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## An Eco-Traumatic Iraqi Experience in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer: An Eco-Critical Perspective*

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### ABSTRACT

From the ancient time up to now, the concept of place and its shadow in literary milieu are not passive. This mutual interconnectedness between literature and place considers a complex relationship that weaves many notions within its context.

However, in this present paper, the researchers focus on one of the most well-known Iraqi novel which is *The Corpse Washer* (2013), written by Sinan Antoon (1967-present). Through this novel, the researchers negotiate the traumatic experience of Iraqi people that stems from the trauma of place and its impact on the relationship between human being and environment where they live. By adapting Eco-trauma theory, which is set by Tina Amorok, the researchers conclude that the novelist creates a microcosm to examine the nature of relationship between human being and environment. Based on this fact, they find that Antoon has portrayed the relationship between environment and Iraqi individuals as unsettled relationship due to the traumatic experience that place causes upon Iraqi people. Thus, Antoon's symbolic depiction of the protagonist as a rebellious

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character comes from the influence of environment upon human beings which formulates their attitudes and understanding. This is clearly depicted by the protagonist Jawed, who always tries to break his relationship with the environment for the sake of achieving his dreams and be an independent man.

**Key words:** Eco-trauma, Environment, Iraqi Experience, Sinan Antoon, and *The Corpse Washer*

الصَّدمة البيئية لتجربة العراقيّة في "وَحْدَهَا شَجَرَةَ الرُّمَّانِ" لِسِنَانِ أَنْطُونِ: قِرَاءَةٌ بِيئِيَّةٌ  
نُقُذِيَّةٌ

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### المستخلص

مُنذُ وَقْتِ طَوِيلٍ وَوَحْدَ الْآنِ، لَا يَزَالُ مَفْهُومُ الْمَكَانِ وَتَجَلِّيَاتِهِ فِي الْأَعْمَالِ الْأَدْبِيَّةِ مَلْمُوسًا. هَذِهِ الْعَلَاقَةُ الْمُتَبَايِلَةُ بَيْنَ الْأَدَبِ وَالْمَكَانِ تُعْتَبَرُ عِلَاقَةً دَاتٌ دَلَالَاتٌ مُتَوَعَّةٌ نَظْرًا لِلْمَفَاهِيمِ الْمُتَعَدِّدَةِ الَّتِي تَنْسُجُهَا تِلْكَ الْعِلَاقَةُ تَحْتَ مَظَلَّتِهَا. عَلَى أَيِّ حَالٍ، فِي هَذِهِ الْوَرَقَةِ النَّقْذِيَّةِ، رَكِّزَا الْبَاحِثِينَ عَلَى إِحْدَى أَبْزَرِ الرِّوَايَاتِ الْعِرَاقِيَّةِ وَوَحْدَهَا شَجَرَةَ الرُّمَّانِ وَالَّتِي كَتَبَهَا سِنَانُ أَنْطُونِ. مِنْ خِلَالِ هَذِهِ الرِّوَايَةِ، نَاقَشَ الْبَاحِثِينَ تَجْرِبَةَ الصَّدْمَةِ فِي الذَّاكِرَةِ الْعِرَاقِيَّةِ وَالَّتِي نَبَعَتْ مِنْ صَدْمَةِ الْمَكَانِ وَتَأْثِيرِهِ السَّلْبِيِّ عَلَى عِلَاقَةِ الْفَرْدِ بِالْبِيئَةِ الَّتِي يَعْشُ فِيهَا.

