

**ECOCRITICISM AND GREEN THOUGHT IN  
SHAKESPEARE'S AS YOU LIKE IT: A PASTORAL READING**  
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**ABSTRACT:**

Ecocriticism is a literary method that investigates the connection between literature and the natural environment. William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is examined through the lens of ecocriticism, focusing on how the concept of ecological awareness and green thought is expressed. The setting of the Forest of Arden is central to the analysis, contrasting the corrupt, hierarchical court life with a progressive, harmonious natural world. From an ecocritical perspective, the forest functions not merely as a pastoral backdrop but as an active space that enables moral renewal, social equality, and sustainable coexistence between humans and nature. Characters such as Duke Senior and Rosalind gain ethical clarity and emotional freedom through their interaction with nature, suggesting Shakespeare's critique of anthropocentric power structures and artificial social norms. The play emphasizes green thought by portraying nature as a teacher and healer rather than a resource to exploit. Images of seasonal change, animal life, and rural labour emphasize the interdependence between humans and the non-human world. Jaques' reflections on the wounded deer reveal a proto-ecological sensitivity to animal suffering, anticipating modern concerns about environmental ethics and compassion. Furthermore, Arden offers an alternative ecological model grounded in simplicity, balance, and communal living, resisting the excesses of political ambition and material greed associated with court life. By applying ecocritical theory, this play challenges human dominance over nature and celebrates ecological harmony.

**KEYWORDS:**

Ecocriticism, Green thought, Anthropocentrism, Environmental ethics, Pastoral Ecology, Human-Nature relationship.

**Introduction:**

Ecocriticism in *As You Like It* is seen through the representation of nature and the articulation of human relationships with the environment. It constructs a pastoral world that highlights ecological harmony, ethical living, and a nuanced human–nature relationship, thereby challenging anthropocentric assumptions prevalent in court life. Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are central and superior to the natural world and that it operates subtly in this play. Through the lens of ecocriticism, this play reveals an alternative ecological model grounded in simplicity, communal existence, and resistance to the material greed and political ambition that dominate the court. The central ecocritical argument hinges on the contrast between the artificial, excess–laden court and the natural restorative environment of Arden. In the court, human desires are unrestrained, reflecting an anthropocentric worldview that subjugates nature to human ambition.

The Forest of Arden emerges as a symbolic and functional space where green thought operates, enabling most of the characters to retreat to the Forest of Arden and escape from the discriminations and injustices of real life. Shakespeare presents it as a reviving space, but it ultimately functions in service of human needs rather than as an independent ecological entity. In the play, nature is valued mainly for its usefulness to human characters. The Forest of Arden provides refuge, emotional healing, and moral education to those exiled from court. Duke Senior praises the forest life as more “free from peril than the envious court,” yet his appreciation is framed through human comfort and ethical improvement, not concern for the forest itself. Nature becomes a backdrop that enables self–discovery and harmony among people. The treatment of animals further reveals anthropocentric attitudes. When Jaques laments the killing of deer, his sympathy appears momentary and philosophical rather than transformative. The deer are hunted to sustain human life, and their suffering does not alter the characters’ behaviour. This reinforces the idea that animal life is secondary to

human survival and pleasure.

Green thought in the play manifests through the celebration of communal, simple living that aligns with sustainable principles. The characters in Arden experience a harmonious human-nature relationship, where nature not only acts as a backdrop but as an active participant in shaping human behaviour and ethics. The forest is abandoned once political order is re-established, suggesting that nature is a temporary space for human correction rather than a permanent, valued environment. Thus, while Shakespeare gestures toward harmony with nature, this play remains fundamentally anthropocentric, portraying the natural world as a resource and moral tool focused on human concerns. This play articulates an early and nuanced environmental ethic through its pastoral setting and its exploration of the human court.

