

An Ecocritical Reading of Banjo Paterson's Bush Ballad The Man from Snowy River

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Abstract

Literature and nature have always shared an intimate correlation across cultures and throughout the ages. The world of literature reflects the beauty of nature, while ecological concerns and the continuous degradation of the environment have given rise to a new branch of literary theory: ecocriticism. This paper argues that the Australian bush ballads of A. B. "Banjo" Paterson embody the essence of ecocritical thinking. The poet emphasizes the vital relationship between living beings and the natural world, while also revealing how nature is endangered by human activity. The Australian bush ballad, with its cultural heritage, fauna, flora, and landscapes, has played a crucial role in shaping cultural identity. Paterson highlights the Australian poetic tradition, expressing his concern for both national identity and global ecological development. In almost every bush ballad, he foregrounds natural elements as central to his vision and demonstrates the interconnection between humans and nature. Therefore, this paper examines how *The Man from Snowy River* manifests an underlying ecocritical awareness. As an eco-conscious poet, Paterson metaphorically sheds light on the urgency of preserving nature from continuous devastation through his bush ballads.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, human-nature relationship, Banjo Paterson, Australian bush ballads*

Ecocriticism is one of the most significant critical movements of recent decades, as it concentrates on the relationship between humans and nature. In the present era,

the world faces ecological crises, and the environment is at high risk. The relevance of ecocriticism lies in its capacity to address these concerns, helping to preserve the planet and safeguard the existence of living beings. The term “ecocriticism” was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Derived from the Greek word *oikos* (house or earth) and *logos* (discourse), the term literally means “the criticism of the house” – the environment as represented in literature. Rueckert defines ecocriticism as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world” (Rueckert 107). Lawrence Buell similarly defines ecocriticism as “a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (Buell 430).

Poetry has played a crucial role in shaping Australian literature. Ironically, the earliest writers in Australia were not native-born Australians but prisoners, convicts, and soldiers from the British settlement in New South Wales in 1788. As Judith Wright notes in *The Generations of Men* (1959): “If there were men of a poetic turn among the convicts and soldiers of the first settlement, they had probably no time or inclination to exercise the gift. Mere survival and a fair share of the rum perhaps filled the early ambitions of most” (Wright 58). From these beginnings, the bush ballad emerged as a poetic tradition that reflected the lives of soldiers, farmers, horsemen, and convicts. Mary E. Fullerton in *The Australian Bush* observes that “All of Australia that is not city, town or suburb, is loosely referred to as ‘the bush’ by most people” (Fullerton 36). Bush poetry captures vivid descriptions of rivers, flora, fauna, and the countryside, while also reflecting the everyday struggles and resilience of people rooted in the Australian landscape and culture. Among its most celebrated exponents was Andrew Barton “Banjo” Paterson (1864–1941), whose works popularized and immortalized the bush ballad tradition.

A. B. Banjo Paterson (1864-1941) was a widely known Australian bush poet, author and journalist. He was born on 17th February, 1864 at Narambla station near Orange in rural New South Wales. Until he was five, he spent his life in the bush on Buckinbah Station near Yeoval in New South Wales. In his early childhood, he delighted in watching horsemen who came from Murrumbidgee River region and picnic races and polo matches which were held near Snowy Mountains. These led to his attraction to horses and inspired him to write abundantly. He joined Sydney Grammar School near Gladesville near Paramatta River. There he dwelled with his grandmother who was also a ballad poetess. He obtained his literary inspiration from his grandmother. He immensely liked to enjoy his leisure time with the associations of bush life. His early ballads appeared from 1880s in *The Bulletin* under the enthusiastic editorship of Mr. J. F. Archibalds who encouraged him to write about the working class people and the life of bush in Australia. He wrote the ballads with the pen name 'The Banjo' which is the name of the racehorse in his station. He published the collected form of ballad entitled *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses* in 1895. The collection of ballads was a huge success. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, he has renowned for his poems and ballads about the rural life in Australia. His work emphasizes on the themes of companionship, bushman, flexibility and the natural beauty of Australian landscape. As an eco-conscious poet, he works on the preservation of wildlife. He reveals the inseparable interrelation between living and nonliving beings in his bush ballads. He denotes nature as a living whole that can help the human being as a source of aspiration. Through his ballads, he portrays about rivers, lands, trees, birds and wild animals and how natural world is affected by the living beings.

Banjo Paterson's bush ballad *The Man from Snowy River* narrates the bush as the place of exciting adventure, valour and freedom. In his poetic masterpiece, he represents the adventurous pastoral lives and agony and resilience of bush people who are deprived of opportunities and freedom. He portrays the outback of Australia which is very resourceful and extremely attached with the land. Bush is concerned as

the source of national pride. As he had the direct connection 'bushrangers', it supported him to compose the bush poetry. His ballads show the profound affection for the ecological landscape and Bushmen who have been living for some time. The landscape in Paterson's ballad is not only a backdrop but also an active power that shapes the destiny of living beings. He sketches his real love of countryside with the natural background of the ballad. He uses 'the horse' metaphorically to express the state of intensity and speed of Australian bush people by using a reckless but brave horseman. The bravery of horseman encourages to Australian to ride horses fearlessly. The ballad portrays the life of "the early Australians, their dare-devilry, extraordinary feats of their courage and their readiness to face the challenges of life" (Gullybaba, 63).

