

MSC 2020**International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.
COMMUNICATION»****ELIZABETH VON ARNIM'S EARLY NOVELS IN THE LIGHT OF
ECO-CRITICISM**

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(a) Pskov State University, Pskov, Russian Federation, rosenoire@yandex.ru**Abstract**

The novels of E. von Arnim (1866-1941), a famous British novelist, are now enjoying great popularity. She is renowned for her books that celebrate different types of novels: garden novels, travelogues, epistolary novels, diary novels. Her works represent an enchanting half-forgotten world of late Edwardian Britain with memorable characters acting in stunning settings in different parts of Europe. In this article we try to approach the novels *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), *The Solitary Summer* (1899), and her autobiography *All the Dogs of My Life* (1936) from the ecocritical point of view. We determine the works that gave rise to eco literature and the influence of H. D. Thoreau's ideas on her novels. A detailed analysis of von Arnim's novels proves that they can be interpreted as "eco literature" because they represent the most crucial eco issues. We show that the novels reflect the complex relations between people and nature; they reveal models both of beneficial and disagreeable interaction. We highlight that some extracts can allow us to imagine what the European landscape was like about a century ago and what rare species of roses could be found in gardens. Nowadays when eco-writing is regarded as a tool to convey ecological problems in a comprehensible manner, our study of E. von Arnim's novels is well-timed.

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1. Introduction

The works of the British novelist Elizabeth von Arnim (1866-1941) have been a matter of discussion for various literary critics for quite a long period of time. Researchers and literary critics in different countries of the world have been disputing the phenomenon of *Elizabeth* and the mystery of her laconic pseudonym that had become a certain symbol of high quality for the lovers of her novels at the beginning of the XX century. There have been numerous attempts to determine the key of her success and the recipe for popularity and growing interest in her works. There are articles and books dedicated to the problems of genre and literary influence, recurring themes and ideas in her books (Maddison, 2017; Maddison et al., 2017; O'Connell, 2017; Römhild, 2017; Shepherd, 2017). It is necessary to mention that even average readers in their turn also tried to disclose the secret of her novels, as they unravel the patterns which combine the artistic world of the writer (one may find a great number of thought-provoking insights into her literary work while browsing book reviews). Extraordinary female characters in their pursuit of happiness on the brink of escapism and descriptions of nature play a significant role in the structure of Elizabeth von Arnim's novels. When reading her novels one delves into nature in all its forms and representations: English and German styles in planning one's garden, detailed descriptions of forests, trees, and flowers, astounding scenery are interwoven with allusions at William Wordsworth, H. D. Thoreau, R. L. Stevenson and many other distinguished writers and poets. All these factors contribute to the special atmosphere of unity with nature. In this article we are planning to consider her novels of early period *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), *The Solitary Summer* (1899), and her autobiography *All the Dogs of My Life* (1936) in the light of eco-criticism and problems of relationships between people and the environment.

2. Problem Statement

To begin with, we are going to study in details the notions fundamental for our research, such as eco-criticism, eco-writing and romantic ecology, then, we are to follow the interconnection between poets-romanticists and the representatives of transcendentalism. The research is based on the works of researchers and philosophers: Adamson (2018), Bavidge (2018), Kirkpatrick (2016), Ryan (2019), Sharma (2016), Thoreau (1862), Williams (2017).

Eco-criticism emerged as a trend in the 1970s and there have been three waves in the development of eco-criticism (it totally depended on different genres), nevertheless, there is no definition of this term revealing all the aspects of this notion that one can find in dictionaries. Eco-criticism comprises the studies of contemporary eco-writing and re-thinking of the works of previous centuries, primarily, the Romanticism poetry. Eco-writing is the term generally applied to prosaic and poetic works in which the author highlights the idea of interconnection and interdependence of everything that happens in the natural world and the author admits the intrinsic value not only of the man but of the natural world as well. The term "romantic ecology" goes back to the origin of contemporary eco-criticism because in the works of the Lake School representatives we can observe the ideas of reverence towards the wild nature.

