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A Postmodern Eco-Critical Study of Identity Crisis in "The Winter of Our Discontent"

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of identity crisis in John Steinbeck's novel "The Winter of Our Discontent" through the lens of ecocriticism theory. The novel is set in the postmodern era and explores the moral decay of American society, particularly the loss of traditional values and the rise of materialism. Through the analysis of the novel, this paper explores the relationship between human identity and the natural world and how the destruction of the environment can lead to a crisis of identity. It starts with

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theoretical background, introduction, theory, discussion and analysis and ends with a conclusion.

Keywords: Ecocriticism theory, John Steinbeck, materialism, identity crisis.

دراسة أدبية لما بعد الحداثة والنقد البيئي لأزمة الهوية في رواية "شتاء خيبتنا"

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المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث موضوع أزمة الهوية في رواية "شتاء خيبتنا" لجون شتاينبك من خلال نظرية النقد البيئي. تدور أحداث الرواية في عصر ما بعد الحداثة وتعرض الإنحطاط الأخلاقي للمجتمع الأمريكي، وخاصة فقدان القيم التقليدية و ارتفاع المادية في ظل الكساد الاقتصادي. من خلال التحليل النقدي للرواية، يستكشف هذا البحث العلاقة بين الهوية البشرية والعالم الطبيعي، وكيف يمكن أن يؤدي تدمير البيئة إلى أزمة الهوية. الكلمات الدالة: نظرية النقد البيئي، جون شتاينبك، المادية، أزمة الهوية.

1. Introduction

"*The Winter of Our Discontent*" is a postmodern novel that critiques American society's obsession with materialism and the loss of traditional values. The novel explores the moral decay of American society and the crisis of identity accompanying it. The protagonist, Ethan Allen Hawley, struggles to find his identity in a rapidly changing world. As he navigates the ethical dilemmas of his life, he is also faced with the destruction of the natural world around him, which exacerbates his identity crisis.

The novel criticises the impact of environmental destruction on human identity and the importance of environmental conservation in contemporary society.

John Steinbeck was born in 1902 in Salinas, California and spent his childhood in the same region that he later wrote about in his famous novels. He attended Stanford University from 1919 but left before graduating. During the 1920s, he supported himself with various jobs, one of which was writing for a newspaper. *Cup of Gold*, his debut novel, was published in 1929. He then wrote two more novels, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), both of which focused on migrant workers in California.

Steinbeck saw himself as someone who could relate well with the common people, and he felt more connected to the migrant workers he wrote about than to the intellectuals who criticized his work for being too simplistic in terms of language and structure. He strongly believed in democracy and was opposed to fascism, but conservatives considered him too socialist, and leftists wanted him to be more outspoken in condemning the injustices of capitalism. Steinbeck did acknowledge that he may not have spoken up enough during the McCarthy era, but he could never fully appease those who tried to force him to conform to their political beliefs.

Steinbeck is famously known for his concern with ecology, which he explored in *Winter*. Steinbeck was an environmental activist who supported the deep ecology movement. His interest in the ecological field is clearly emphasised by certain critics like Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li (2005), Petr Kopecký (2006), and Mark Andrew White (2006). In fact, due to his ecological concerns, he was called by some critics an "ecological prophet".

2. The Ecocriticism Theory

Ecocriticism is a relatively new literary theory that emerged in the 1990s, intending to examine the relationship between literature and the environment. Ecocritics believe that literature reflects and shapes our perceptions of the natural world. By

analysing these representations, we can better understand our relationship with the environment (Glotfelty, 1996).

Abdullah and Abdullah (2021) claim that “environmental themes are very important subjects that have reflected in the writings of many writers since the last quarter of the previous century. Ecocriticism is a field of criticism that is concerned with the writings that tackle these themes.” According to Joseph Meeker (1972), it began at first as an idea called "literary ecology". In 1978, the term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical essay "Literature and Ecology: An Ecocriticism Experiment". The term "eco" is taken from the Greek word "oikos", which means earth or household, and the second part, "logy", from "logos", which means logical discourse. Together, they refer to criticism of the house—the environment as it is represented in literature. Rueckert claims that "ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles into the literature study." (1972). Furthermore, Lawrence Buell (1995) defines ecocriticism "as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis". As a result, ecocriticism is not particularly concerned with nature study; rather, it marked itself away from conventional nature writings by its commitment and representation of the natural world and connecting the human with the non-human world.

