

FROM ALIENATION TO CONNECTEDNESS: A POSTMODERN ECOCRITICAL READING OF JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT*

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Abstract

Within a postmodern ecocritical framework, the present paper seeks to examine John Steinbeck's ecocentric vision in his last novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). The paper analyzes the novel from an ecocritical perspective, showing how man's connectedness with nature highlights postmodern phenomena of identity crisis, disintegration, alienation, and deterioration of ethics. Within this framework, nature asserts itself as man's 'place,' companion, solace, and refuge from a rapidly changing American society during the 1950s and 1960s in which the heavy grip of capitalism and consumerism was felt. The paper argues that *The Winter of Our Discontent* foregrounds the concept of interdependence that governs the relationship between human beings and the environment, thus emphasizing Steinbeck's ecocentric vision that destabilizes the dichotomous notion that man is superior to nature. Here, the ontological landscape of a man searching for a lost disintegrated identity and escaping from moral degeneration expands within a typical postmodern literary text to form one ontological structure of which nature is a crucial component. The paper aims at finding links between postmodernism and ecocriticism, demonstrating that the protagonist's attempt to accomplish connectedness with nature is an impact of the postmodern sense of alienation, identity crisis, and the erosion of moral codes.

Keywords: Steinbeck, *Winter of Our Discontent*, ecocriticism, postmodernism

Introduction

"Live in fragments no longer. Only connect ..."

(E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), 206)

Written in 1961, Steinbeck's last novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* (*Winter*) can be safely labeled 'postmodern,' as it exemplifies in both form and content the postmodern aspects of fragmentation, alienation, lack of subjectivity, and identity crisis. *Winter* is selected here for two main reasons. In the first place, the novel in general has not yet received critical attention commensurate with its literary value or the value of its Nobel Prize-winning author. Apart from scattered reviews and a few articles in which it has been unfavorably received, the novel has been strangely ignored even by contemporary critics. As late as 2011, for instance, Don Noble's bulky study of Steinbeck and his writings, *Critical Insights: John Steinbeck*, almost disregarded the novel. Moreover, most of those who reviewed or analyzed *Winter* such as Randall D. Miller (2005), Joseph Allegretti (2005), Barbara A. Heavilin (2004), Lesleigh Patton (2002), Joseph R. McElrath, Jesse S. Crisler, and Susan Shillinglaw (1996), Richard C. Bedford (1972), and Jarmila Dvorak (1962) focused merely on its moral theme. In particular, the novel's postmodern aspects have not yet been fully tackled by critics.

In the second place, Steinbeck is well known for his ecological concerns, a thing which is clearly traced in *Winter*. Throughout his life, Steinbeck was a friend of the environment and a supporter of the deep ecology movement. His interest in ecology is emphasized by several critics like Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li (2005) Petr Kopecký (2006), and Mark Andrew White (2006). Although Steinbeck's ecological concerns are so acknowledged by critics that he is sometimes called an "ecological prophet" (Simmonds 323), his ecological thought in *Winter* has been almost ignored by the same critics. Even in a study like *Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (1997) by Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw, and Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr. which is dedicated to the representation of the environment in Steinbeck's works, only few pages are given to the analysis of the whaling industry in *Winter*.

Not only does the present paper seek to highlight those aspects of postmodernism and ecology which have been ignored by critics, but also to find a link that connects these aspects of postmodernism in *Winter* with the representation of ecology in the text, bringing to light Steinbeck's ecocentric vision in a postmodern anthropocentric world. Moreover, the spread of capitalism and consumerism, aided by the rapid development in technology, weighed heavily on the environment. The exploitation of the physical environment as well as the disintegration and alienation of the postmodern man in the social environment highlight Steinbeck's ecocentric vision which represents a hope in a world of despair. As the paper demonstrates through the lens of ecocriticism, in *Winter*, Steinbeck creates an ecological

community in which connectedness with nature becomes a substitute for the loss of identity, lack of subjectivity, and the absence of morality in the postmodern world.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part analyzes the dilemma of Steinbeck's protagonist as a representative of the postmodern man who lives in a changing world in which stable identity is eroded, subjectivity no longer exists, and morality deteriorates. In such a world, man feels disintegrated, alienated, and displaced. The failure of Steinbeck's protagonist to cope up with a postmodern changing and unstable social environment motivates him to withdraw from such a world towards the physical environment where he attempts to find connectedness and identification. This leads to the second part of the paper which ecocritically analyzes Steinbeck's novel in order to show the role of nature in solving the postmodern man's predicament. As the paper demonstrates, nature in the novel has a dynamic role in the protagonist's search for connectedness, subjectivity, and true identity.

The Fractured Self and the Crisis of Postmodern Identity The Case of Ethan Hawley

Following the Second World War, the Western world witnessed a rapid change in almost every aspect of culture, a change which took that world from the stability of modernism to a new era of doubt and fragmentation which came to be known as postmodernism. James M. Glass defines postmodernism as a philosophy which "celebrates difference, change, transformation, and flux" (256). Thus, postmodernism represents a turning point in almost all aspects of western culture. By their very nature, turning points are not stable, and they bring about a variety of changes. In particular, postmodern critics have always been preoccupied with the problem of identity and have extensively handled its facets. In such an era, identity is destabilized and subjectivity is eroded.