Subsequently, the idea of the necessity of harmonious co-existence of the man and the nature was elaborated in the works of H. D. Thoreau, the famous American poet, thinker and naturalist, one of the leading representatives of transcendentalism. He argued against the misuse of nature and he strove to prove

by the example of his own life the possibility of harmonious co-existence with the flora and fauna. Nowadays we can witness the growing influence of ecocriticism for there are many papers and books on it in different fields of literature. Williams (2017) gives a detailed overview on Victorian ecocriticism, Adamson (2019) introduces the concept of “environmental justice discourse that recognizes the interdependency of people and places” (p. 1), Ryan (2019) accentuates the British and American writers (starting from William Wordsworth and up to Annie Dillard) “as voices for/of vulnerable places and non-human beings” (p. 2). The papers delve into different aspects of ecocriticism while their major goal is to prove that (if one may quote Dr. V. Sharma) “ecocriticism serves this precise purpose that studies the literature and the environment where the scholars of vary realms discuss, analyze and formulate texts on environmental and concerns and challenges on the subject of nature” (Sharma, 2016, p. 60).

3. Research Questions

In our article we adhere to the principle stated by Jenny Bavidge in her article *Environment and Nature in Contemporary British Fiction and Poetry*:

an ecocritic will ask what sort of images are used to describe nature in a poem or novel, or think about the kind of attitudes towards or ideas about the environment they might find in literary work, or they might look back into history to see what the literature of the past had to say about nature” (Bavidge, 2018, p. 45).

We shall now examine the afore-mentioned works of Elizabeth von Arnim in the light of ecocriticism. The first pages of the novel *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* set the tone to the literary work. The novel is done in the form of a journal and it covers the events of one year, from May, 7 to April, 18. It is a first-person narrative, and Elizabeth speaks in details about her garden, and it is the garden space gradually explored by the protagonist that structures the novel. The garden becomes the pivot of all the events, it has a protective function and it contributes to self-discovery. The time spent in the garden, and the interaction of the protagonist with the nature and the birds exposes the problematic relationships of the man and the nature.

The writer builds her literary work on philosophical ideas and trends of H. D. Thoreau who in his famed essay *Walking* juxtaposes people who are able to enjoy the beauty of nature who prefer living in the countryside and taking long walks and those who live in the city and are deprived of this opportunity: “This is less a garden than a wilderness. No one has lived in the house, much less in the garden, for twenty-five years, and it is such a pretty old place that the people who might have lived here and did not, deliberately preferring the horrors of a flat in a town, must have belonged to that vast number of eyeless and earless persons of whom the world seems chiefly composed. Noseless, too, though it does not sound pretty; but the greater part of my spring happiness is due to the scent of the wet earth and young leaves” (von Arnim, 1898, p. 4). The genuine epithets “eyeless”, “noseless” and “earless” used by the narrator to depict people who are indifferent to nature are not only typical of von Arnim’s ironic style, but they also have a very important function, for they create an impressive antithesis of two groups of people.

4. Purpose of the Study

Henry David Thoreau dwells upon the importance of nature and long walks (combined with contemplations and meditations on what one has seen or witnessed) for any person, because all this contributes to spiritual perfection and awakening. The thinker dwells upon the origin of the verb *to saunter*, explaining that there exist two complementary versions that clarify the true meaning of walking. According to the first one, vagabonds and beggars were called in such a way in the Middle Ages who were walking about and asking for some money presumably to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (la Sainte Terre). The second version gives another explanation and states that the word is derived from the phrase *sans terre*, so on the one hand, such a person does not possess any land or home, but on the other hand, such a person will find a home everywhere (Thoreau, 1862). Thoreau (1862) prefers the first version and regards any walk as a kind of pilgrimage or even a crusade. The unity with nature, when a person can watch the forests, bogs, rare species of animals and birds, makes this person a blessed one, receiving Divine Revelation.

Thus Thoreau (1862) constantly reminds the readers of their responsibility before the environment providing some vivid examples:

We are accustomed to say in New England that few and fewer pigeons visit us every year. Our forests furnish no masts for them. So, it would seem, few and fewer thoughts visit each growing man from year to year, for the grove in our minds is laid waste, – sold to feed unnecessary fires of ambition, or sent to mill, and there is scarcely a twig left for them to perch on (Thoreau, 1862).