Accordingly, there are two waves of ecocriticism: the first in the 1980s and the second in the 1990s. The first mentioned stressed the writings about nature as a field of study and good practice. Nancy Aravec (2014) underscores that it maintained the distinction between nature and humans but supported the value and importance of nature and the need to speak up for it. The second wave developed to include a wider environmental movement's scope. This wave's ecocritics redefined the environment concept to include natural and urban areas. They challenged the distinction between nature and non-nature and human and non-human.

One of the core ideas of ecocriticism is the notion of "nature writing" - literature that represents the natural world in a positive or idealised way. Ecocritics argue that nature writing reflects a desire to reconnect with the natural world and to challenge the dominant cultural narrative of human domination over nature. It is exemplified in

works such as Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" (1854) and John Muir's "The Yosemite" (1912), which celebrate the beauty and majesty of the natural world. However, ecocriticism is not limited to nature writing. It also encompasses various literary genres and forms, including poetry, fiction, and drama. Ecocritics examine how these works represent the natural world and how these representations reflect cultural attitudes towards the environment.

Among of the key approaches of ecocriticism is the examination of place and space in literature. Ecocritics argue that the natural world is not simply a backdrop to human activity but an active participant in shaping human experience. Place and space are, therefore, important in understanding the relationship between literature and the environment. For example, in Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" (2006), the desolate landscape is a metaphor for the bleakness of the post-apocalyptic world and the fragility of human existence. Another important approach to ecocriticism is examining environmental justice and activism in literature. Ecocritics argue that literature can be important in raising awareness of environmental issues and promoting social and political change. It is exemplified in works such as Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" (1962), which helped galvanise the environmental movement and led to the banning of the pesticide DDT.

Environmental Justice is another important concept in ecocriticism that emphasizes the social and political dimensions of environmental issues. Ecocritics examine how literature reflects and shapes these issues, including the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits among different social groups (Garrard, 2004).

Nonhuman Agency challenges the traditional anthropocentric view of the world and explores the agency and subjectivity of nonhuman beings such as animals, plants, and ecosystems. Ecocritics examine how literature represents nonhuman agency and how this representation shapes our understanding of the environment (Wolfe, 2003).

Finally, Sustainability is a concept that focuses on the long-term health and viability of ecological systems. Ecocritics examine how literature reflects and shapes attitudes towards sustainable practices and how literary texts can inspire environmental activism (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015). These key concepts are essential to the field of

ecocriticism and help scholars to better understand the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment.

Due to its significant impact, ecocriticism theory flowered at the hands of many pioneers such as:

1. Cheryll Glotfelty: Glotfelty is considered one of the founders of the field of ecocriticism. She co-edited the influential book "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" with Harold Fromm in 1996, which helped to establish ecocriticism as a distinct discipline.

2. Lawrence Buell: Buell is another influential figure in ecocriticism. He wrote the book "The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture" in 1995, which is considered a seminal work in the field.

3. Jonathan Bate: Bate is a British literary scholar who has written extensively on the relationship between literature and the environment. He is the author of several influential books, including "The Song of the Earth" (2000) and "The Cure for Catastrophe" (2020).

4. Ursula K. Heise: Heise is a literary scholar and environmental critic who has written widely on the intersection of literature, culture, and the environment. Her book "Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global" (2008) is considered a landmark in the field.

5. Donna Haraway: Haraway is a feminist scholar and philosopher who has written on the relationship between humans and non-human animals, as well as on the politics of the environment. Her book "Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene" (2016) has been influential in shaping the direction of ecocritical thought.

Ecocriticism has been a subject of debate and discussion among critics, each of them demonstrating their own views. According to Lawrence Buell, one of the founders of ecocriticism, the field is essential because "the natural world is, in effect, a silent partner in all human endeavors, and neglect of it is a form of self-neglect" (2005). Similarly, Timothy Morton argues that ecocriticism is crucial for understanding the

interconnectedness of all things and for imagining new ways of relating to the world (2007).

