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Lucy Kirkwood's "The Children" as a Play of Environmental Disaster and Personal Responsibility

ABSTRACT

This study provides an analytical examination of British playwright Lucy Kirkwood's play, *The Children*, with a focus on its portrayal of environmental catastrophe. *The Children* addresses the creative endeavour of portraying the pressing issue of environmental disaster, including the perils associated with nuclear devastation and climate change. This ecocritical study delves into Lucy Kirkwood's play as a poignant exploration of environmental disaster and individual responsibility. The research, structured into an introduction, theoretical framework, analysis, and conclusion, aims to unravel the eco-centric nuances embedded in the narrative. The introduction sets the stage by outlining the study's purpose and hypotheses. The theoretical framework employs ecocritical perspectives to contextualise the play within environmental discourse. The subsequent analysis scrutinises the play's portrayal of environmental catastrophe and the characters' responses, emphasising themes of personal responsibility. The study concludes by synthesising findings and highlighting the play's contribution to eco-literature.

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مسرحية "الأطفال" لـلوسي كيركوود باعتبارها مسرحية عن الكوارث

البيئية والمسؤولية الشخصية

الخلاصة:

تقدم هذه الدراسة فحصاً تحليلياً لمسرحية "الأطفال" للكاتبة المسرحية بريث لوسي كيركوود، مع التركيز على تصويرها للكارثة البيئية. يتناول الأطفال المسعى الإبداعي لتصوير القضية الملحة المتمثلة في الكوارث البيئية، بما في ذلك المخاطر المرتبطة بالدمار النووي وتغير المناخ. تتعمق هذه الدراسة النقدية البيئية في مسرحية لوسي كيركوود باعتبارها استكشافاً مؤثراً للكوارث البيئية والمسؤولية الفردية. يهدف البحث، الذي تم تنظيمه في مقدمة وإطار نظري وتحليل وخاتمة، إلى كشف الفروق الدقيقة التي تركز على البيئة والمضمنة في السرد. تمهد المقدمة الطريق من خلال تحديد غرض الدراسة وفرضياتها. يستخدم الإطار النظري وجهات نظر نقدية بيئية لوضع المسرحية في سياق الخطاب البيئي. يفحص التحليل اللاحق تصوير المسرحية للكارثة البيئية واستجابات الشخصيات، مع التركيز على موضوعات المسؤولية الشخصية. وتختتم الدراسة بتجميع النتائج وإبراز مساهمة المسرحية في الأدب البيئي.

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مجلة الدراسات التاريخية والحضارية مجلة الدراسات التاريخية

Introduction

This study examines the potential of drama and theatrical performances in catalysing good eco-social change. This analysis elucidates how theatre shapes individuals' understanding of ecological issues, their connection to the natural world, and the concept of humanity within the climate change framework. This procedure is fulfilled by applying the ecocriticism theory to the play *The Children* to show how the play presents the idea of ecocriticism on what happens in the world. The study also examines the potential of the play in catalysing positive eco-social change .

This study examines the influence of Green Theatre practices on the perception of the Earth as a dwelling place and the potential for promoting environmentally conscious values and actions. The analysis emphasises the transformative ability of theatre as a medium for fostering a deeper understanding of ecological issues and redirecting societal inclinations towards sustainable and constructive behaviours. It is imperative for the arts and humanities, particularly the theatre, to assume a significant role .This ecocritical inquiry may engender inquiries such as :

- How could concepts like Environmental Disaster and Personal Responsibility be applied in the selected text?

- How was the topic of environmental studies being addressed in the play? Moreover, whether the intervention of writers and theatrical artists is necessary to preserve the environment.

Methodology

The field of study known as ecocriticism examines the interplay between literature and the natural world. According to Abdullah and Abdullah (2021) says that "Ecocriticism is a field of criticism that is concerned with the writings that tackle these themes." Writers in this field of study examine humans' perspectives towards the environment, as conveyed through nature writing. This particular discipline of literary criticism, called green cultural studies, ecopoetic, or environmental literary criticism, encompasses various topics and is recognised by various titles. It is a relatively recent development within the field of literary criticism. In a broad sense, literary criticism explores the interconnections among authors, literary works, and the broader societal context. In the majority of literary theory, and as Greg Garrard notes, the term "the world" is often used interchangeably with "society," referring to the realm of social interactions and relationships (9). Ecocriticism broadens the conceptualisation of "the world" to encompass the entirety of the ecosphere. Ecocriticism adopts a perspective that centres on the Earth in the context of literary criticism. Ecocritics and theorists are engaged in examining various aspects related to