مِنْ خِلَالِ اسْتِخْدَامِ نَظْرِيَّةِ الصَّدْمَةِ الْبِيئِيَّةِ وَالَّتِي هِيَ إِحْدَى نَظْرِيَّاتِ تِينَا أَمُورُوكِ ( Tina Amorok)، اسْتُنْتِجَ الْبَاحِثِينَ عَلَى أَنَّ الرِّوَايَةَ قَدْ نَجَحَ فِي خَلْقِ عَالَمٍ مُصَغَّرٍ خَاصَّةً بِهِ لَفْهَمِ طَبِيعَةِ الْعِلَاقَةِ بَيْنَ الْإِنْسَانِ وَالْبِيئَةِ. وَبِنَاءِ عَلَى ذَلِكَ، وَجَدَا الْبَاحِثِينَ أَنَّ أَنْطُونِ قَدْ صَوَّرَ الْعِلَاقَةَ بَيْنَ الْفَرْدِ الْعِرَاقِيِّ وَالْبِيئَةِ عَلَى أَنَّهَا عِلَاقَةٌ تَتَّسِمُ بِعَدَمِ الْإِسْتِقْرَارِ نَظْرًا لِلْأَثَرِ السَّلْبِيِّ لِلْبِيئَةِ عَلَى تَجْرِبَةِ الْعِرَاقِيِّينَ عَامَّةً وَالرِّوَايَةِ خَاصَّةً. لِذَا، فَإِنَّ تَشْكِيلَ الصُّورَةِ الرَّمْزِيَّةِ لِنَبْطِ الرِّوَايَةِ عَلَى أَنَّهُ شَخْصِيَّةٌ

مُتَمَرِّدَةً جَاءَ نَتِيجَةَ لِلْعَوَامِلِ الْبِئِيَّةِ الَّتِي أَثَرَتْ بِشَكْلِ وَاضِحٍ عَلَى تَوَجُّهَاتِ وَمُسَارَاتِ الشَّخْصِيَّاتِ  
دَاخِلِ الرِّوَايَةِ وَ هَذَا يَظْهَرُ بِشَكْلِ وَاضِحٍ مِنْ خِلَالِ شَخْصِيَّةِ جَوَادِ الَّذِي يُحَاوِلُ بِشَتَّى الطُّرُقِ إِلَى  
كَسْرِ عِلَاقَتِهِ مَعَ الْبِئِيَّةِ الَّتِي يَعْيشُ فِيهَا مِنْ أَجْلِ أَنْ يُحَقِّقَ أَحْلَامَهُ وَيُصْبِحَ فَرْدًا مُسْتَقِلًّا.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الصدمة البيئية و البيئية و الانسان و التجربة العراقية و سنان انطون و "وحدها  
شجرة الرمان"

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is globally known that writing in its general meaning can be considered as a supplement means to uncover the inner side that cannot be described orally and this fact is affirmed by Jacques Derrida (1976) when he defines the process of writing as a "signification to reality" (as cited in Culler, 1997, p. 12). Drawing on this acknowledgment, Alan Sinfield (2004) elucidates that, "Literature is an institutional arrangement we have made to dignify some writing at the expense of other" (as cited in Mhoodar, 2021, p. 40).

Literature is one of the most influential form of writing that intellectuals, readers and politics tend to engage with it in order to be in contact with hidden secretes. As Cathy Caruth (1966) claims that, the role of literature is "to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens our ears to experiences that might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard" (as cited in Mahmoud, 2016, p. 51). It carries a full of epistemological holes that cannot be filled from the first glance. Thus, it seems a good material to everyone who wants to express his/her unspoken truths.

Prior to this fact, there are many Iraqi elites turn their eyes to document their miseries representing trauma, war, loss, nostalgia, death and disparity of life as they are. Based on Laurie Vickroy (2002) Iraqi writers' attentions increase to "go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within [their] consciousness and structures"(Mankhi, Mohammed and Hummadi, 2002, p. 88). One of those novelists who mainly concern with every aspect of Iraqi daily life is Sinaan Antoon. He is an American-Iraqi novelist who writes to make the reader/s in contact with Iraqi traumas. He thinks, "Iraq is a million broken mirrors scattered across a desert crushed by Rome's hooves. Blind barbarians must look for the pieces and wipe the blood off them without being devoured by the wolves, which howl and growl on both sides" (Antoon, 2013, p. 33).

Likewise, Antoon is much obsessed with the notion of traumatic experiences and its impact on Iraqi humans' memories. He works to tackle this issue in his novels repeatedly due to its importance in shaping the collective memory of Iraqi people. Although the concept of trauma and its representation in Sinaan Anton's anthologies has been discussed, it remains a rich key concept that abundantly holds many connotations in its package. Prior to these features, one can be in line with what Ferial J. Ehazoul reports in

her article "Literature and the Art in Contemporary Iraqi Culture" about Iraqi writers; she deems them as "cultural heroes" (Aziz and Longhai, 2021, p. 500).