One reason for this change which left negative impacts on the postmodern identity is the obvious transformations in economic and technological fields. Such transformations led to the circulation of capitalism and consumerism which inevitably changed the modes of thinking, communication, and relations among individuals. Robert G. Dunn argues that "the destabilization of identity in Western societies has its deepest sources in the transformation and increasing instability of cultural patterns associated with massive economic and technological restructuring on a world scale" (108). The American society of the 1950s and 1960s was based on capitalist consumerism. Although consumerism as an economic and social order is an old phenomenon, in the postwar era, it became the major feature of the American society. Commercial boom in America during the 1950s and 1960s was evident in the proliferation of shopping malls and grocery stores all over the country (Sheumaker and

Wajda 128-33; Featherstone 64-109). Thus, a consumer culture circulated and became the main aspect of postwar life. This change turns the individual into a mere consumer, a thing which puts heavy financial demands on him/her and menaces his/her subjectivity and identity formation. The circulation of the culture of consumption and the failure of the individual to adapt to its demands is dramatized in Steinbeck's novel *Winter*.

Set in the early 1960s in New Baytown, a small New England town, *Winter* tells the story of Ethan Allen Hawley, a former member of Long Island's aristocratic class, who cannot cope up with a rapidly changing world. He has been brought up within a stable and fixed traditions to which he adhered. Born in a rich family who owned almost half of the New Baytown's land, Ethan enjoyed a financially stable life. During the Second World War, however, Ethan's late father invested and lost a lot of money. Thus, Ethan's family lost their fortune and financial status. Consequently, after the war, Ethan was forced to work as a grocery clerk in the very store his family once owned. The stability Ethan enjoyed before now obliterates and he finds himself adrift in a new era of changing values and modes of thinking, experiencing a world of "fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness, a vagueness or even absence of moral parameters and societal chaos" (Rosenau 15). These modes, which are identified with postmodernism, inevitably problematize his identity formation and menace his subjectivity and self-image.

The change that took place in the postwar era is represented in *Winter*. New Baytown, which has always been identified with the whaling industry, now succumbs to the new capitalist order. Early in the novel, while Ethan is walking to work, he observes how the old Bay Hotel is "now being wrecked to make room for the new Woolworth's," a new department store which symbolizes the new consumerism boom (*Winter* 9). Ethan describes the bulldozer and the huge crane which is used for swinging the wrecking ball as "waiting predators in the early morning" (*Winter* 9). Through this early image, Steinbeck gives an ugly notion of the new capitalist culture. Capitalism is here introduced as a fierce intruder that comes to prey on the town's quietness and security. This image is also apocalyptic of a forthcoming calamity: "If the old does not adapt, then it will be destroyed" (Patton 180). Referring to the rapid change that characterizes postwar life, Ethan says:

What was happening could be described as a great ship being turned and bunted and shoved about and pulled around by many small tugs. Once turned by tide and tugs, it must set a new course and start its engines turning. On the bridge which is the planning center, the question must be asked: All right, I know now where I

want to go. How do I get there, and where are lurking rocks and what will the weather be? (*Winter* 92-3)

The ship here may stand for the postmodern era which takes a new course in every field. The questions here refer to the predicament of the postmodern man who, though knows what he/she wants, does not feel secure in a rapidly changing world. The postmodern time is full of different kinds of rocks or crises which destabilize man's identity and weaken his/her subjectivity.

Financial demands and the spirit of consumption emphasize throughout the novel as the main reason for an identity crisis. Ethan's wife Mary and adolescent children Allen and Ellen are not content with their low social and economic position. They live in a new era which gives great value and priority to consumption. As a result, Ethan in such a postwar era finds himself without financial security; he is unable to provide his family with such material comforts. He cannot cope up with these new values which shake his content and menace his self-image. Early in the novel, Ethan complains to Mr. Baker, the banker, that he suffers from a sense of erosion and failure owing to his inability to cope up with the financial demands of his family: "My wife needs clothes. My children—shoes and fun. And suppose they can't get an education? And the monthly bills and the doctor and teeth and a tonsillectomy, and beyond that suppose I get sick and can't sweep this goddam sidewalk? ... I hate my job and I'm scared I'll lose it" (*Winter* 14). As it is clear here, the commodification of all aspects of life accounts for the discontent and instability felt by Ethan as a postmodern man.

The idea that money is the main impetus of social action circulates in the whole town of New Baytown as a representative of the postmodern era. In *Winter*, the language of money dominates most of the conversations in Ethan's family, and material demands from Ethan, the father, exceed all others. Mary tells Ethan that she is going to read the cards, predicting that "[e]verything you touch will turn to gold" (18). When Margie Young-Hunt, a middle-aged fortune teller and Mary's friend, foresees that Ethan will become the most important person in town, his importance is interpreted in terms of money: "Every card she turned to show money and more money. You're going to be a rich man" (31). What troubles Ethan is that his wife prioritizes money in their conversation and considers him a failure without fortune. Mary commodifies and materializes social relations, respect, success, security, and social position. For her, all these concepts are based on money: "I'd like to be able to hold up my head in this town. I don't like the children to be hangdog because they can't dress as good—as well—as some others. I'd love to hold up my head" (34). Mary launches a severe attack against her husband for not adapting to the new capitalist era, a thing which accounts for his failure:

"You could climb out of it if you didn't have your old-fashioned fancy-pants ideas. Everybody's laughing at you. A grand gentleman without money is a bum" (34). Even Ellen, who has the nearest resemblance to her father, asks him when he is going to be rich: "Well, I wish you'd hurry up. I'm sick of being poor." (57)

It is worth mentioning that the protagonist's meetings and conversations with the other characters revolve mainly around the topic of money. In addition to frequent references to the importance of money and business, the sentence "money gets money" is literally repeated three times in the novel (*Winter* 55, 271). This is the first lesson of success in the marketplace as given to Ethan by Mr. Baker and Joey Morphy, the bank teller and town playboy. Mr. Baker also teaches Ethan that his pathway to the world of business is not his ethics, nor his good reputation or expertise: "Your only entrance is money" (144). This implies that in the capitalist world man is nothing without money. Alfio Marullo, the Italian immigrant and owner of the grocery store where Ethan works, gives Ethan another lesson: "money has no heart" (56). In other words, business is ruthless; there is no room for emotions in it. A fourth lesson, which is terrible indeed, is that money is more sacred than fixed codes of ethics. For Morph, money is "the holy of holies ... we all bow down to the Great God Currency." (132)

Critics of postmodernism elaborate on discussing the impacts of postmodern capitalist practices on the self. In particular, they agree that such practices negatively affect the processes of identity formation and caused the destabilization of postmodern identity. For example, commodities and forms of consumption come to dominate the way people see things and how others see them (Dunn 51-80; Clarke 106-8; Lindholm 756-8). Moreover, such commodities become part and parcel of the modern man's daily life to the extent that they prioritize other forms of communication and social relations. It is here that "filial piety is no longer the conventional morality it was a century ago" (Clarke 153). Cultural commodities such as music, television, and advertising replace the traditional institutions of social identification like the family in the process of identity construction.

In *Winter*, commodities like television and music replace social relations and, hence, menace the processes of identity formation and contribute to destabilizing identity. Ethan's son Allen is an example of how the role of family in the process of identity formation is weakened. For example, Allen seldom communicates with the members of his family. He creates for himself a virtual community in which he communicates with his favorite music and singers and dreams of appearing on TV. He is proud of having a copy of the "Lonely Lovin' Heart" song which is "number one in the whole country. Sold a million copies in two weeks" (*Winter* 234). Ironically, this is not communication in the true sense of the word.

Allen here is only receptive rather than productive; he just consumes the commodities that are immersed to him through the radio and TV. Allen is obsessed by other commodities, as well. Realizing that Allen feels bitter for not being rich, Ethan asks him what he wants money for. Allen replies: "Do you think I like to live without no motorbike? Must be twenty kids with motorbikes. And how you think it is if your family hasn't even got a car, leave alone no television?" (72-3) Allen also tells his father that the first thing he is going to do when he gets a lot of money is "to buy you an automobile so you won't feel so lousy when other people all got one" (73). Whether he intends it or not, Allen's words here seep into Ethan's psyche, endanger his self-image, and shake the stability of his identity as a father.

Steinbeck's *Winter* also exemplifies the dilemma of the postmodern era in which even national history is commodified. An early evidence of this attitude occurs when Ethan speaks to Allen about the history of America. Allen just wishes he had lived in those old days of "[p]irate ships ... [p]lots of gold and ladies in silk dresses and jewels" (*Winter* 71). Here, the son commodifies history itself in the form of pieces of gold, dresses, and jewels. Another example of the commodification of national history is represented in the national essay contest in which Allen and Ellen participate. The purpose of the contest, as its title "I Love America" indicates, is to show supreme feelings of patriotism and loyalty to the country. The very contest, however, is commodified. Allen's purpose of writing the contest essay is not to pour his love for his country into paper, but rather to draw some materialistic gains from it like a watch and a trip, in addition to showing up on TV. Here, identity formation in relation to the fixed ethics and sense of belonging is eroded. Moreover, when Allen wins the contest, no one thinks of the significance of this in showing how Allen as an American youth loves his country. Rather, Allen and all people around him except his father focus on the commodified benefits drawn from the contest: "The newspapers want to interview him—and television, he's going to be on television ... A celebrity in the family! Ethan, we ought to have a television." (242)

Thus, as a postmodern man, Ethan finds himself alien in a social environment which rapidly changes under the influence of new modes of production and consumption. Contrary to Mimi Gladstein's idea that in *Winter* "the family is whole [in which a] mother, a father, and two children live together in a town and are part of a community" (47), the events of the novel reveal deep layers of disintegration, alienation and lack of communication in the family as well as in the whole community. This is traced in Ethan's direct statement: "I do not listen with complete attention ... I do not listen at all" (*Winter* 52). Even when Ethan's wife is in his company and he seems to talk to her, he is virtually set apart from her: "I am not talking to

her, but to some dark listener within myself" (53). His daughter also accuses him of not listening, which is a sign of disintegration: "You never listen, really listen" (149). Mary also is alienated from her husband. At the end of the novel, Ethan's agony is so great that he decides to leave the house and commit suicide. Throughout the whole scene, Ethan remains alone; his wife never feels his psychological distress. Gladstein observes that Mary in this scene "is not even aware that her husband is troubled. Her main concern is that he take along a raincoat." (50). Again, it is the physical appearance that matters most.