the representation of nature in literature. The researchers investigate the potential impact of the physical environment on the development of the storyline and the extent to which the values conveyed in a piece of literature are by ecological principles. Moreover, place incorporation is regarded as a novel and significant category in conjunction with race, class, and gender. In addition, the authors examine the impact of the environmental catastrophe on current literature and popular culture, as well as the subsequent consequences of this influence. Scholars in the field of literary academia possess specialised knowledge in areas such as value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language, which enables them to make substantial contributions to the field of environmental philosophy. The present study utilises ecocritical theory as a methodological framework to analyse the play "The Children" and explore its representation of ecocriticism in the context of global events, drawing on the insights of William Rueckert and his essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Moreover, this investigation examines the capacity of play to catalyse and facilitate the advancement of good eco-social transformation .

The prolonged discussion over the issue of climate change and the adverse effects of human activities on the environment has endured for a considerable time. As the ongoing discussion continues, the progressively intensifying levels of heightened temperatures, climate change, environmental catastrophes, and

rising sea levels significantly impact virtually all human existence. In the present challenging context, renowned authors, playwrights, actors, and thinkers find themselves compelled to address the urgent matter of climate change, which presents a substantial peril to the endurance and sustainable existence of humanity and the environment. Mayall asserts that the individuals mentioned above exhibit a notable degree of conscientiousness about their societal obligations, as evidenced by their active involvement in disseminating knowledge about climate science. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that climate science plays a pivotal role in promoting a vital cultural shift that can enable positive transformations (32).

Analysis and Discussion

Across various historical periods, artists have constantly been responsible for documenting and representing the state of society and the encompassing natural environment within which society exists (Abrahams vii). From an ecocritical perspective, the artistic pursuit of tackling climate change and other environmental concerns can be understood as an aesthetic representation and examination of what Hassall describes as "the contemporary embodiment of Frankenstein's monster in the twenty-first century." This characterisation introduces a moral and psychological predicament that profoundly resonates with the broader societal context (2). The amalgamation of the concepts 'Green' and 'Theatre' can yield diverse outcomes

within both theoretical and practical realms. The combination of theatre and green performance within their respective contexts signifies the merging of these two unique entities, resulting in a cohesive eco-artistic response.

This study examines the influence of Green Theatre practices on fostering a profound comprehension of the Earth as a habitat and redirecting societal inclinations towards environmentally conscious and constructive values and actions. The central emphasis lies in the potency of theatre as a literary catalyst. According to Una Chaudhuri, achieving ecological victory necessitates a radical transformation that is currently difficult to conceive (26). It is imperative for the arts and humanities, particularly the theatre, to assume a significant role.

Hazel and Robin, two nuclear scientists in their mid-sixties and the protagonists of *The Children*, live in "a small cottage on the east coast." They are now threatened by radiation pollution due to a recent accident at the local power station where they used to work. They establish a humble existence for themselves following an ecological catastrophe. They have a Geiger counter and ration their electricity and water in case there is any radiation leakage. However, Hazel is resolved to keep her life as regular and healthy as possible. Now, Robin tends crops while Hazel does yoga and eats healthy greens. Their delicately balanced lives are thrown off-kilter when Rose, a former coworker they have not seen in 38 years, unexpectedly shows

up. Even if it means their destruction, Rose is adamant that they must right the wrongs they have made for the next generation to mitigate the effects of radiation and restore the functionality of the damaged atomic equipment. She is assembling a group of retired scientists. The author contends that an ethical imbalance exists in which young scientists are subjected to life-threatening circumstances to rectify their older counterparts' actions. Ultimately, the marital partners are persuaded and reach a consensus regarding Rose's entreaty, albeit its potentially lethal consequences. Lucy Kirkwood's three-character play depicts a realistic, post-nuclear society in which questions of responsibility, remorse, and morality are examined (Farnell 40).

The 2010 have seen significant efforts to address the current ecological challenges. Certain dramas have predominantly served a didactic purpose, employing scientific terminology, but others raise awareness by highlighting the impending catastrophe and the impact of individuals' daily behaviours on the environment. In addition to individual endeavours, collective theatrical establishments and ensembles actively participate in this activism movement. The Royal Court has contributed significantly to this cause by producing and presenting numerous plays. Nevertheless, it has been observed that in most ecological spaces, children are portrayed as individuals who bear the weight of an environmentally polluted legacy. Lucy Kirkwood's play explores the enduring consequences of

previous mistakes on the lives of present-day individuals and future generations. The theatrical production represents a contemporary manifestation of the increasing efforts within the field to address complex inquiries about the environment and humanity's destiny. This cognitive process encompasses considerations not limited to human beings but extends to technology, species, chemicals, and ecosystems. The ecological motivation for *The Children* lies in its ability to emphasise global warming and climate change without resorting to excessive didacticism. As the play progresses, these pressing environmental issues become increasingly prominent, moving beyond the mundane challenges of an apocalyptic present scenario. Kirkwood creates connections between the current circumstances and the eco-social forces that will influence the future. In this regard, the play dynamically oscillates between dialogues and a sequence of monologues that depict environmental disasters, employing apocalyptic rhetoric .

