2) Marryat refers to the sufferings of the family by saying,

The news of his death had such an effect upon Mrs. Beverley, already worn with anxiety on her husband's account, that a few months afterward she followed him to an early tomb, leaving the four children under the charge of an elderly relative. (1847: 2)

One of the salient points in this novel is Marryat's use of nature for the change in the political sphere of Britain. The title of the novel is of a meaningful nature. It would arise a question of why there should be a new forest in the natural environment of Lymington. The answer is that Marryat illustrates the natural environment as an observer of the political changes. In his *A Study of Captain Frederick Marryat and His Contribution to the English Nautical Novel*, John Glen McKeller observes,

The juvenile stories include Masterman Ready (1841-42), The Settlers in Canada (1844), The Mission, or Scenes in Africa (1846), The Children of the Mew Forest (1847), and The Little Savage (1848-49). They are all written on essentially the same plan in which the characters struggle against nature, and all are filled with practical counsel for young people. (1968: 108)

Marryat also focuses on an elderly forester who is named Jacob Armitage. When Oliver Cromwell takes charge of the government, Armitage is still responsible for the forest. Afterwards, they perceive that a new intendant of the forest, Mr Heatherstone, has been appointed by the Roundheads and they will have to deal with him for the matters of the newly managed forest. The important part of the story is where Edward Beverley, who supports the King's cause, begins to love Patience Heatherstone who is the new intendant's daughter. That is the point where Marryat reaches the climax of his novel. When Major Radcliffe is injured in the Civil War and dies before the eyes of Edward, Heatherstone laments

his death and wonders how political differences can cause two friends to diverge. When Edward challenges Heatherstone and questions him over why he has joined the House of Commons' forces, Heatherstone replies,

You are too young a man to have known the cause of the insurrection, or, rather, opposition, to the unfortunate King Charles. He attempted to make himself absolute, and to wrest the liberties from the people of England: that his warmest adherents will admit. When I joined the party which opposed him, I little thought that matters would have been carried so far as they have been. (1847: 146)

Heatherstone laments his party's decision of beheading the King but also blames the King for his absolutism. That is the point where both Edward and Heatherstone apprehend that both Cavaliers and Roundheads can be blamed. Although Marryat supports the monarchy in this novel, his blaming of Charles I for his absolutism can be a clear sign that he supported the constitutional monarchy.

After Charles II's (Charles I's son and heir to the throne) ascension to the throne and restoration of the monarchy, Edward and Patience Heatherstone's marriage is celebrated with a fete and the presence of Charles II. Marryat, once again triumphs over a constitutional monarchy when the new King says, "Could loyalty be better rewarded?" (1847: 254). Afterwards, their celebration is succeeded by their return and repairing of nature.

Marryat concludes the story by repairing to the nature as the nature proffers peace to the nation when there is a constitutional monarchy. That is where the nature becomes politicised. It is more enjoyable when Marryat's favoured political system is incumbent. In his essay "Victorian ecocriticism: the politics of place and early environmental justice", Peter Adkins states

the term 'place' should be understood as meaning the 'schema' through which humans 'make sense of the space' around them, whether that be mountains, the ocean or urban slums. By extension, the 'politics of place' is the 'web of interrelations' that emerges from those sense making activities. (2017: 1)

As Adkins observes, in an eco-critical criticism, the politicisation of nature and its understanding can lead to apprehend more precisely how the environment is portrayed in literature.

There is also a question about the title. As it is observed the novel starts with the word 'children'. We can see that Marryat uses the title to imply that the relationship between nature and children is undeniable. According to Alan Reid in "Increasing Environmental Awareness through Children's Literature", while discussing children's instruction, he says, "should be capable of opening up ways to changing the field's thinking and capacities and their dimensions, including their regularities of actions" (2010: 443). That is why Marryat uses the title to refer to the role of the environment on children's literature. Children are responsible for the environment as the environment also changes their course of actions.

#### MASTERMAN READY: NATURE IS A MORAL INSTRUCTOR

*Masterman Ready, Or the Wreck of the Pacific* is another work of Marryat's where he portrays the role of children as a salient point of spreading his moral opinions. Before starting to analyse the text, it is of a telling significance to understand why Marryat intended to write this novel. According to Peter Hunt in his "Why Captain Marryat would have disapproved of *Treasure Island*", Marryat disapproved of John Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* when his children urged him to read that work of the Swiss novelist which belonged to the children genre. While disapproving of Wyss's work, Marryat said,

It is true that it is a child's book; but I consider, for that very reason, it is necessary that the author should be particular in what may appear to be trifles, but which really are not, when it is remembered how strong the impressions are upon the juvenile mind. Fiction, when written for young children should, at all events, be based on truth. (2011:2).

According to Hunt Marryat merely referred to the natural scenes that had appeared in Wyss's novels. Afterwards, Hunt concluded that Marryat never tempered the truth when it came to the matter of environment in a literary work and for the same reason that he had disapproved of Wyss's work, he would certainly not have approved of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Treasure Island* (Hunt 4).

Thus, Marryat decided to write his novel to show his children and the literati in London that the environments of the Atlantic Ocean is different

from Wyss's work. The novel starts when the Seagrave family are shipwrecked while they were on their way back to Britain. While there were the prospects of being shipwrecked, Marryat introduces a captain who is named Masterman Ready who believes in God and morality. Marryat pinpoints the importance of morality by observing,

But she was a fine vessel and the Captain was a good seaman, who did what he considered best for the safety of his vessel, and then put his trust in the Providence who is ever watchful over us. (1841:5)

It is obvious from this quotation that Marryat intended to write a moral novel by relating a story from a family who are shipwrecked.