Ansam Almaarroof in her study entitled “An Eco critical View of P. Shaffer's Equas and S. Wannous's The King's Elephant”, asserts that Ecocriticism is not limited to any specific geographical or cultural context. It encompasses a wide range of literary traditions from around the world, reflecting the global nature of environmental challenges. (2008, 305) Also, ecocriticism is limited in its scope: some critics argue that ecocriticism is too narrowly focused on literature and does not fully address the broader cultural and political issues related to the environment. For example, Rob Nixon states that ecocriticism tends to focus on the "sublime, unspoiled, and nonhuman," while neglecting the environmental injustice and human suffering that is often caused by environmental degradation (2011).

Finally, ecocriticism has potential but needs to evolve. Other critics suggest that ecocriticism has the potential to be a powerful tool for addressing environmental issues but needs to evolve to better integrate scientific and social perspectives. For example, Ursula K. Heise argues that ecocriticism needs to embrace a more interdisciplinary approach that incorporates fields such as environmental science, economics, and policy (2008).

Generally, ecocriticism has received a variety of responses from critics. While some see it as a valuable field of study that is necessary for understanding our relationship with the natural world, others believe that it is limited in its scope and needs to evolve to better address broader environmental issues.

As a conclusion, ecocriticism is an important and influential theory that has significantly impacted literary studies. Its focus on the relationship between literature and the environment has helped to raise awareness of environmental issues and promote social and political change. Ecocritics have provided a valuable framework for understanding our complex relationship with the environment by examining how literature reflects and shapes our perceptions of the natural world.

3. Discussion

The aftermath of the Second World War caused the world to change almost every aspect of life rapidly. This change is marked by deviation away from the stability of modernism into an era of fragmentation and doubt which came to the ground as postmodernism. James M. Glass (1993) states that postmodernism is "a philosophy which celebrates difference, change, transformation, and flux". Thus, postmodern critics have always been preoccupied with the issue of identity and have addressed its facets in depth. In such an era, identity and subjectivity are destabilised.

The huge transformations in economic and technological sectors are one cause for this change, which had negative effects on the postmodern identity. Such transformations resulted in the popularisation of capitalism and consumerism, inevitably altering individuals' modes of thought, communication, and interpersonal relationships. The American Society of the 1950s and 1960s depended mainly on the culture of capitalist consumerism. Although consumerism is an economic and social order considered an old phenomenon, it became the distinguishing feature of the new American society in the postwar era. This particular culture turns the individual into a mere consumer, which puts heavy financial demands on him/her and menaces his/her subjectivity and identity formation. Steinbeck's novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* dramatises the circulation of the consumption culture and the individual's failure to adapt to its demands.

The novel tells the story of Ethan Allen Hawley, a former member of Long Island's aristocratic class, who cannot cope with a rapidly changing world. Born in a rich family, Ethan was financially stable until the Second World War, when his late father invested and lost a lot of money. After the war, Ethan was forced to work as a grocery clerk in the store his family once owned. He is 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". These modes, identified with postmodernism, challenge his identity and self-image.

The protagonist's identity crisis in "*The Winter of Our Discontent*" is closely related to the natural world's destruction. Steinbeck intended to portray how the degradation of the natural environment mirrored the moral decay and loss of self-experience by the protagonist, Ethan Allen Hawley. The changing landscape of his

hometown, New Baytown, serves as a metaphor for America's larger environmental and societal changes. The decaying wharf, polluted waters, and the destruction of the once-thriving vineyard all symbolise the ecological degradation of the natural world, which parallels Ethan's internal struggles with his sense of self and morality.

Steinbeck portrays the interconnectedness between the protagonist's identity crisis and the natural world's destruction through his vivid descriptions of the deteriorating environment. For instance, Ethan reflects on the decay of the wharf, stating, "The wharf, decaying, rotting, spilling cargo into the filthy, dying water, was a metaphor for my entire existence" (Steinbeck, 1961). This quote illustrates how Ethan's internal struggles with his identity and moral values are mirrored in the deteriorating state of the wharf and the polluted waters. The destruction of the natural environment reflects Ethan's moral decay and loss of self as he grapples with the changing world around him.

