

Environmental Themes in Michael Punke's *The Revenant*: An Ecocritical Analysis of Human-Nature Interaction

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Abstract—The objective of this research is to explore the environmental themes shown in Michael Punke's novel, titled *The Revenant*, with a focus on the complex relationship between the protagonist, Hugh Glass, the surrounding environment, and interaction. This descriptive research uses the ecocriticism theory to analyze the data and address the related questions. The novel vividly depicts nature as the surrounding forest and the diverse array of animals as the central character. As a frontiersman, Glass perceives nature as a realm to be conquered, which resorts to actions such as felling trees and hunting animals. However, the consequences of these actions significantly impact the natural world. The research findings underscored the disadvantageous and imbalanced nature of the human-environment relationship driven by humans' exploitative tendencies with little consideration for environmental preservation. The consequences of this one-sided relationship are evident in the ecological degradation and the personal suffering experienced by Hugh Glass, hence the novel's critique of this complex interaction between humans and the environment.

Index Terms—human and nature, *The Revenant*, ecocriticism

I. INTRODUCTION

Society is a team of diverse human organizations in unit areas connected by specific systems, customs, rites, and laws (Yulianti et al., 2022). The wealth and complexness of individual social content are conditioned by various associations with the degree to which the varied spheres of life have been assimilated and refracted in conscious activities. Therefore, an individual's behaviour reflects society (Takwa et al., 2022; Afiah et al., 2022), including development level and vice versa. Relating to this discussion, the entire process prevents human dissolution (Spirkin, 1983).

The evolution of science and technology has led to significant changes in the social order (Arafah et al., 2023b) and completely revolutionized the world (Kaharuddin, 2022). These changes impact several aspects of life, including communication, digital media, education, culture, and the environment (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a). Moreover, the rapid expansion of the internet and social media has become necessary (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b). For example, in the educational field, science and technology led to increased awareness of the coding system, online learning, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Arafah et al., 2024b; Iksora et al., 2022; Kaharuddin et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in the cultural field, the transition from tradition to modernization occurred due to a systemic change (Takwa et al., 2022). Relating to this discussion, environmental issues are reportedly encountered globally (Arafah et al., 2021).

From this viewpoint, the evolution of humans marked the varying forms of life (Emerson, 1967). Human ability to use technology, develop abstract or critical thinking skills, and envisage more wide-scale changes and plans significantly impact the environment more than other forms of life (Arifin et al., 2022; Takwa et al., 2024a). Therefore, the development of culture, including knowledge, technology, and ideas socially upheld and passed to generations, had increased societal advancement compared to the slower biological evolution (Arafah et al., 2020; Kaharuddin et al., 2021). Diverse human labour has been adopted to transform nature. According to Spirkin (1983) and Purwaningsih et al. (2020), humanity has converted nature into a representation of cultural history. Therefore, the surge in human needs led to the excessive exploitation of natural resources, impacting environmental sustainability, balance, and ecosystems

(Manugeran et al., 2023; Abbas et al., 2024). Additionally, the adverse effect of science and technology on society is visible (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019; Suhadi et al., 2022).

Electricity was induced to serve the interests of society, which led to the transfer of varied species of plants and animals to different climatic zones (Arafah et al., 2023c; Halil et al., 2024). Humans have modified diverse habitation forms, including the remodelling of plants and animals. Relating to this discussion, Indonesia tends to face significant environmental problems (Hasibuan et al., 2021; Arafah et al., 2023a), such as the deforestation process in Sibatuloting, North Sumatra, caused by the establishment of a pulp factory. The Indonesian Environmental Forum opposed this activity because the new factory exploited forests without paying attention to environmental management and impact assessment laws and regulations (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Misnah et al., 2024).

Several species of animals were lost in the Arctic of Alaska, and ten are approaching extinction, including the musk oxen. Dumont et al. (2006, p. 15) stated that the Musk Oxen was the focus of intense fur trade from the late eighteenth century to the early 1900s. Many individuals hunted Musk Oxen with the intent of processing it into clothing. However, these animals are crucial in preserving the populations of other species, communities and plants, such as willows, wolves and polar bears. According to Yudith et al. (2023), humans threaten animals' lives in various ways, leading to biodiversity loss. Furthermore, biodiversity loss due to species extinction significantly impacts the planet. Cardinale (2012, p. 25) stated that it reduces the ability of nature to provide goods and services such as food, potable water and a stable climate.