Paterson successfully captures the natural beauty of countryside in Australia and the unconquerable spirit of Bushmen for survival. The ballad opens with the portrayal of gathering of well-skilled and brave horsemen for searching the lost colt across wild bushes. The lost colt is not a normal horse but the prizewinning racehorse that flees from its stable and dwells with wild horses in the mountain. Its owner declares that who can bring him back his horse would be able to give his reward. For that purpose, a large number of well-trained riders have gathered to win the offered prize. The love and fondness of Australians for nonhuman living being like horse is displayed here. His engagement with bush people may describe his tendency to highlight its heroic perspectives. He describes the style and nature of Australian wildlife and the flora and fauna in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The word 'horse' is used repeatedly to focus the attention to the horse imagery against the hilly background. The poet presents the stockmen to take part in the hard expedition to bring back the lost horse. Harrison and Clancy are the two brave and courageous riders in the Snowy River region. They are the brave heroes of Paterson's remarkable poems *Clancy of the Overflow* and *Old Pardon, Son of Reprieve* that are also included in the collected ballads *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*. The poet sketches the theme of bravery, hard laboring, courage, valor and fearlessness of Australian bush

people with the description of Harrison by telling, "But few could ride beside him when his blood was fairly up," and the representation of Clancy by saying, "No better horseman ever held the reins." Such men prove to be stronger like the rough rocky nature of bush who have the power to save the other horsemen. The youngster rider enters with a weedy little horse but he has the courage in quick impatient tread. His self-confidence makes him strong, courageous, proud and lofty. Though he was "a stripling on a small and weedy beast," he bore "the badge of gameness in his bright and fiery eye, / And the proud and lofty carriage of his head" (Paterson, 4).

The bravery of the horseman from Snowy River proves his valor to climb on that bad road in the high mountain. Here the poet skillfully describes the nature which is the primary concern of the present study. From the very beginning to the end of his ballad, he represents the rugged mountainous province. He "keeps the image of the mountains in the background, never concentrating his descriptive focus on any particular aspect of it till he reaches the last stanza of the poem" (Gullybaba, 63-64). The nature of Mountain is vividly shown in such lines as "Where the hills are twice as steep and twice as rough, / Where a horse's hoofs strike firelight from the flint stones every stride" (Paterson, 5). The speaker informs that the other riders who dwell in Snowy River region are regarded the best horsemen ever "And the Snowy River riders on the mountains make their home, / where the river runs those giant hills between; / I have seen full many horsemen since I first commenced to roam." (Paterson, 5) The riders have followed the wild horses that have climbed up the mountainside. After many hardships, the riders have finally found the escaped colt in the rugged mountain region. Paterson's ballads deal with the place of hardship and the resource of national pride. He also shows the importance of multi-aspects of the cultural narratives that make our understanding of the landscape and the Australian people who belong to the bush region.

The courage and valour of the man who have come from Snowy River arrives to the zenith of the mountain. The horsemen who reach the summit have no choice except

descent down the other side. In fact, any small slip means devastating death. All the riders "even Clancy took a pull/ It well might make the boldest hold their breath." (Paterson, 7) Only the rider from Snowy River has returned in the land safely. He goes carefully on the racing place until he arrives to the bottom of the mountain. The horsemen have observed him running at a distant mountainside. He has brought all the wild horses back "like a bloodhound on their track...../But his Pluck was still undaunted and his courage fiery hot, / For never yet was mountain horse a cur." (Paterson, 9) Then, the man from Snowy River comes back his home in Kosciusko. At the beginning of the ballad the other riders have mocked him; he has proved himself as a legend in front of them. The concluding portion of the ballad presents how notable the ballad is- "The man from Snowy River is a household word today/ And the stockmen tell the story of his ride." (Paterson,9)

Paterson shows his passionate love for Australia and Australian bush region. He chooses to employ the simple language used by Australian bush people. Paterson has used pastoral settings to narrate the poem. In this context Tom Wilson tells: "Banjo Paterson's poem *The Man from Snowy River* is a nationally celebrated pastoral which narrates the horse-back pursuit of an escaped colt through mountainous terrain. It is presumed to be so quintessentially Australian's verse that the federal government has seen fit to have the text printed on each and every Australian ten dollar note in micro script, viewable using a magnifying glass." (Wilson, 5) Paterson is an incredible ballad poet who has written about the horse and horsemanship. In bushman fashion, he presents horse as an animal that has been trained for specific tasks like racing. The need for racing is the speed, indomitable courage and endurance and a lot of human drama is involved with it. The poet expresses the cultural landscape of Australia, fauna and flora, the convicts, the horses and the mountains etc.

The sketch of the bush in the ballads of Banjo Paterson represents the expensive insights into the cultural significance of landscape and the perplexities of Australian identity. His work celebrates the myth of the bush that is accepted

as the Australian spirit, focusing its excitement, beauty, heroism and solidarities of its dwellers. The representation of Australian 'bushman' signifies the emerging national identity of the real Australian character and resilience. As the essence of eco-conscious poet, he portrays natural objectives like mountain, trees, lands and horses and sketches his close relationship and deep love for nature. He displays how human beings are dominating and demolishing the non-human natural objectives very casually in the world. He wants to draw the attention that human world needs to be very pure and simple to life and be friendly and sympathetic to wildlife. Therefore, this analysis is an attempt to tell that the poet intimately attaches nature with human being in his bush ballads demanding that those ballads are the epitome of his Eco-consciousness for "Ecocriticism analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relations to nature." (Alam, 13)

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