As time elapses, they decide to depart their wrecked ship and construct their settlement on the island. The important point in the process of their settlement is that they learn that they should respect and preserve the environment surrounding them. When William, who is one of Mr Seagrave's sons, asks him about a snake, he says,

You observe, William, that the Almighty, in his wisdom, has arranged it that no animal (especially of a noxious kind) shall be multiplied to excess, be kept under by being preyed upon by some other. (1841: 12)

The explanations from Mr Seagrave explicates that according to Marryat, man need not interfere in the matters of nature and that nature itself can deal with its matters. According to Marryat, nature is the best judge in deciding the number of creatures and that man should respect it.

There are some other points in the novel where Marryat endeavours to warn man to not interfere in the matters of the animals. In *Masterman Ready*, when Tommy who is the other boy of the Seagraves, throws a stone at a lion's den, the lion comes back and roars at the child. Marryat states that,

Mr. Seagrave scolded Tommy well for his foolish conduct, and by degrees he became more composed; but he did not recover himself until they had walked some distance away from the lion's den. (1841:13)

Once again Marryat defended the rights of animals against the cruelty and intervention of man and warned his readers not to harm the animals by unnecessary disturbances.

As Marryat advanced through the novel, he suggested that humans should be careful of using the proper words when describing the flora and fauna of the nature. This was a warning against the harmful interference of man. When William asks his father, Mr Seagrave, whether the albatross they are seeing is odd or not, his father replies,

Don't say how odd William; that is not an expression to use when we talk of the wonderful provisions made by the Almighty hand, who neglects not the meanest of his creatures\_\_\_\_ say rather, how wonderful! (1841:14)

The wordings illustrate clearly that Marryat warned his readers that not to treat the nature in an unkind way. What seemed to be the conclusion was that he believed the nature was a creation of God and man could only preserve it in its most possible way. This suggestion from Marryat can remind us of the current environmental activist Greta Thunberg's words that, "The way we make food, raising animals to eat, clearing land to grow food to feed those animals—if we continue, we will run out of land and food." (2020:1).

It can be observed clearly that the novel was a moral lesson that man has a duty towards God and that is preserving the nature that the Creator, according to what Marryat believed, commended to the care of man. Gradually, the children learn this lesson and become different people as the novel progresses. As Joseph Carroll says in "The Ecology of Victorian Fiction",

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin attributes human morality to the capacity to compare present action with the past and the future and hence to assess the consequences of our acts in the light of our evolved feelings of social sympathy. (2001: 299)

Consequently, the natural environment of the ocean permits the Seagrave family and their children to evolve from ignorant observers of nature to a grateful watchers of it.

In "To See Things for the First Time': Before and After Ecocriticism", Svend Erik Larsen focuses on literature "in which a reference to nature applies: physics, psychology, poetics, metaphysics, logic, rhetoric, politics" (2007: 349). We can see in Marryat's *Masterman Ready* that there is an

undeniable link between life and the teachings of nature which is gained by the rhetoric of Mr Seagrave.

## CONCLUSION

Captain Frederick Marryat's novels are replete with meaningful messages about the past. By reading his novels, we can have the ability to travel back to the Victorian and pre-Victorian time and apprehend what our precedent people thought about the nature that they inherited from their ancestors. As Ezra Pound says in his *ABC of Reading*, "literature is news that has stayed news" (1934: 6). Thus, by reading Marryat's novels, we can attain a notion of what he and other Victorians thought about the environment.

In *The Children of the New Forest*, Marryat narrates a story of the Beverley family. The four children struggle to live after their parents perished. Their father was slayed during the fight for the King's (Charles I) cause and their mother dies after a few months. Afterwards, destiny leads them to live under the tutelage of Jacob Armitage who is the old forester. Meanwhile, Edward who is the senior son of the family, socialises with Mr Heatherstone, the new intendant appointed by Roundheads, to make him aware of the proceedings of the forest. Once when they are talking, Edward gains new knowledge from Heatherstone who supported Parliament and Oliver Cromwell. He is informed that both the King and the Roundheads erred and that the best form of government is a constitutional monarchy.

The salient point in the novel is the role of the nature in it. The forest becomes the new forest when Cromwell is incumbent and when Charles II restores the monarchy, the environment is enjoyed more. The wedding of Edward Beverley and Miss Heatherstone in the nature is a symbol of practising the new form of monarchy in the new forest. Barrie J Gold observes in "Energy, Ecology, and Victorian Fiction", "In such manifestly social and political contexts, we cannot easily ignore the effects of language on nature even as we devote to the physical world the attention it deserves" (2011: 214). As Gold says, such an impact can conspicuously be seen in Victorian novels.

*Masterman Ready* is another novel of Marryat's in which the focus is on nature. As the novel is about a shipwrecked family who settle on the

Atlantic Ocean, the Seagrave family learn gradually that they need to respect nature in order to pay their tribute to their God. As Marryat noted, in order to be grateful to the God that has bestowed man with intellect and superiority over other creatures, it is afterwards the duty of man to preserve the nature that God has commended to their care. The novel ends when the children have learnt their moral instructions from the nature and know how to respect it. The novel can remind the readers of what the current environmental activists like Greta Thunberg emphasise on, such as the duty that man has towards nature and how nature can influence the well-being of our future lives.

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