In such a consumer-based community in which identity as an integrated entity is threatened and becomes vulnerable to loss or dissolving, Ethan tries to find refuge in new communities, whether they are real or virtual. According to Dunn, the postmodern sense of "loss of connection and coherence thus drives the creation of new communities promising renewed social bonds, personal and social fulfillment" (144). Fragmentation in society leads Ethan to search for new relations of connectedness for the sake of social and personal fulfillment. It is here that Ethan creates for himself two interrelated communities. In addition to an ecological community which will be discussed later, Ethan revives the past, his prewar years which witnessed his and his family's glory. As an indication of the failure of the postmodern era to meet people's personal and social needs, the phenomenon of revivalism takes different forms and is related to various fields. In so far as this paper is concerned, revivalism involves "a longing for a personal past, particularly in the family ... an interest in family trees and histories." (Dunn 155)

Not only does Ethan frequently refer to the past, but also lives in it. His postmodern dilemma of loss and doubt forces him to create for himself a micro-community whose members belong to past generations. The majority of those members is dead now such as his Aunt Deborah, his grandfather, and his father. Although those people died long ago, he recalls them and consults them in almost every action in his life: "Much of my talk is addressed to people who are dead, like my little Plymouth Rock Aunt Deborah or old Cap'n. I find myself arguing with them ... It's asking for advice or an excuse from the inner part of you that is formed and certain" (*Winter* 53). Ethan's words here indicate that he is still trying to stick to the fixed codes of the past upon which his identity was formed. It also implies that he does not find stability or certainty in the present. Ethan's insistence on carrying his "father's big silver Hamilton railroad watch" reveals his denial of the present as well as his attempt to restore his lost past (134). Ethan's denial of the present is clear in his assertion that "most people live ninety per cent in the past, seven per cent in the present, and that only leaves three percent for the future" (166). Failing to find fixed reference points in the present,

Ethan "engages with the past of his family and his hometown through habits of imaginative projection which force the past into a direct engagement with the living present" (Kocela 75). Ethan's denial of the present is emphasized through Miss Elgar, an old acquaintance of his late father. Whenever she comes to the grocery store, Miss Elgar inquires about Ethan's father and how he is. Although his father died long ago, Ethan never frustrates her nor attempts to shake her illusion simply because he recognizes her need to cling to a stable authentic past in a destabilized present. Like the watch of Ethan's father with which Ethan fantastically controls the passage of time, Miss Elgar's mental perception of time stops at a certain point in the past when she was a young woman befriended by Ethan's father: "Give him my greetings, that's a good boy" (*Winter* 139). It is here that Ethan's tragedy lies: to be able to survive, he recalls the ethics of the past in the present moment; he tries "to run for a safe anchorage in the past" (116). However, this causes him many crises of adaptation and integration. Of these crises which make Ethan feel displaced is that of ethics.

Critics agree that the problem of ethics is at the heart of postmodernism. As Dunn puts it: "[t]he assault on traditional social structures gave rise to an individual called on to forge his (but seldom her) own identity independently of the ascribed characteristics inhering in one's placement in tradition and nature" (53). Ethan did forge his own identity in order to cope up with the new forces of capitalist consumerism circulating in his society. At the outset of the novel, he seems satisfied with his lot, denouncing the corruption circulating in town institutions and businesses. He resists the temptations of those around him to motivate him to participate in the moral decay of his time. Failing to meet the material needs of his family, however, he descends to a Machiavellian opportunist who resorts to immoral and illegal means to get what he needs. Within this context, Ethan works on establishing his social desirability, an important postmodern psychological feature. He tries to conform to the social norm, which hails materialism and respects money, by immoral and opportunistic means. He becomes one of those who "deliberately change their behavior and identity to match a given situation ... to control the image which others have of them" (Hamouda 104). He realizes that he has to change in order to satisfy all those around him. He comes to believe in Marullo's idea that "[w]here money is concerned, the ordinary rules of conduct take a holiday" (*Winter* 58). For the new Ethan, ethics are no longer fixed, but fluid and relative like everything else: "If the laws of thinking are the laws of things, then morals are relative too, and the manner and sin – that's relative too in a relative universe" (57). In a world governed by fluidity and fracture, Ethan comes to the conclusion that it is not morals against which people's behavior and actions are gauged. The new criteria of judgment are "[s]trength and success—they are

above morality, above criticism. It seems, then, that it is not what you do, but how you do it and what you call it" (187). Ethan eventually accepts the bribe offered him by Mr. Biggers, deceives his friend Danny to take his land, and even plans to rob the bank. Justifying his plan to rob the bank, Ethan says: "And as for the dishonesty, the crime—it was not a crime against men, only against money" (215). He also contrives a plan to get his boss deported to Sicily so that he can take to the store for himself. For Patton, Ethan "becomes more like a wolf than his previous moral standards would have ever allowed him to conceive of being." (185)