Taking into consideration the important role of environment in reconstructing the views of intellectuals. It becomes of necessity to reconsider certain Iraqi literary works from an eco-critical perspective. Drawing on Lamiaa A. Rasheed's and Tabarak L. Abdullah's (2023) claims that the major concern of eco-criticism is to "restore the land's agency and voice" (p. 151).

Therefore, in this present paper, the researchers focus on the traumatic experience of Iraqi people that stems from the trauma of place and its impact on the relationship between man and environment where they live. Hence, the focus will be directed to investigate the relationship between environment and man and how these two entities help the novelist to dramatize the Iraqi traumatic experience from an eco-critical perspective. Namely, Eco-trauma theory, which is set by Tina Amorok's (2007) concepts.

Throughout this concept, Amorok (2007) emphasizes on the pivotal role of environment in the memory of people and its essential side in determining the behavior of individuals. Amorok (2007) asserts that eco-trauma is a sign towards the destruction state of environment. It is a concept of viewing environment as an eco-phobia for human beings (Cochran, 2022, p.62).

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recently, the critical lights have been directed towards Iraqi literature, especially, Iraqi novels. This critical interest stems from the fact that "Iraqi novel has become a representation of the manifestation of sovereign power, examining how the individual Iraqi has coped with and withstood the subjugation of life to the power of death and killing" (Mousa and Alhomoud, 2022, p. 164). *The Corpse Washer* is one of the most controversial novels that has extensively been studied on different levels: sociology, psychology, cultural and linguistic levels.

Starting with the psychological side, Radwa Ramadan Mahmoud's (2016) "War and Violence in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*" addresses the issue of war as an act of violence. In her article, she argues that war and violence are two faces that are integrated together to complete the cycle of their significance which is the injury of body and mind. Moreover, the researcher focuses on the narrative techniques that are used to be an integral part of portraying the traumatic experience of Iraqi people. Therefore, it is worthy to say that this article contains a clear methodology with an omniscient practical study, which leads to cover the psychological aspect of *The Corpse Washer* adequately.

In an ongoing vein, the concept of violence has been investigated in a paper entitled, "Violence and Terror in Post 2003 Iraqi fiction: Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*" from a new perspective. Lamiaa A. Rasheed and Ahmed Majhool (2023) discuss the representation of violence and its psychological atrocities in *The Corpse Washer* based on Galtung's triangle of violence. Through their paper, they argue that violence becomes a constant feature of Iraqi fiction as a result of Iraqi atmosphere. Therefore, they insist that Iraqi literary productions are a reflection to the environment that stems from.

Culturally speaking, the process of translating *The Corpse Washer* by the author himself is regarded as a cultural transition. In his article "Cultural Identity in Sinan Antoon's Self-Translated *The Corpse Washer*," Nibras A. M. Al-Omar (2018) argues that the efforts of Antoon in translating his novel into English version are sketched in two reasons; on the one hand, self-translating is viewed as a tool to transmit the Iraqi cultural identity across the borders. On the other hand, it stands for keeping the translated version assembles as much as the original one.

In the similar way, *The Corpse Washer* is a paramount novel that helps to arise awareness of American postcolonial strategy in rewriting the history via their perspectives. In an article entitled "Art as a Cultural Glue in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*," Mohammed Lateef Aziz and Zhang Longhai (2021) tackle *The Corpse Washer* from cultural point of view. They argue that the novelist remarkably plays an important role in raising Iraqis' awareness toward the Western ideology of subverting the indigenous Iraqi culture and constitutes it, as they like to be. Through their article, they find that Antoon by his craft makes his novel to be a cultural glue in front of Western regionalist ideology.