The Forest of Arden offers a moral alternative to the court setting, representing simplicity, balance, and coexistence. It suggests that ethical living is closely connected to living in harmony with nature. Duke Senior's appreciation of forest life emphasizes acceptance of natural hardships such as cold and hunger as honest experiences that teach humility and resilience. This promotes an ethic of respect for natural laws rather than domination over them. The role of hunting and its involvement in the forest highlights the moral discomfort involving the exploitation of animals for human benefit. Though his protest does not stop the practice, it introduces a reflective consciousness about animal suffering and human intrusion into natural habitats, hinting at proto-ecological sensitivity. However, the play's environmental ethic remains limited by anthropocentrism. Nature is valued primarily for its role in reforming human character and restoring social order. The forest is ultimately left behind once harmony is achieved, reinforcing the idea that nature serves as a moral testing ground rather than an entity with intrinsic value. Overall, *As You Like It* presents a balanced environmental ethic that recognizes nature as a moral guide and a space that deserves respect, while still subordinating it to human

needs and social restoration.

The play establishes a sharp division between the court and the forest, reflecting two opposing modes of existence. The court, being marked by ambition, violence, and exploitation, is exemplified by Duke Frederick's usurpation of power and Oliver's mistreatment of Orlando. This environment reflects human arrogance and domination, values that ecocriticism identifies as central to ecological degradation. The court represents an artificial, rigid system disconnected from natural rhythms and ethical harmony. In contrast, the Forest of Arden embodies a green space where natural law supersedes political authority. Here, characters live in closer alignment with nature, at times learning to endure hardship, respect, and simplicity. Duke Senior's acceptance of forest life illustrates this transformation. His speech celebrating "the uses of adversity" highlights nature's capacity to instruct humanity morally and spiritually. The forest becomes a corrective space where ecological awareness replaces greed and competition, suggesting that ethical regeneration is inseparable from environmental engagement.

The Forest of Arden shapes human consciousness by demanding adaptation and cooperation. Life in the forest requires respect for natural cycles where food must be hunted, seeking shelter and sacrificing a comfortable life. These conditions foster ecological humility, reminding humans of their dependence on the environment rather than mastery over it. The forest also encourages a sense of community that transcends social rank. Nobles and commoners coexist, dissolving rigid status structures that characterize court life. This social balancing reflects green thought, which challenges structures of domination whether social or environmental and advocates balance and inclusivity. The forest thus becomes a democratic ecological space where survival depends on harmony rather than power.

Oliver, the elder brother of Orlando, has been painted black in the first half of the play. Apart from his misbehaviour with his

brother, he even plots to kill him by burning. Such a wicked fellow, when he enters the Forest of Arden, undergoes conversion after being rescued by his brother from the attacks of a snake and a lioness. Another character to experience such a sudden change of attitude is Duke Frederick. In the beginning of the play, he is a usurper banishing his brother after snatching his dukedom. At the end of this play, we find him retiring from worldly life, restoring all his wealth and power to his brother. The reason behind these conversions is the magical power possessed by the Forest of Arden. Here, ecocriticism offers a more reasonable interpretation. According to it, nature itself has a benevolent influence upon all creatures. Once you come under its soothing effect, you will find peace and rest within yourself. Such was the case of Oliver and Duke Frederick too. After the tedious ways of life in the court, when they entered into the peaceful and serene atmosphere of the forest, they realized the meaninglessness of wealth, power, and lust leading nowhere but to damnation. So, they overthrew all their evil designs in order to live a new life in the lap of nature.