Kirkwood is a highly regarded British playwright and screenwriter with numerous accolades, including wins and nominations for various prestigious prizes. The playwright drew inspiration from a notable ecological catastrophe that transpired in Japan in the year 2011. A seismic event of magnitude 9.1 resulted in a tsunami that inundated the Fukushima region, leading to catastrophic damage to the Daiichi nuclear facility. This incident significantly released radioactive materials, surpassing the permissible radiation thresholds and causing

widespread contamination. During her interview with The English Theatre in 2019, Kirkwood expressed her desire to create a theatrical work centred around climate change. However, she acknowledged her uncertainty over the appropriate technique to tackle this subject matter .

For a long time, I had been looking for a form to write about climate change in a way that was emotionally rather than intellectually driven. What is essential and theatrical to me is not the facts of climate change —we all know the facts now. (4)

The evidence and indications of the detrimental effects of human activities on the environment are substantial and cannot be disregarded. The intriguing aspect lies in the discrepancy between our knowledge of the facts and our profound inability to modify our behaviours, leading to terrible outcomes effectively. In this way, the play is understood as a manifestation of the playwright's genuine intention to bring about socio-ecological transformation. Kirkwood's play, when analysed via an ecocritical lens, addresses numerous pressing issues of the present era that evoke a sense of anxiety and trauma among its viewers. These issues can be attributed to environmental difficulties affecting current and future generations. This play holds considerable significance as it addresses the issue of climate change and its repercussions on current and future generations. Kirkwood's dramatic work acknowledges and honours the characters' environmental challenges, which result

in their displacement and significantly impact their physical and psychological well-being. The drama demonstrates a significant concern for ecological disasters, regardless of whether natural phenomena or human activities cause them. The city had a severe earthquake, "saw the road cracked down the middle," observed Hazel (The Children 11). The occurrence leads to a tsunami that causes the water level to recede for a considerable distance. In her attempt to navigate her house, Hazel describes the sensation of walking through the flooded space, with the carpet making a squelching sound and an overwhelming feeling of despair, accompanied by an unpleasant odour (The Children 18).

Furthermore, the nuclear power plant is impacted, resulting in its demise and the subsequent emission of atomic radiation in the vicinity. "waded through it [house] up the stairs, the carpet squelching and something else, something dreadful, a smell a feeling a hopelessness" (The Children 11). The region affected by the phenomenon completely lacks indigenous flora and fauna, leading the government to designate it as an "exclusion zone" (The Children 11). Hazel and Robin are compelled to vacate their farmhouse, which significantly impacts their mental well-being, as Hazel elaborates. The play effectively integrates and mirrors the devastation of the external world with that of the internal identities .

From an ecocritical perspective, an environmental catastrophe and the resulting dislocation have induced psychological distress in each of the three individuals, albeit to different extents. Robin experiences a condition of denial, as evidenced by his daily visits to the "exclusionary zone" under the pretence of tending to his animal farm, which had already perished due to the catastrophe. When Rose exhibits compassionate emotions towards his condition, Robin demonstrates an unusual reaction, stating, "No I sort of...I dunno, I quite enjoy it. I cry a lot. Sometimes I get to the end of the day and I realise I've been crying for...six or seven hours" (The Children 53). Conversely, Hazel experiences a condition of psychological turmoil. This is evident in her dialogue with Rose, as she recounts the distressing recollections of the catastrophe and its ramifications: "I cried, Rose, I just sank down at the bottom of the stairs...and I was just...crying ...the mess was just overwhelming. It was overwhelming Rose" (The Children 18). The catastrophe has moreover had a tangible and psychological impact on Rose personally. At the commencement of the play, Rose finds herself bespattered with blood resulting from severe epistaxis—an element of the plot that warrants significant attention in a disquieting theatrical production centred on the consequences of an atomic catastrophe. The name "Ross" holds considerable significance, perhaps extending beyond its mere designation as a name. It might serve as a symbol of nature itself, with the

individual bearing this name assuming the role of a spokesperson for the natural world .