The destruction of the environment is equated with impoverishment and destruction of the mind, while any communication with nature can restore the disrupted balance:

There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you (Thoreau, 1862).

We believe that here we can find some echoes of the Renaissance ideas, in particular, the works of Leon Battista Alberti who paid special attention to such features of a *villa* as its openness and immersion into nature that is essential for the people living in it. The famous essay of H. D. Thoreau is devoted to the idea of achieving divine state by people through communication with nature. For this purpose walking must be combined with reflections. Summing up, H. D. Thoreau writes:

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn (Thoreau, 1862).

5. Research Methods

Leslie de Charms, daughter of Elizabeth von Arnim, states that Elizabeth was well versed in H. D. Thoreau's works and frequently read them in different periods of her life:

Probably Pepys, Montaigne, Lamb, Gibbon – to mention but a few permanently kept on the pillar shelves – were in the same fireside category, while Thoreau, Goethe, Keats, Spenser, Wordsworth and Shakespeare were some of her companions out of doors. She was particularly fond of Thoreau at this time (de Charms, 1958, p. 67).

Further on, we can see that her own ideas resonate with the ideas expressed by H. D. Thoreau, in her books we may follow the key motif that is the necessity of unity with nature. For Elizabeth von Arnim watching the surrounding nature, being in the midst of it, admiring the beauty of forests, fields and flowers helps any keen observer feel the presence of God:

My garden is surrounded by cornfields and meadows, and beyond are great stretches of sandy heath and pine forests, and where the forests leave off the bare heath begins again; but the forests are beautiful in their lofty, pink-stemmed vastness, far overhead the crowns of softest gray-green, and underfoot a bright green whortleberry carpet, and everywhere the breathless silence; and the bare heaths are beautiful too, for one can see across them into eternity almost, and to go out onto them with one's face toward the setting sun is like going into the very presence of God (von Arnim, 1898, p. 5-6).

6. Findings

Close attention to details, punctilious recitation of all kinds of flowers and plants growing in the forest or in the garden takes us back to the text of the novel as a document that recorded for us a certain natural area at a certain period of time. One can find detailed information on the surrounding landscape of her husband's estate in Nassenheide, with its gardens, fields and forests, and these descriptions are of great value for they represent the natural area at the turn of the century, the area that was later disfigured during the First and the Second World Wars.

It is worth noting that going for a walk to a forest (or rather an escape to a forest) is one of recurring episodes in some of her early novels. It reflects her personal experience, for when she relates her first years of marriage in her autobiography *All the Dogs of My Life* she depicts escaping to a forest as a way to hide from the tiresome and unpleasant duties and burdens of being a married woman and a wife of a German count:

We [she and her dog, Cornelia] frisked across the unreproachful fields, laughing and talking – I swear she laughed and talked, – to the cover of the nearest wood. <...>The March wind, blowing my skirt all anyhow, and causing Cornelia's ears to stream out behind her, didn't care a fig that I was a fleeting *Hausfrau*; the woods, when we got to them – those clear light woods of silver birches, free from obscuring undergrowth, – welcomed us with beauty, just as though I were deserving as anybody else. Pale beauty it was, in a pale sun; beauty of winter delicately dying, of branches bare, except for mistletoe. But beneath the branches were the first signs of spring, for down among last year's dead leaves, in groups, in patches, in streams, and in some places in lakes, hepaticas were beginning to cover the ground with their heavenly blue (von Arnim, 2000, p. 26).

The cited excerpt demonstrates efficiently that the writer regards the interaction between the man and the nature as a kind of communication that frees from any conventions and the forest acts as a friend that gives shelter and shares its mysteries giving an attentive observer an opportunity to notice all the changes in the landscape that happen in spring. The beauty of the forest has a positive impact upon the man, and the consummate goal of any walk is to achieve the state of happiness. The same motif can be seen in the text of the novel *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*:

The garden is the place I go to for refuge and shelter, not the house. <...> It is there that that all my sins and silliness are forgiven, there that I feel protected and at home, and every flower and a weed is a friend and every tree a lover (von Arnim, 1898, p. 38-39).