"The building at the end of the wharf had once been white, but now the paint hung on it in long strips and shreds, and it was the color of dirty snow. The wharf itself was gray with rot" (Steinbeck, 1961).

This excerpt vividly portrays the physical decay and neglect of the wharf and its surroundings. From an ecocritical perspective, this imagery symbolizes the degradation of the natural environment due to human neglect and exploitation. The once vibrant and functional wharf, now worn and rotting, reflects the broader theme of ecological degradation caused by human activities. The grayness of the wharf, symbolizing rot, further emphasizes the deteriorating state of the surroundings. This depiction draws attention to the negative impact of human activity on the natural world. It suggests that the wharf, once a bustling hub of activity, has now become a site of decay and environmental degradation. From an ecocritical perspective, this passage invites us to contemplate the consequences of human actions on the environment. It raises questions about the responsibility humans have in maintaining and preserving the natural world. The deteriorating state of the building and the wharf serves as a reminder of the consequences of neglecting our ecological responsibilities. Furthermore, this passage can be interpreted as a critique of the industrialization and urbanization processes that often prioritize economic growth over environmental conservation. The decay and degradation depicted in the quote can be seen as a consequence of human activities that prioritize short-term gains at the expense of long-term sustainability. Steinbeck's description of the building and the

wharf in this quote serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of human neglect and disregard for the environment. It prompts us to reflect on our role in preserving and protecting the natural world, and the potential consequences of prioritizing economic growth over environmental sustainability.

“The earth had been ripped and torn by greed and the new wooden piles of the new wharf stood out raw and red. They had killed the fish in the water”. (Steinbeck, 1961).

This passage highlights the destructive impact of human greed on the natural world. The description of the earth being "ripped and torn" suggests a violent alteration of the landscape for economic gain. The mention of the new wharf and its impact on the fish population underscores the ecological consequences of such actions. It reflects a critique of anthropocentric practices that prioritize profit over environmental sustainability. highlights the destructive consequences of human greed and exploitation on the natural environment. The imagery of the earth being "ripped and torn" signifies the violent disruption caused by human activities such as industrialization and resource extraction. This portrayal draws attention to the detrimental effects of unchecked human greed on the Earth's ecosystems.

The mention of the new wooden piles of the wharf standing out "raw and red" suggests the recent construction and expansion of human infrastructure. This expansion often comes at the expense of the natural environment, as it involves clearing land, altering water bodies, and disrupting habitats. The vivid description of the wooden piles emphasizes the stark contrast between the artificial human-made structures and the surrounding natural environment.

The statement that "they had killed the fish in the water" further underscores the ecological consequences of human actions. It implies that the disruption caused by the construction of the new wharf has resulted in the loss of aquatic life and the degradation of the marine ecosystem. This highlights the interconnectedness of different species and ecosystems, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balanced and harmonious relationship with the natural world. This quote serves as a critique of the exploitative mindset that prioritizes short-term gains over long-term environmental sustainability. It

calls attention to the destructive impact of human activities on the Earth's ecosystems and the need for responsible stewardship of the environment. Furthermore, this passage invites us to reflect on the broader implications of our actions and the consequences they have on the natural world. It prompts us to consider the ethical dimensions of our relationship with the environment and the responsibility we have to protect and preserve it for future generations. John Steinbeck's quote from "The Winter of Our Discontent" presents a powerful ecocritical commentary on the destructive consequences of human greed and exploitation on the natural environment. It emphasizes the need for a more sustainable and responsible approach to our interactions with the Earth, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings and ecosystems.

“I looked down at the street level of the building. It was closed off with battered pieces of lumber, but the place was filled with rats. They stood in line, listening and sniffing”.
(Steinbeck, 1961).

This passage draws attention to the deteriorating state of urban infrastructure and its implications for the natural world. The use of "battered pieces of lumber" and the presence of rats suggest a human-made environment in disrepair. From an ecocritical perspective, this can be seen as a commentary on how urbanization and neglect of built environments can disrupt natural ecosystems and lead to the proliferation of species that thrive in degraded habitats.

“The land on the other side of the fence had been stripped of everything. Trees had been cut down, roots pulled out, brush bulldozed. A small cat with big yellow eyes walked around on the bare ground as though he had lost something”.
(Steinbeck, 1961).