Moreover, *The Corpse Washer* has been discussed in term of ecology. For example, Bouchra Sadouni and Yousef Abu Amrieh's (2021) "The Stories Trees Tell: Jad El Hage's *The Myrtle Tree* and Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*" negotiate the importance of trees in their cultural context. The article traces the function that nature (trees) does in recording historical events. Throughout the article, the researchers argue that the trees in both novels act as if they were human beings in which both of them suffer from the same fate. Thus, it is necessary to say that nature and human being are identical within the context of wartime. They researchers heavily emphasize on the image of tree/s as a cultural iconic in both texts and neglecting their symbolic meaning in soliciting the human from his/her place.

Putting Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* in political context, one might come up with a fact that this novel's recaptures the Iraqi traumata in a surrealist way. In their paper "Necropolitics in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*," José M. Yebra and Alfonso Revilla (2022) ponder that the novel constitutes the western view of American invasion to an accurate vision. In this article, the researchers focus on the role of the myth of the "trauma hero" in shaping American necropolitical discourse. It concentrates on Western discourse as source of Iraqi dehumanization, wounded and spatialization. Insofar, the articles provides a full understanding of discursive speech in formulating human ideologies.

As previously argued, many studies tackle *The Corpse Washer* from various critical points of views. The centre of these studies has been directed to the impact of war on human beings and its undeniable function of shocking the memory of Iraqi people. Thus, it is necessary to mention that the focus of the critics is limited to the psychological study and they derelict the importance of ecological studies in the context of this novel. Although one of the aforementioned previous studies traces the representation of nature within two selected novels, its critical scope and results were not sufficient. Accordingly, this epistemological gap gives a voice for accounting the interpretation of the novel from another corner to throw attention to the importance of geographical location in the text.

Historically, the rise of eco-criticism dates back to romanticism by which this movement cherishes nature as a pristine path to life and globe. Hutchings (2007) states that:

Because Romantic literature often appears to value the non-human world most highly, celebrating nature as an [sic] beneficent antidote to the crass world of getting and spending, and lamenting its perceived destruction at the hands of technological industrialism and capitalist consumerism, Romanticism has provided much fertile ground for ecocritical theory and practice. (Pp.172-173)

This swing status of nature between the past and present deems a rich material for many critics to deal with. The mixture of knowledge provides literary critics a flexible move that encourages engaging with this field of cultural studies. Bressler heavily argues that the flourishing of eco-criticism lies in its "multiple perspectives, there is no single dominant methodology by which eco-critics analyze texts" (as cited in Malakshah and Pourqarib, 2018, p. 235). Thus, this present paper increases the interest on the role of place in cultivating a traumatic experience in human memory. Subsequently, the researcher offers a theoretical framework to prove that the symbolic representation of location purposely stands for questioning the relationship of human being and environment. In addition, how environment can be a threatening phenomenon for people.

### **3. Iraqi Traumatic Experience in *The Corpse Washer*: An Eco-Critical Perspective**

The human condition still circles in its place with no remarkable progress although the huge development of technologies and new discoveries that human beings have been reached out. It is supposed that with the spark of modernity, the human condition would be developed to a better stage. Unfortunately, the human life gets time by time to the worst. Therefore, Shoshana Felman (2002) affirms, "the twentieth century can be defined as a century of trauma" (as cited in Mahmoud, 2016, p. 50). Weaving the argumentation of this present paper with what has been mentioned; the researcher finds that *The Corpse Washer* is a novel of trauma in which it emanates a feeling of fear and loss. In other words, *The Corpse Washer* is regarded as a "trauma novel" in terms of its focus whether on individual and collective traumatic experience of certain group of people or country in a whole (Mahmoud, 2016, p. 51).

This novel condemns the cruelty of Iraqi life during the two historical wars: Iran- Iraq war and American invasion. Since the novelist mixes the past with present and indicates to the future, it is of logic to say that *The Corpse Washer* represents a hybrid description of Iraq status within these two wars. In recent years, this novel gains a great critical attentions due to its astonished depiction of brutality of place and its trauma. Rohit Chopra in his article "A Chronicle of the Death of a Civilization" dismantles the codes of the novel and he asserts that it is:

"a tale about the destruction of a society. It is a chronicle of the visceral, material obliteration of every aspect of the being of that society, from its infrastructure to its cultural institutions, from the

relationships that form the basis of its communal life to its sense of itself as a body politic.” (as cited in Aziz and Longhai, 2021, p. 501)