Following the tragedy, she relocated to the United States and endured a severe case of breast cancer, resulting in the necessity of a double mastectomy. She is in a state of solitude, in the most literal interpretation of the term, lacking any familial connections – devoid of offspring or a partner. Hence, it may be asserted that all three characters experience a genuine physical and psychological dislocation when the Earth ceases to provide a secure environment for its residents. The play incorporates ideas and perspectives from environmental activism while exploring the complexities of environmental justice among different generations. These themes are central to the theatrical portrayal of the story. This analysis delves into the ethical, individual, and intergenerational intricacies brought to the forefront by climate change and related environmental issues. The play's ecocritical message revolves around themes of redemption, compensation, and the pursuit of salvation as a response to the disastrous consequences of human interference in the natural world. Kirkwood's sombre theatrical production explores the elemental essence of existence within a devastated environment, prompting significant concerns regarding the global catastrophe and offering potential pathways towards sustainable resolutions. This notion is exemplified in Rose's stated objective, which she deliberately withholds until the conclusion of the play. Ross monitors the current status of the plant and reports ;

Ross: This morning, there was a radiation spike. They should be pulling them all out [the scientists working there now], but they cannot. There are significant leaks in unit 2, and there is contaminated water flooding into the discharge channel (The Children 45).

Rose possesses a profound awareness of the ecological transgressions committed by her generation and experiences a sense of remorse regarding the far-reaching consequences these actions have on both the current and future generations .

Ross: We built a nuclear reactor next to the sea, then put the emergency generators in the basement! We left them with a shit show waiting to happen and no evacuation procedure! And then they were standing in the dark, trying to fix something we could have predicted, we should have predicted, opening valves by hand, even though it was already too late! (The Children 48–49).

The play addresses significant contemporary notions of humanity's responsibility towards the environment, interpersonal relationships, and the well-being of present and future generations. The work showcases complex and identifiable individuals grappling with a moral quandary currently being faced on a global scale. Kirkwood espouses the environmental principle of thinking globally and acting locally in her play. The

space resonates with the principles of sustainable structures by asserting its objective to minimise the utilisation of resources. The area lasts 90 minutes and is set in a single location, with a cast comprising only three characters. The enclosed environment in Kirkwood's work compels the characters to confront a moral dilemma without any opportunity for physical evasion. Kirkwood's selection of the play's title can be interpreted as having ecocritical symbolism. "It seemingly alludes to the offspring of Hazel and Robin while also serving as a symbolic gesture towards future generations who will bear the burdens of environmental contamination in a vulnerable manner" (Interview with Lucy Kirkwood 3). Paradoxically, children perceive themselves as unable to influence their surroundings, while the play serves as a discourse on how we may impact our world. Responsibility has been a subject of constant discourse in contemporary times. The habits and practices of preceding generations have engendered increased difficulties for subsequent cohorts. The play serves as a platform for addressing environmental concerns and urges audience members to reflect on their actions, the resulting consequences, and the potential impact on future generations. Within a global context characterised by widespread disorder after a catastrophic ecological calamity, the theatrical production prompts inquiries on the individuals or entities accountable for the situation and the nature of the proposed resolution.

Conclusion

The play can be interpreted through an ecocritical lens, revealing its dual purpose of advocating for action and serving as a dramatic vehicle for rejecting the concept of limitation. The distinguishing feature of *The Children* is how Kirkwood artistically portrays a highly intense ecological disaster inside a realist framework, incorporating elements of both formal experience and a futuristic backdrop. The theatrical production serves as a compelling exposition that compels humanity to consider the possibly catastrophic consequences of their decisions. The three characters exhibit distinct responses to the ethical issue of self-sacrifice and social commitment, influenced by their individual objectives and intricate affiliations. Rose demonstrates a proactive approach by assuming accountability and making amends for their previous actions. The underlying justification is that individuals participating in the problem-creation process should also be responsible for its resolution. Robin consents to Rose's plea, and Hazel acquiesces after that. Initially, the individual expresses concern for her four offspring and contemplates the rationale behind being denied the privilege of witnessing the maturation of her grandchildren firsthand. Over time, she realises she must engage in self-sacrifice to provide a secure future for her immediate offspring, descendants, and future generations. The conclusion of the play signifies the culmination of the characters' sincere commitment to their noble environmental cause. The scene concludes with a

tranquil tableau, with two women engaged in yoga practice and Robin partaking in a cigarette as the ocean tide rhythmically ebbs and flows. This evocative imagery serves as a poignant reminder of the potential for a promising and environmentally conscious future for the younger generation.

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