This passage vividly portrays the aftermath of environmental exploitation. The image of a barren landscape, where trees have been felled and roots uprooted, speaks to the severe disruption of the natural balance. The presence of the cat, seemingly displaced and disoriented, serves as a poignant reminder of the impact of human activities on local wildlife. It underscores how environmental degradation affects not only the physical landscape but also the living beings that depend on it.

Additionally, the destruction of the once-thriving vineyard also serves as a metaphor for Ethan's identity crisis. The vineyard, which used to be a source of pride for Ethan's family, has been abandoned and left to wither away, reflecting the erosion of his

family legacy and sense of self. Ethan reflects on the state of the vineyard, stating, "The vineyard was old and dying, the vines as grey and shrivelled as if they were sixty years old" (Steinbeck, 1961). This quote symbolises the decay of Ethan's identity and moral values as he struggles to reconcile his actions with his sense of self and heritage.

All the selected excerpts collectively highlight how Steinbeck uses detailed descriptions of the environment to convey the interconnectedness between human actions, ecological degradation, and the protagonist's internal struggles. They serve as poignant examples of how literature can engage with ecocritical themes to offer insights into the complex relationships between humans and the natural world.

Throughout the novel, financial demands and the emphasis on consumption are highlighted as the primary cause of an identity crisis. Ethan's wife Mary and teenage children Allen and Ellen are dissatisfied with their low social and economic status, which clashes with the societal emphasis on material possessions in the contemporary era. Consequently, Ethan finds himself without financial security in a postwar society that prioritizes consumerism. He struggles to provide his family with the material comforts that are valued so highly, leading to a sense of inadequacy and a threat to his self-image: "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" (Steinbeck 1961). At the start of the book, Ethan confides in Mr. Baker, the banker, that he feels a sense of erosion and failure due to his inability to meet his family's financial demands. This illustrates that the commodification of all aspects of life leads to Ethan's discontent and instability as a modern man.

In addition, the novel portrays how the pursuit of consumerism and materialism, prevalent in post-war America, contributes to destroying the natural world and exacerbates Ethan's identity crisis. The emphasis on material wealth and social status leads Ethan to compromise his moral values and integrity to achieve financial success. He becomes involved in unethical and corrupt practices, exploiting the natural resources and environment for his gain. For instance, he is willing to sacrifice the pristine wilderness of a nearby island for commercial development, stating, "I was willing to burn that island to the waterline for a million dollars" (Steinbeck, 1961). This quote illustrates how the

natural world's destruction is linked to Ethan's moral degradation and loss of self as he succumbs to the allure of material wealth and societal expectations. "I am not one thing, but many." (Steinbeck, 1961) This quote reflects the central struggle of Ethan, who is torn between his innate sense of morality and his desire for material success and social status. Hawley grapples with his identity, questioning whether he is truly a good person or whether he has been corrupted by his own ambition. By acknowledging that he is "not one thing, but many," Hawley highlights the complexity of human nature and the difficulty of maintaining a consistent sense of self in the face of competing desires and social pressures.

One of the main existential questions in this novel is the question of identity. "Who am I to myself?" (Steinbeck, 1961). It is a powerful and thought-provoking question that arises in the novel. It emphasizes the themes of morality, integrity, and the American Dream that are represented through the character of Ethan Allen Hawley. This question of "Who am I to myself?" arises as Ethan grapples with his sense of identity and values. Throughout the novel, Ethan is confronted with various ethical dilemmas and temptations that challenge his integrity. He is offered bribes, encouraged to cheat, and even encouraged to commit criminal acts in order to gain wealth and status. As he faces these challenges, he begins to question his own sense of self and whether he is truly living up to his own standards. Ultimately, the question "Who am I to myself?" serves as a catalyst for Ethan's moral awakening. Through his struggle to answer this question, he comes to realize the importance of living a life of integrity and staying true to one's own values. In the end, he rejects the temptations that had once lured him and embraces a life of honesty and authenticity, even if it means giving up his dreams of wealth and success.