The moral degeneration in the novel reaches a climax when Ethan discovers that his son has plagiarized from different sources in the essay contest. To win the contest, Allen has copied freely from the speeches of Thomas Jefferson, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and Abraham Lincoln. Allen's plagiarism here alludes to a famous national scandal during the late 1950s involving Charles Van Doren, an American intellectual and writer, who cheated in a television quiz show called *Twenty One* with the help of the quiz producers. (Gladstein 49; Kocela 69; George 12-7). Although Allen becomes a celebrity like Doren, he is a fake celebrity based on moral decay. Like his father, Allen rationalizes his delinquent actions using Machiavellian reasoning. He comes to believe that cheating is right simply because "[e]verybody does it" (*Winter* 276). It is a postmodern fluid society in which stabilized notions of ethics and identity formation "are seen as inconsistent with a culture of 'surface' and 'multiplicity' playfully asserted and celebrated for their own sake" (Dunn 65). In a letter he wrote to his friend and politician Adlai Stevenson in 1959, Steinbeck laments the circulation of moral bankruptcy in his society: "[There's] a creeping, all pervading, nerve-gas of immorality which starts in the nursery and does not stop before it reaches the highest offices both corporate and governmental" (Qtd in Banach 55). Since the world Ethan lives in is extremely fragmented and corrupt, he has to search for new ways to satisfy his need for connectedness and belonging, a new community to identify with.

Towards an Ecological Community: The Quest for Connectedness

Reading Steinbeck's *Winter*, one finds him/herself facing a typical postmodern human entity suffering from alienation, moral disintegration and loss of identity. However, throughout the novel, the same reader finds that it turns over to introduce him/her to a notion of connectedness that Steinbeck is keen to portray. This time, the relationship is not drawn between humans, but between a human, on one hand, and nature as a domineering and powerful agent, on the other. It is the aim of the research to show through the context as much as the content that *Winter* has a new reading that rests on proving that the implications of both postmodernism and ecocriticism in the novel evolve from each other and that they

then turn to create one literary amalgamation endowed with a wonderful artistic expression portrayed by 'Green' Steinbeck.

One could propose here that without the appearance of what underlies postmodernism as philosophy, ecocriticism would not have arisen. In other words, without the utter separateness, skepticism, and alienation modern man have experienced within the cloak of postmodernism, he/she would not have felt the need for connectedness; he/she would not have started to search for an entity to link him/herself to. This makes ecocriticism a possible field of study to be acclaimed within a postmodern context. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that is based on reading nature, with all its forms, in literary works since it focuses on "literary (and artistic) expression of human experience primarily in a natural and consequently in a culturally shaped world" (Cohen 10). Ecocriticism is a method of reading works of art in a way that puts all environmental as well as natural elements into deep consideration. Here, it is important to bring into the same context Steinbeck's *Winter*, a novel that rests on a challenging confrontation between idealism on one hand, and moral disintegration, on the other, resulting in a submission to the latter. However, it ends in an implication of a hopeful return to morality and ethics through getting from nature the strength and solidity of a stone, and the cleansing and purity of water.

In *Winter*, nature is artistically represented to involve all the elements of the environmental milieu that Ethan constructs for himself, a milieu in which are listed the places, and other components that Ethan combines to form a sort of alternative community. Within the framework of an ecologically oriented perspective, nature, with its components, becomes a companion defying by this the stereotypical representation of nature as a mute non-human background. Instead, it is brought forcibly to the foreground linked tightly to the sense of relaxation and satisfaction one derives from being accepted by an 'other,' even if this order is non-human. It is from these components that Ethan derives the "psychological maturity" that he needs to achieve what Robyn Eckersley calls "dynamic autonomy" (54). Dynamic autonomy, within an ecocritical framework, "requires psychological maturity and involves a sensitive mediation between one's individual self and the larger whole. This does not mean having control over others but rather means having *a sense of competent agency in the world* in the context of an experience of continuity" (54). Therefore, man is no more the exploiter, but the tool through which nature preserves its role of continuity. Again, this developed dynamic autonomy eliminates at once the one-sided super human objectification of nature and ends the long held logocentric relationship between man, as master, and nature, as a mute static entity.

The ecological awareness that draws the reader with it along many patterns in the novel is most elaborately expressed within a panoramic representation of the place. Place, as a notion, is essentially traced in Steinbeck's *Winter* since it acts like a literary knot around which three different threads are spun. These threads are nature, society and the individual. In other words, it is the place that enables one to look deeply into an individual amid a certain social context, on one hand, and nature, on the other. In this respect, Lawrence Buell proposes that "[t]hat the concept of place also gestures in at least three directions at once—toward environmental materiality, toward social perception of construction, and toward individual affect or bond—makes it an additionally rich and tangled arena for environmental criticism" (63). Accordingly, nature in the novel is not a mere background against which the main actions of the novel take place. In contrast, nature here becomes a character whose role is clear in the life of the protagonist, shaping his character and giving him the sense of satisfaction he needs and lacks at the same time. This notion of place involves one individual i.e. Ethan, and two place versions i.e. his 'Place,' which relates the individual to nature, and the grocery store, that links the individual to the society. Therefore, this central position place occupies in Steinbeck's *Winter* varies to incorporate many connotations for the main character of the novel.