The garden is a part of nature though it is mastered by the man and is cultivated; it is juxtaposed to the house and to the city (which represent the civilization where a person is not free). Plants and trees “accept” people as they are, with all their weaknesses and drawbacks, in any emotional state, and owing to this the man displays the inner world, the best qualities and achieves the calmness of the mind, whereas the city impoverishes his life and deprives him of the opportunity to be a part of the nature.

Flowers, bushes and trees play a significant role in the novels *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* and *The Solitary Summer*. The journal entry of the 15 of September opens up with a lyrical and emotional description of nature and the idyllic scene of the family reunion in the country estate, where the children play in the garden and taste different berries, while her husband is busy hunting. These scenes of everyday life alternate with the skilful descriptions of the autumn garden and the protagonist does not hide her feelings because of the impending separation with the nature:

This is the month of quiet days, crimson creepers, and blackberries; of mellow afternoons in the ripening garden; of tea under the acacias instead of the too shady beeches; of wood-fires in the library in the chilly evenings.<...>It is hard to believe that in three months we shall probably be snowed up and certainly be cold. There is a feeling about this month that reminds me of March and the early days of April, when spring is still hesitating on the threshold and the garden holds its breath in expectation. There is the same mildness in the air, and the sky and grass have the same look as then; but the leaves tell a different tale, and the reddening creeper on the house is rapidly approaching its last and loveliest glory (von Arnim, 1898, p. 73-74).

In the excerpt we can see a unique example of unity between the man and the nature, when the pace of life is subject to the life of nature: when people feel the minute changes and enjoy whatever the garden offers, thus the tea-parties are under the acacias and not under the beeches, and the extract shows that a person must be a keen observer of the garden who reflects on what he sees. The periphrasis used in the last sentence (*but the leaves tell a different tale, and the reddening creeper on the house is rapidly approaching its last and loveliest glory*) not only conveys that melancholic atmosphere but it also exemplifies the results of fruitful communication between the man and the nature, this is what H. D. Thoreau considered to be the most crucial aspect of living in harmony with nature.

It is remarkable that Elizabeth shares with the readers the reasons why she chooses species of roses for her garden, and what the motives that guided her were. Planning the garden for the following year and buying new species of roses is what occupies her mind on a bright September day. The author resorts to irony in order to explain why she does not like the low-growing roses and what improvements have to be made: “one has to kneel down to be able to see them well in the dwarf forms – not but what I entirely approve kneeling before such perfect beauty, only it dirties one’s clothes” (von Armin, 1898, p. 74).

Elizabeth von Arnim enumerates the species of roses that meet her requirements which leads to a reasonable question: when studying the text of the novel from the point of view of eco-writing and eco-criticism, is it possible to consider this text as a unique document, a testimony of the rose species that were really popular more than one hundred years ago, at the end of the 19 century? At the beginning of the novel

the main character plants eleven flower-beds with roses and as an amateur gardener she is bound to make some mistakes and to learn from experience. There are twenty-two species of roses that are given in the book, they are: Marie van Houtte, Viscountess Folkestone, Laurette Messimy, Souvenir de la Malmaison, Adam, Devoniensis, the Persian Yellows, Bicolors, Duke of Teck, Chestnut Scarlet, Préfet de Limburg, Jules Finger, the Bride, Madame Lambard, Madame de Watteville, Comtesse Riza du Parc, Rubens, Madame Joseph Schwartz, the Hon. Edith Gifford, Madame George Bruants, Safrano tea roses, Bouquet d'Or.

The species of roses enumerated in the novel are of great interest not only from the point of view of horticulture development in Europe at the turn of the century (von Arnim gives the most popular species of roses at that period, the oldest date back to 1838, the latest date back to 1893). Many of them can be seen in catalogues and gardens of Europe nowadays, but some of them are getting less and less widespread, and the text of the novel preserves the name of the Hon. Edith Gifford rose that has been irretrievably lost. Thus we may say that studying the plants and flowers mentioned in the novels is critical for promoting the knowledge about the environment and the natural world of the past.