To stress on the aforementioned, Ethan ask himself a more deep question by saying: "What am I doing? Who am I? Is this me, or is this someone else?" This quotation is a another reflection on the themes of identity and authenticity in Steinbeck's novel. He is questioning his actions and his sense of self. Ethan is struggling to determine whether he is acting according to his true character or whether he is conforming to the expectations of others. The phrase "What am I doing?" suggests that Ethan is questioning the purpose of his actions and whether they align with his own values. The question "Who am I?" reveals his confusion about his identity and whether his actions are truly reflective of his

character. Finally, the question "Is this me, or is this someone else?" highlights the tension between being true to oneself and conforming to societal expectations.

Among the most significant contributions of ecocriticism theory to understanding the theme of identity crisis in the novel is recognizing the interconnectedness between human identity and the natural environment. The novel's degrading view of nature, as seen via the deteriorating dock, tainted waterways, and abandoned vineyard, mirrors the moral decline and sense of identity loss that the protagonist goes through. Ecocriticism theory emphasizes how the degradation of the environment can mirror and exacerbate the internal struggles of human characters, shaping their sense of self and moral values. The quote "The sea was dead gray, and the waves slammed against the shore as if they hated it." (Steinbeck, 1961) This quote suggests a sense of hostility towards nature, which could be interpreted as a metaphor for the characters' disregard for the environment and their own moral values.

Furthermore, ecocriticism theory highlights how the pursuit of consumerism and materialism, prevalent in post-war America and central to the novel's plot, contributes to the protagonist's identity crisis. The novel portrays how exploiting natural resources and the environment for financial gain leads Ethan to compromise his moral values and integrity, resulting in an internal conflict about his sense of self and moral code. Ecocriticism theory provides insights into the detrimental effects of human actions on the natural world and how these actions can impact human identity and morality. In "I have lost myself. I don't know who I am or what I want" (Steinbeck, 1961), suggests that the character is experiencing a deep sense of confusion and existential crisis. Ethan is a man who once had a clear sense of purpose and moral values but has since become disillusioned and lost in his pursuit of material wealth and social status.

This quote reveals his realization that he has lost touch with his true self and is no longer sure of his identity or what he really wants in life. The statement "I have lost myself" suggests a sense of detachment and disconnection from his own identity. This loss of self is likely the result of the compromises he has made in order to achieve his material goals. He has traded his integrity for wealth and status, and in doing so, has lost sight of who he really is. The phrase "I don't know who I am" suggests a lack of self-awareness, as though Ethan is struggling to recognize his own identity and values. He may have been so

focused on achieving his goals that he has neglected to examine his own beliefs and desires. The phrase "or what I want" suggests a sense of aimlessness and confusion about his future. He may have achieved his goals, but now that he has lost sight of his true self, he is unsure of what he really wants in life. The quote, "I want to be true to myself, but I don't even know who that is anymore," suggests a deep sense of internal conflict and confusion. Ethan is struggling with his own identity and trying to reconcile the person he once was with the person he has become. The phrase "true to myself" implies a desire to live authentically and in alignment with one's values and beliefs. However, the second part of the sentence, "but I don't even know who that is anymore," reveals a sense of loss or disconnection from one's true self. This internal conflict could be the result of various factors such as societal pressures, personal relationships, or past traumas that have caused Ethan to lose touch with his core identity. The quote also suggests that Ethan is actively trying to rediscover his true self and come to terms with the changes that have occurred in his life. The fact that he recognizes this internal conflict is a positive sign that he is on the path to self-discovery. However, it also highlights the difficult and often painful process of self-exploration and the challenge of staying true to oneself in a constantly changing world.

Steinbeck keeps on presenting the issue of identity through the quote "I want to be myself. I don't want to be someone else's idea of who I am." (Steinbeck, 1961) it is a statement of self-determination and individualism. Through this statement, Ethan expresses his desire to be true to himself and to not conform to the expectations or desires of others. He is rejecting the idea of being defined or controlled by external forces and instead asserting his own autonomy and agency. This quote also highlights the theme of identity in the novel, as he struggles to reconcile his own desires and ambitions with the expectations of his family, community, and society. He feels a sense of disconnection from his own identity and is searching for a way to reclaim it.