### **Duke Senior and Green Philosophy**

Duke Senior functions as the primary spokesperson for green thought in the play. His philosophy embraces nature as a moral teacher and rejects excessive materialism. By choosing exile over confrontation, he aligns himself with natural processes of withdrawal and renewal. His leadership style in the forest emphasizes cooperation, restraint, and respect for the environment. In Duke Senior's opinion, nature guides us on the way to live in harmony with her. Animals and birds are part of the physical environment, and damage to their lives will affect the peace of human happiness. This philosophy is evident through Duke Senior's reflections on hunting which implies the realization of ecological sensitivity. Though he unintentionally kills deer for survival, he later expresses regret, acknowledging that animals are the rightful inhabitants of the forest and that they should not be harmed at any cost. This uncertainty reflects Shakespeare's nuanced understanding of human

interaction with nature—recognizing necessity while on the other hand questioning exploitation. This sort of understanding anticipates the search for sustainable coexistence in modern ecological ethics rather than absolute abstention or unchecked consumption.

### **Observation of Ecocritical Element in the Character of Jaques**

Jaques, who is described as a satirist or philosopher, offers a complex ecological perspective through his melancholy and critical observations. Jaques' discomfort with human intrusion into nature is articulated, and his lament over the wounded deer foregrounds animal suffering. This suffering challenges the moral legitimacy of human dominance. Through Jaques, Shakespeare gives voice to a proto-environmental consciousness that questions anthropocentrism and highlights ethical responsibility toward non-human life. Jaques' famous "All the world's a stage" speech, when read ecocritically, underscores the transient nature of human existence. By situating humanity within a larger temporal and natural framework, the speech diminishes human centrality and reinforces the idea that humans are merely one part of a vast ecological system. This perspective aligns closely with ecocritical efforts to decentre the human subject in literary analysis.

### **Rosalind and Natural Identity**

Rosalind's transformation in the forest further illustrates green thought. Disguised as Ganymede, she adapts fluidly to the forest environment, shedding the restrictive norms imposed by courtly society. Her intellectual freedom and emotional growth are facilitated by the natural setting, suggesting that nature enables authentic self-expression. The forest allows Rosalind to negotiate identity beyond social constructs of gender, class, and authority. This flexibility mirrors ecological principles of diversity and adaptability. From an ecocritical standpoint, Rosalind's experience reinforces the idea that human identity flourishes in harmony with natural surroundings, unburdened by artificial constraints.

## **Pastoral Idealism and Ecological Realism**

While *As You Like It* celebrates pastoral life, Shakespeare does not present nature as entirely idyllic. Hunger, discomfort, and danger persist in the forest, reminding audiences that nature demands resilience and responsibility. This balance prevents the play from descending into romantic escapism and instead offers an ecological realism that acknowledges both the generosity and severity of the natural world. Such representation aligns with contemporary ecocriticism, which resists idealizing nature and instead emphasizes reciprocal relationships. Shakespeare suggests that living sustainably requires acceptance of hardship and limitation—an idea increasingly relevant in the context of modern environmental crises.

## **Reconciliation and Ecological Restoration**

The resolution of the play, marked by reconciliation and return, symbolizes ecological restoration. Duke Frederick's conversion and renunciation of power suggest moral awakening influenced by proximity to nature. Order is restored not through violence but through transformation, reflecting green thought's emphasis on renewal rather than retribution. Importantly, the play does not advocate permanent escape from society but proposes the integration of ecological values into human governance. The return of characters to the court implies that nature has taught them humility, cooperation, and respect for the natural order.

## **Conclusion**

An ecocritical reading of *As You Like It* reveals Shakespeare's profound engagement with green thought long before the emergence of environmental discourse as a formal field. Through the Forest of Arden, Shakespeare presents nature as a moral, philosophical, and transformative force that challenges human arrogance and promotes ecological balance. The play critiques exploitative systems, celebrates simplicity, and envisions a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. By foregrounding interdependence, adaptability, and ethical coexistence, *As You Like It* resonates

strongly with contemporary environmental concerns. Shakespeare's pastoral vision thus transcends its historical context, offering enduring insights into ecological responsibility and the necessity of aligning human values with the rhythms of nature. The play stands as a significant early text in the tradition of ecocritical literature, affirming that green thought is deeply rooted in literary imagination.

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