Hence, a number of critical studies centre their argumentations on the psychological influence of unrested life to the human beings and they neglect the hallmark hiatus in eco-critical sides that have not been filed. In this vein, the paper tackles the impact of setting as a site of unbroken trauma for individual/s. Fashioning this argumentation with a theoretical framework, one axiomatically agglutinates with eco-trauma theory. Via this theory, Amorok (2007) claims that the motivation of human destructive intention toward the environment comes from his/ her fear or anxiety about death. These ingredients of anxiety and fear lead human being to create a defense mechanism as Amorok (2007) states in the following lines:

We defend ourselves from this fearsome side of interconnectedness through separation ideologies and practices (war, religious fanaticism, racism, and sexism), psychological defense mechanisms (denial, dissociation, psychic numbing), and an array of debilitating behaviors and responses that bear the signature of trauma ranging from depression, anxiety, and addictive life styles to violence toward self, others, and nature. (Cochran, 2022, p. 62)

Accommodating this theory with the context of *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon tries to highlight the inner psychological perspectives of his fictional characters. As it is known, the novel discusses the war and its impact on human beings. In the novel, Antoon makes increased attentions towards Jawad's imagination, young boy who descends from a Shiite family. Jawad is the protagonist of *The Corpse Washer* whose ambition to be an artist pushes him to be a rebellious boy against his father's profession. In the body of the novel, there are many notions replete with traumatic dooms. One of the most traumatic aspect that the novelist works to question it is the image of place in Jawad's mind. Through the protagonist, Antoon incarnates the place, which is the Maghaysil where Jawad's Father works in as a site for Jawad's traumatic experience. In his first description of Maghaysil, Jawad says:

I got to the Maghaysil... The door was ajar. I crossed the walkway and saw the Qur'anic verse 'Every soul shall taste death'. ... Father was sitting in the left corner of the side room on a wooden chair listening to the radio." He adds: "Death's traces - its scents and memories - were present in every inch of that place. As if death were the real owner and Father merely an employee working for it and not for God, as he liked to think." (Antoon, 2013, p. 11)

Here, Jawad appears as if he is really shocked by the inner atmosphere of the place. Based on Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as "an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" becomes remarkable that Antoon's using of past tense in describing the Maghaysil is on purpose. By using this tense, he consolidates his attitude with Caruth's notion of trauma as a delayed and uncontrolled condition. Moreover, Antoon intends to be realistic as far

as he could. Thus, he uses the first-person narrative technique as an evidence to his realistic tendency. Through this narrative, he makes his fictional character utter his traumatic experience as if he were a real person. Moreover, it is necessary to say that Antoon also makes his narration in broken sequence to convey the inner condition of the traumatizer as it is. The fact that makes Antoon in compatible with Toni Pressles-Sanon's argumentation of trauma, who says, "If trauma can be put into a narrative form, it requires one that depart from a conventional linear sequence"(Abbady, 2021, p. 2362).

After getting a traumatic experience from the Maghysil, Jawad decides not eating [sic] the fruit of the pomegranate because it comes from 'Maghysil' as he said, "I stopped eating it when I realized that it had drunk of [sic] the waters of death. I heard the sound of water being poured inside. Seconds later I saw it rush through the runnel and flow around the roots of the tree." (Antoon, 2013, p. 63)

In the context of this quotation, it is true to say that the kinship between human being and nature starts to break. Because of environmental trauma, Jawad decides to not eat the fruit of pomegranate anymore. He says "I stopped eating it when I realized that it had drunk of [sic] the waters of death" although he was eating it when he was young as mentioned here "when I was young, I ate the fruit of this tree that my father would pluck and bring home" (Antoon 2013, 63). In this line, Jawad vindicates the broken nature of his kinship with the surroundings in an innocent way. He explains that the condition was on contrary when he was young. However, when he realizes that the fruit comes from the tree that is resided in that place, he leaves it away. This sudden change comes from his traumatic experience from the Maghysil as Laurie Vickory states that "traumatic experience can produce a sometimes indelible effect on the human psyche that can change the nature of an individual's memory, self-recognition and relation life" (as cited in Mankhi and et al., 2020, p. 94).