Ethan's Place is the point where the individual Ethan intersects with nature. Ethan finds himself resorting to a certain place that he does not know a name for but "the Place." This Place is a sort of old harbor that Ethan used to visit long ago when he was still a boy belonging to a rich family. It lies "[o]n the edge of the silted and sanded up Old Harbor, right where the Hawley dock had been, the stone foundation is still there That is my Place" (*Winter* 43). Actually, it is more interesting than shocking to know that whenever Ethan is to make a great decision concerning his life, he goes to his 'Place,' which is a part of nature. Before he went into service, before he married, and while his wife was having their first baby, Ethan used to spend the night there. In fact, he is conscious of this effect his Place has on him. He says: "I knew I had to sit there. It's big changes take me there—big changes" (44). Again, it is to be noted that during his morally transitional period in which he submits to the surrounding materialistic demands, he does not visit his Place; for example, he does not go there before taking the decision of robbing the bank or asking his closest friend to sell his meadow, as if he feels shy of the postmodern self he has developed.

As a result, linking himself tightly to such a place, Ethan finds a kind of refuge and it is in this linking that one easily perceives a psychological defense mechanism through which Ethan is fighting back. In this regard, it is the 'Place' that serves Ethan specifically because in

it he implants himself within a natural setting far away from the social space that works on suffocating him. Steinbeck here thus proposes that "the cultivation of an attitude of respect for nature is a necessary aspect of human psychological maturity and self-realization" (Eckersley 162). It is at this place that a perfect fusion occurs between what lies outside, represented in the natural element, and what is buried deep inside i.e. Ethan's American idealism. As a result, Ethan has developed an internal relationship with this place that provides him with the sense of self-satisfaction he seeks since "on each visit [he] reconstruct [s] Old Harbor for [his] mind's pleasure" (*Winter* 47). He expresses his relationship to this place as a need for anybody to accommodate. He says: "I wondered whether all men have a Place, or need a Place, or want one and have none. Sometimes I've seen a look in eyes, a frenzied animal look as of need for a quiet, secret place where soul-shivers can abate, where a man is one and can take stock of it" (44). Here, there is a direct reference to the fragmentation of identity that postmodernism implies. This is a fragmentation that necessitates everybody to have a separate place for him/herself only, but not everybody succeeds in having one.

The second place that permeates *Winter* and controls Ethan's world is the grocery store. The significance of the store as a place springs powerfully from the chance it gives to Ethan to meet his true friends and companions i.e. the items on the shelves. These items in the store bring the discussion directly toward an ecologically oriented term that exists powerfully in Steinbeck's *Winter*, which is that of the 'ecological community.' Such a community works hard on healing the protagonist psychologically as it provides him with an alternative community other than the materialistic morally corrupted postmodern society. In the very beginning of the novel, Ethan is portrayed in close contact with the items in his grocery store, talking to them and calling them "my friends," "gentlemen" and "Dear associates" (*Winter* 56, 57). He identifies with the goods in the store and deals with them as if they were humans, not just living creatures. He is used to "discuss[ing] matters with [his] friends on the shelves, perhaps aloud, perhaps not" (56). It is only with such an ecological community that is composed of the goods in the store, the sea, and the other natural elements in his 'Place' that Ethan reaches the harmonious moment he is thriving for. Because Ethan is never able to achieve connectedness or harmony with the people around him, he resorts to nature which will never think he is silly, unlike his wife who always criticizes him. Therefore, one can propose that Ethan works all the time in search for a place in which he may establish an ecological community together with all the other elements involved. Ethan tries to compensate himself for the sense of social belonging and solidarity he lacks in such a postmodern society.

Among his groceries in the store, Ethan is able to express himself eloquently. He addresses them as if they understand his words and all what they do is to "sit up and listen" (*Winter* 57). Ethan deliberately separates himself from the materialistic society he lives in. He does not want to hear the comments of his wife, children and friends calling him to follow their steps in life searching for ways to collect money. This state, actually, accords with a common ecological theme that ecocommunal theorists support concerning "the idea of disengagement or withdrawal from corrupt social and political institutions and the establishment of exemplary institutions and/or the pursuit of exemplary personal action" (Eckersley 163). This 'exemplary personal action' is crystallized in Ethan's pursuit of a relationship with nonliving things and objects, and this 'exemplary institution,' one can propose, is the Place he identifies himself within Old Harbor. As a result, Ethan's relationship with the ecological community he establishes reaches the degree of identification that occurs "when man transfers part of his own being to his symbols, when an object becomes suffused with human spirit so that a complete interpenetration exists." (Lieber 265)

In addition to Ethan's identification with his 'green' companions in the store, the ecological context of the novel passes to other objects that are represented in his talisman. Ethan is responsible for achieving what can restore him the kind of spiritual balance he needs in order to go on with his life. Symbolized in a talisman, his ontological quest finds in his relationship with nature a resolution. The talisman is an important motif that Steinbeck uses genuine to unravel the protagonist's social and psychological dilemma. The talisman which is mainly a stone on which is inscribed an unknown shape is Ethan's lost identity crystallized. Ethan defines it as a "stone or other object engraved with figures or characters to which are attributed the occult powers of the planetary influences and celestial configurations under which it was made, usually worn as an amulet to avert evil from or bring fortune to the bearer" (*Winter* 202). The stone is an unpolluted part of Ethan received and kept as a legacy from his family. It stands for solidity as it is the strongest of nature's elements. It is "a continuity thing that inflames and comforts and inspires from generation to generation" (126). The stone is "light-bearer" (279) and, therefore, it carries light which is again a naturally-oriented motif since it is an authentic part of nature. Ethan is convinced that this stone talisman has affected him greatly since "it puts its power on me as I traced its design with my finger. At midday it was the pink of a rose, but in the evening it picked up a darker tone, a purplish blush as though a little blood had got into it" (231). Here, it is important to refer to the fact that the stone is not fixed. Its color changes from one time to another from "pink" to "purplish." Moreover, the figure carved on the stone is not clear cut as "its color and

convolutions and texture changed as [his] needs changed" (127). When Ethan's aunt gave him the talisman, she refused to tell him anything about it. She told him that the talisman "means what you want it to mean" (203). Again, it is the inner self that reflects physically on the outer world.