The blossoming roses are the pinnacle of the summer season for Elizabeth despite the mistakes she made while growing some of them. The plants endure all hardships and experiments of the inexperienced gardener and the author resorts to an allusion at the famous quotation from Alexander Pope:

It was no doubt because I was so ignorant that I rushed in where Teutonic angels fear to tread, and made my teas face a northern winter; but they did face it under fir branches and leaves, and not one has suffered, and they are looking to-day as happy and as determined to enjoy themselves as any roses, I am sure, in Europe (von Arnim, 1898, p. 25-26).

The original quotation is slightly changed but is easily recognizable and it gives the whole situation an ironic hint at the naivety of the gardener, and the epithet "Teutonic" speaks volumes of her audacity and readiness to experiment with roses. Here we can also notice a juxtaposition of two techniques in gardening – the English one (represented by the efforts of the protagonist) and the German one (= the Teutonic).

In the novel *The Solitary Summer* the writer turns to one more aspect of interaction between the man and the nature, namely in what way the man can change, form and modify the surrounding landscape. There are a lot of bushes and plants in her garden, and lilac is one of the most remarkable ones, for it is very old and it was planted by the previous owner of the house. The author remarks that travelling to different parts of the world was one of the reasons for his keen interest in horticulture. He brought various plants, some of them could not adapt to the climate change, but the ones that survived make the garden beautiful. Thus the writer highlights the idea of the beneficial impact of people's activity, because the trees and flowers can act as memorabilia and the generations to come may be grateful for creative changes that had been performed in the garden years before:

A century ago a man lived here who loved his garden. <...> We have to thank him for the surprising beauty of the garden in May and early June, for he it was who planted the great groups of it, and the banks of it, and massed it between the pines and firs. Wherever a lilac bush could go a lilac bush went; and not common sorts, white, and purple, and pink, and mauve, and he might have planted it with special care and

discrimination, for it grows here as nothing else will, and keeps his memory, in my heart at least, for ever gratefully green (von Arnim, 1993, p. 55-56).

It must be stated that the love for the garden of the previous owner of the house, his ability to choose the proper plants, cultivate them and create a harmonious garden becomes the only criterion for his generosity and goodness: “How could he be anything but good since he loved his garden – that divine filter that filters all the grossness out of us, and leaves us, each time we have been in it, clearer and purer, and more harmless?”(von Arnim, 1993, p. 56-57). The key point is that people should not damage the environment or violate the harmony, on the contrary, their interaction can be mutually reinforcing. If they improve and study the natural world on any level, they approach the biblical harmonious Eden and they become Adam and Eve. Again if we remember the statements made by H. D. Thoreau in his essay, in such cases they become blessed hence the communication with nature was mutually beneficial.

The garden design does not imply creating artificial zones where the nature gives way to the art. The carefully-planned English garden is contrasted with her garden where the rules of horticulture are not observed, an overgrown garden is the place where people are not afraid of making a wrong step and where they are close to nature:

I spent a very happy afternoon in that little English paradise, but I came away quite joyfully, and with many a loving thought of my own dear ragged garden, and all the corners in it where the anemones twinkle in the spring like stars, and where there is so much nature and so little art. <...> Nature herself is untidy, and in a garden she ought to come first, and Art with her brooms and clipping-shears follow humbly behind (von Arnim, 1993, p. 150).

7. Conclusion

Fiction is a very powerful impetus for re-evaluating the past and tackling the problems of the present. As many researchers have already stated, “the central and principal task of literature is the formation of readers’ value-based attitude to life” (Kolobova et al., 2018, p. 1277). Thus the analysis of Elizabeth von Arnim’s early novels clearly demonstrates the recognition that any literary work of the previous epoch can be regarded as a source of information on the natural world, the environment and types of interaction between the man and the nature in the given historical period. When studying the novels we have traced the influence of H. D. Thoreau and his ideas on von Arnim’s works. *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* and *The Solitary Summer* are autobiographical and it enabled her to convey crucial ideas and values. Her personal experience of communication with nature enriched the text of the novels, and her strivings to co-exist harmoniously with the natural world can be seen in the actions of the protagonist who creates her own garden keeping the symbol of the Garden of Eden in her mind.

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