In another condition, Antoon illustrates the impact of traumatic experience on the individual/s. Thus, in the following lines he explains Jawad's miserable condition and his feeling of dissociation from his father profession, Jawad says, "I can't do it anymore. I'm suffocating. I'm not cut out for this job. I wasn't planning on doing it for two years. I can't sleep at night. Nightmares are driving me insane" (Antoon, 2013, p. 171). This dissociation stems from his traumatic experience of working in the Mghysil that leads him to be aware of the role of environment in his trauma. Consequently, the kinship between the human and nature has been broken. As in these lines, "...I felt for the hundredth time what a stranger I'd become in my hometown and how my alienation had intensified in these last years". He laments: "Everyone in Baghdad felt like a stranger in his own country. Most people were drained, and the fatigue was clearly drawn on their faces" (Antoon, 2013, p.175). Through these lines, Jawad's dissociation from the environment becomes plain. This might be in coincidence with Herman's portrayal of traumatized people where she claims, "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine system of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship" (as cited in Mankhi and et al., 2020, p.93).



In continuous rhythm, Antoon persists his depiction of the trauma of place in an amazing way. He focuses on the hybridity in describing the situation. Thus, he makes his attitude narrating by Jawad's Uncle, Sabri, who is a communist person leaves Iraq and lives in Germany. Sabri says "There aren't any women walking down the street anymore! This is not the Baghdad I'd imagined. Not just in terms of the people. Even the poor palm trees are tired and no one takes care of them" (Antoon, 2013, p. 96).

Apparently, these lines account for the destructive status of the Baghdad. Jawad's uncle utters that he is shocked by the miserable condition of Baghdad. The environment here traumatizes the human being and makes him/her in distance with the surroundings and then it breaks the kinship of human being with nature. Here, the sense of anxiety of death extents to cover all people in Baghdad. This comprehensive view of trauma as a sense of anxiety to the community might be in line with what Jenny Edkins understands of trauma. He claims that trauma "always already involves the community or the cultural setting people are placed" (as cited in Abbady, 2021, P. 2358). Through above lines, Sabri seems astonished by the reality of Baghdad. He compares it to a city of ghosts. There are not even simplest necessities of life. Intentionally, Antoon articulates the reality of Iraq via Sabri who has two different experiences in Iraq and Germany to display the deficiencies between the life in Iraq and Germany. This hybrid status of the character makes Antoon move freely from one situation to another in a flexible way. Going back to Amorok's (2007) claims, the researcher finds that the anxiety of fear and death leads the character to be a far away from the environment.

Akin to what has been discussed, the researchers find that *The Corpse Washer* has various notions, which can be examined within its context. Investigation the novel according to Amorok's eco-trauma theory, it becomes evident that the novelist attempts to personify the place as a ghost where all people seek to fly away from it. This feeling of fear and anxiety makes individuals tend to be rebellious against anything causing fearsome for them. Accordingly, it is worthy to argue that *The Corpse Washer* is a true representative work that throws the light upon the traumatic sense of place. By using Amorok's theory in analyzing the text, one can conclude that Amorok's claims are closely to Simon Estok's view of place as an eco-phobia which refers to "an irrational and groundless fear or world....Eco-phobia is all about fear of a loss of agency hatred of the natural and control in Nature" (as cited in Cochran, 2022, p.64). Throughout these lines, Estok insists on the important role of place in formulating the personal reaction toward nature and environment.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

*The Corpse Washer* tackles the function of place in the imagination of people. The novelist does a great job when he uses many literary devices to be in line with what has really happened in Iraqi society. By examining this text from an eco-critical perspective, the researchers find that the kinship between human beings and environment was not in harmony because of the miserable condition of people who live in Iraq. The ongoing fearsome and the anxiety of death pushes individuals to be in distance with the place where they live in. Prior to this claim, one can argue that environment can act as a real threat to the cycle life of human beings. This conclusion is not compatible with the romantic view of nature as a site (place) of safety and comfort.

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