The snake or serpent figure that seems to be carved on the stone holds double meanings. On one hand, it acts as a guard that keeps the past intact and alive since "snakes, scorpions and suchlike creatures that in real life are dangerous and to be avoided acquiring beneficial, magical properties as images" (Hall xi). On the other hand, it still represents the evil nature embedded in the very nature of man against the backdrop of postmodernism. It is through this stone that Steinbeck calls for keeping on American idealism that has been driven apart by postmodernist ideals of materialism and capitalism symbolized by the serpent shape on the talisman. This accords with Todd Lieber who argues that the "talisman becomes a vehicle to help man feel his oneness with the whole and express that feeling, and the pattern of talismanic identification becomes a ritual...for overcoming the cosmic alienation of a separate being and for reaffirming the oneness of creation" (266-67). As a result, it is nature, symbolized in the stone talisman, that stands at the core of the novel connecting people to their past, history, and nationalism.

Ecocritically speaking, *Winter* is centered around Ethan who undergoes a journey towards temporal, spatial and moral reinhabitation. The term 'reinhabitation' is basically an ecologically-oriented term defined by Peter Berg and Raymond F. Dasmann as "learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation" (217). Ethan is obliged to go through a kind of temporal 'reinhabitation' with a postmodern era that forces him to undergo a moral metamorphosis from idealism to disintegration. He imprisons himself in the only thing that could keep him alive i.e. his past, from which he springs out in a kind of fake temporal reinhabitation when he tries to take over and internalize the new morals of the postmodern age. However, the true temporal reinhabitation occurs when he is able, at the end of the novel, to make a compromise between his social milieu of postmodern values and his ethical heritage. Ethan is now able to face his present and overcome his socially-oriented moral disintegration. He is deeply involved in and psychologically saturated with his natural-textualized sea Place in a kind of spatial reinhabitation that "involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it" (Berg and Dasmann 217). He quits all the other places which are mere geographical space-designed entities toward locating himself within a place that occupies him to the extent that when he wants to die, he goes there to dissolve with its

natural components since he is one of them. Here, it is Steinbeck trying to assert the ecologically-oriented fact that "the world is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving." (Eckersley 49). These two kinds of reinhabitation are linked to a third one which lies in Ethan's moral legacy epitomized in the talisman he receives from his aunt. This talisman is an inherited token of a familial history. However, it is not a ready-made living pattern catalogue. It stimulates in its holder a sort of self-projection that makes him/her contemplate his/her life thoroughly. In a word, Ethan achieves reinhabitation on the temporal, spatial and moral levels through knotting together his strong sense of the past, his sense of the place, and his ethical sense of familial legacy.

Mystery applies to many details in Ethan's life, especially his tight link to a place, his spiritual relationship with canned foods in the store and to his talisman. This mystery constitutes in part Steinbeck's monistic look that Lieber defines as "his belief that one thing is all things and all things are one thing ... and thus share a fundamental relatedness" (266). In fact, Steinbeck's green philosophy is overruling in the novel giving the readers many ecological overtones that are really difficult to be ignored. On the surface, Steinbeck seems to be "describing the common psychological quirk of a man identifying with his tools or with the object of his work, infusing his spirit into his physical environment" (Lieber 265), but on a deeper level, Steinbeck is actually investigating a world of connectedness and ecological continuity, a world in which all items and elements dissolve within a greater whole. When Ethan is talking to his canned foods, he says that in the world, there "are the eaters and the eaten. That's a good rule to start with ... In the end all are eaten- all-gobbled up the earth, even the fiercest and the most crafty" (*Winter* 46-7). Again, it is "earth" that collects and gathers all things, animals and humans. Therefore, all will come to an end within the immortal crucible of the earth, so people should realize that they are nothing but one part that will never succeed in escaping from the others just because they are complementing, not contradicting parts. This holistic vision is also reflected deeply in the language of the novel.

Although the language in *Winter* is definitely not that 'green language' of the Romantic poets whose aim was to praise nature in all its shapes, the language here is still highly ecologically indicative. Ethan frequently uses words referring to elements of nature to reflect upon his ideas and thoughts. The title itself is an example of how Steinbeck is careful to draw a relationship between the natural, symbolized in 'winter' with all its implications that allude to "the death of nature in winter" (Hall 156), and the human world, symbolized in the abstract noun 'discontent.' Regardless of the fact that this title is borrowed from Shakespeare's

play *Richard III*, the words in the title, read ecocritically, acquire extra importance since they clearly develop a structural link between nature, on one hand, and human psyche, on the other hand. As a result, the title of the novel throws shadows on the title of the present paper itself which proposes an evolving relationship between postmodernism, which faces man with his/her dilemma of alienation and loss, and ecocriticism which introduces a way out through creating connectedness with nature. Actually, Ethan echoes Steinbeck himself when he says, "I wished I could stay to see the sun rise straight out from the Place" (*Winter* 47). Being a symbol of a new life and new hope, the sun rising denotes the resurrection of the moral code that has long been suppressed under the pressure of postmodernism only within the framework of nature, symbolized in the 'Place' as a hostess.