In addition to those mentioned above, to fully understand the identity crisis issue, ecocriticism theory offers a valuable lens through which to analyse and interpret the theme in the novel. Since this literary theory focuses on the relationship between literature and the natural world, in Steinbeck's novel, ecocriticism theory sheds light on how the degradation of the natural world and the pursuit of material wealth impact the protagonist's

identity crisis. "The beach was dirty with seaweed and dead fish and driftwood and bottles and cans and debris from the sea." (Steinbeck, 1961). This quote paints a picture of a polluted and degraded natural environment, which can be seen as a reflection of the moral decay of the society.

Moreover, ecocriticism theory also highlights the novel's critique of the anthropocentric view of nature, where humans see themselves as separate from and superior to the natural world which results in breaking the connectedness between man and nature. In this quotation "The sky was empty, the air was dead, and the land was silent." (Steinbeck, 1960), The quotation conveys a sense of emptiness and lifelessness in the natural world, which can be seen as a reflection of the characters' own sense of identity crisis and lack of purpose. The novel challenges this view by showcasing how the destruction of the environment is intertwined with Ethan's moral crisis, questioning the dominant human-centered perspective. Ecocriticism theory encourages readers to re-evaluate their relationship with the natural world and recognise the intrinsic value of nature beyond its utilitarian and commercial purposes. Steinbeck's portrayal of the degradation of the natural world in "The Winter of Our Discontent" critiques the materialistic and exploitative attitudes towards nature that contribute to the protagonist's identity crisis.

The protagonist's identity crisis is intricately related to the natural world's destruction and degradation. "The snow lay on the ground like a dirty blanket, and the trees were stripped and bare." (Steinbeck, 1960) The degradation of the natural environment serves as a metaphor for Ethan's moral decay and loss of self, reflecting the larger societal and environmental changes in post-war America.

To conclude, the ongoing practice of consumerism and materialism, along with the exploitation of natural resources, exacerbates Ethan's identity crisis and contributes to destroying the natural world. Steinbeck's portrayal of the interconnectedness between the protagonist's internal struggles and the degradation of the environment underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the impact of human actions on nature and the repercussions on personal identity and morality.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, ecocriticism theory enriches our understanding of the theme of identity crisis in "The Winter of Our Discontent" by providing insights into the interconnectedness between human identity, societal values, and the natural environment. It highlights how the degradation of the natural world mirrors and exacerbates the protagonist's internal struggles and how the pursuit of consumerism and materialism contributes to his identity crisis. Additionally, ecocriticism theory challenges the anthropocentric view of nature and encourages readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world. Through the lens of ecocriticism, Steinbeck's novel offers a complex exploration of the interplay between human identity, morality, and the environment, providing a nuanced understanding of the protagonist's identity crisis and its ecological dimensions.

Degradation of the Natural World and Internal Struggles: The degradation of the natural world in the novel is not merely a backdrop, but a reflection of the protagonist's inner turmoil. The desolation of the environment mirrors and intensifies Ethan Hawley's internal conflicts and sense of moral decay.

Consumerism and Materialism as Contributors to Identity Crisis: Ecocriticism underscores how the pursuit of consumerism and materialism in the story is a catalyst for Ethan's identity crisis. The rampant exploitation of natural resources and pursuit of wealth at any cost serve as powerful metaphors for his personal moral descent.

Challenging Anthropocentric Views of Nature: Ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric (human-centered) view of nature that often dominates literature and societal perspectives. It urges readers to see nature as more than just a resource for human use, but as a complex, interconnected web of life with intrinsic value.

Reconsideration of the Relationship with the Natural World: This theoretical lens encourages readers to reevaluate their relationship with the environment. It prompts reflection on our responsibilities towards the natural world and the consequences of neglecting or exploiting it.

Complex Exploration of Identity, Morality, and Environment: Through ecocriticism, Steinbeck's novel offers a nuanced examination of how human identity and

morality are intricately linked with the environment. It presents a multi-layered understanding of Ethan's identity crisis, revealing its ecological dimensions.

By applying ecocritical theory to "The Winter of Our Discontent," we gain a deeper appreciation of how the novel engages with ecological themes and how these themes are integral to the exploration of the characters' identities and moral dilemmas. This perspective broadens our understanding of the work and encourages us to consider the broader implications of human actions on the natural world.

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