A very significant incident in the novel that knots together both postmodernism and ecocriticism is the case of selling Danny's green meadow and converting it to an airport. The country council in New Baytown plans to take the meadow to build on it an airport since "[d]evelopment is pretty much dependent on transportation" (*Winter* 111). For this 'development,' the natural element should be sacrificed. Here is capsulated a relevant ecological theme which is the dominance of the modern civilization that has grown on devouring nature and pushing it to the protruding borders. The clash between capitalists and nature activists is clear especially after Danny's refusal to sell his meadow to Ethan who makes use of what Mr. Baker has told him about the airport and offers to buy it. The novel presents a faithful portrayal of the sense of loss man internalized in the twentieth century where man loses any sense of belonging except for money, the only thing that could get people together in such a period of time in which "[a]nybody with money has relatives" (259). Danny, the drunkard, refuses to sell his meadow "[b]ecause it's me. It's Daniel Taylor" (49). It is no chance that Steinbeck makes Danny's legacy and inherited honor embraced in a piece of land. It is not a building nor is it an amount of money; instead, it is a part of nature, a green meadow and not a piece of land to be built on.

Another thread that unties Steinbeck's ecological vision is the open ending of *Winter* that can be variously interpreted within a postmodern context, but is much positively understood if its postmodern core is spun with an ecological thread that holds the whole novel together. This open ending represents in part Steinbeck's attack on anthropocentrism by creating the super powerful cultured man with an inseparable sense of loss only unraveled when he comes into direct contact with nature. When Ethan finally submits to the social materialistic pressures he has worked hard to avoid, he becomes another person who sacrifices his ethical commitments and commits mistakes. However, when he eventually

wants to end his life, he goes back to his Place saying, "I came to the Old Harbor. Good-by to what? I don't know. I couldn't remember. I think I wanted to go to the Place, but man commensal with the sea would know that the tide was at flood and the Place under dark water" (*Winter* 203). He is plunged into the water together with his razors, with which he decides to commit suicide, before he suddenly touches his talisman in his pocket. It seems that Ethan is not trying to commit suicide as much as he is trying to get back to what can purify him of his mistakes. The scene implies that Ethan's getting away from his ethics is a kind of betrayal to nature, and, thus; he has to pay back one way or another. It also shows that it is nature that represents the sole way out of the moral and ethical dilemma modern man is facing, and, therefore, Ethan is there to be re-born since water is originally a symbol of life and cleansing. Here, Ethan's contact with nature proves another ecologically based model of relationships since it involves the fact that "one's personal fulfillment is inextricably tied up with that of others. This is not seen as a resignation or self sacrifice but rather as a *positive affirmation* of the fact of our embeddedness in ecological relationships" (Eckersley 53). Therefore, Ethan's attempt to commit suicide earns extra significance when it is done against the backdrop of a naturally oriented place. He is not sacrificing himself, but is trying to purify himself from the weeds of ethical deterioration by unifying himself with a greater whole and a more domineering entity, i.e. nature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Steinbeck's *Winter* is an attack against the postmodern aspects of alienation, disintegration, and deterioration of ethics as well as a plea for connectedness. It is clear that Steinbeck expresses a negative view of the new culture of capitalism and the spirit of consumerism it created. In such a world, the self is fractured, subjectivity is eroded, and identity formation is problematized. As a representative of the postmodern man, Ethan is living in a socially and economically changing environment which questions his manhood and threatens his self-image at every turn. Confronted by a capitalist culture in which every aspect of culture becomes commodified, Ethan comes to suffer from an identity crisis. He must either craft a new fluid identity for himself, or be singled out as an outcast of the era. He eventually allows himself to be constructed by the changing forces of his culture. It is here that the role of nature in redeeming identity and alleviating the dilemma of the postmodern man is highlighted. The present paper shows how nature provides man with the connectedness and integration he/she lacks in a postmodern capitalist world. The paper also proves that Steinbeck is a green writer who has an ecocentric vision in which man is no longer the center around which all the other organisms and objects revolve. Along *Winter*,

Steinbeck works on speaking out the unspoken concerning man's position in an interrelated world through the use of some wonderful patterns that intermingle to show an artistic design of such a world. In short, it is only through a postmodern ecocritical reading of Steinbeck's *Winter* that one could easily identify Steinbeck's green philosophy that holds, within a monolithic outlook, a symbiotic relationship between nature and man through the sense of place that is endowed with temporal, spatial and moral dimensions. Such a sense is developed along the novel to embrace a sort of ecological ethical commitment toward nature as a place. Wrapping together the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism and the general philosophical rubrics of postmodernism, one finds that they are not only tightly related, but they also evolve out of each other.

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