Awareness is urgently needed in response to environmental issues (Siwi et al., 2022; Takwa et al., 2024b). However, realizing the problem of nature as the impact of human misconduct has led to concerns about environmental preservation. Religious groups, farmers, loggers, and business leaders have started vocalizing the importance of nature (Cunningham et al., 2007; Usman et al., 2024). Educational method concerning the natural environment was adopted to meet this need (Andi & Arafah, 2017; Arafah et al., 2024a), accomplished by implementing a scientific procedure (Ismail et al., 2020). This method focused on creating awareness, which improved relevant skills and actions associated with preserving and protecting the natural environment daily (Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019; Mardiana et al., 2023). In this context, decisive action must be adopted to educate individuals regarding the environment as an integral part of society (Mokoginta & Arafah, 2022; Kuswanti et al., 2023). Therefore, humans endeavour to sustain nature through relevant skills and methods to pass the green earth to future generations.

Concerning the analysis, this topic can also be found in literary works such as novels. The research focused on the book *The Revenant* by Michael Punke, published in 2002. This novel provides a detailed exploration of the life of Hugh Glass, an American frontiersman, highlighting his profound relationship with the environment after a brutal bear attack leaves him in a condition of consciousness. Additionally, the novel offers valuable perspectives on the environmental consequences of a hunting expedition. By employing ecocriticism theory, the analysis confidently illuminates the complex portrayal of ecological issues and their impact on the characters within the novel.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary works

Ecocriticism, a literary and cultural theory recently gaining significant attention, offered a unique perspective to examine the complex and multifaceted relationship between humans and the natural world. Originating in the early 1990s, this interdisciplinary field of study expanded its scope beyond the initial focus on American nature writing and British Romantics, investigating diverse literary and cultural expressions and exploring the intricate relations between humanity and the environment. However, at the core of ecocriticism lies the notion that literature and other artistic productions can be analyzed to reveal how they reflect, shape, and respond to environmental concerns. Meanwhile, ecocritics examined how literary texts, films, and other cultural artefacts handled the challenges of contemporary ecological crisis, including the contributions towards understanding the human-nature relationship (Bracke & Corporaal, 2010; Mutmainnah et al., 2022).

From this viewpoint, the rise of ecocriticism was driven by the growing awareness of environmental crisis on a global scale, prompting a renewed interest in redefining and rethinking the age-old relationship between literature and the physical world. This led to the formulation of diverse ecocritical methods informed by various disciplines, including risk theory, queer studies, and postcolonialism (Bracke & Corporaal, 2010). Following the expanded field of ecocriticism, scholars have engaged in active debate on the purpose, methods, and scope of this interdisciplinary endeavour. While some ecocritics focused on identifying and proposing solutions to environmental problems, others were more concerned with the complex and contradictory ways literature and culture shaped the perceptions and attitudes towards nature. In this context, the physical environment, perceived as the investigation's central object, was constantly redefined, adding to the challenges and complexities inherent in ecocritical analysis (Yudith et al., 2024). Despite these ongoing discussions and debates, ecocriticism has been firmly established as a crucial and innovative method for studying literature and culture. It also offered invaluable insights into the dynamic and multifaceted relationship between humans and the natural world.

Since its inception, ecocriticism has shifted from the margins to a more central position within the humanities, as the global scale of environmental crisis has contributed to the prominence of the discourse (Asri et al., 2023). Meanwhile, ecocritics have broadened the scope to include a wide range of literary works, from American nature writing to

Shakespearean drama, as well as adopted interdisciplinary methods informed by the following fields, risk theory, queer studies, and postcolonialism (Bracke & Corporaal, 2010). This expansion of ecocritical inquiry has led to a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between literature and the natural world.

Regarding this aspect, ecocriticism explored the interconnectedness between nature and tradition, specifically focusing on the cultural artefacts of language and literature. This critical stance integrated literary analysis with environmental awareness, expanding the notion of the world to incorporate the entire ecosphere (Kerridge & Sammells, 1998). These publications are known for their diverse contributions, covering scholarly research, educational perspectives, creative expressions, and environmentalist insights (Buell, 1995). ISLE, established in 1993, aimed to provide a forum for critical research on literary and performing arts related to environmental considerations, such as ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions and depictions of nature, the human/nature dichotomy, and related concerns (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Sunyoto et al., 2022).

In this context, ecology focuses on understanding the interconnected relationship between humans and the natural environment (Baa et al., 2023). This field adopted a comprehensive, national method to investigate human-natural systems, recognizing that these organic or mechanical systems are constantly evolving and interconnected. Since its classical origins, ecology's main aim is to thoroughly investigate the relationship between humans and nature, which is evident in its romantic legacy. However, ecological discussions focus on topics such as family and community, the connection between individuals and the surrounding environment, and life and death, including the representation of human relationship with the environment (Fadillah et al., 2022; Arafah et al., 2024). These discussions often question whether humans are a part of a distinct aspect of nature.

Considering this perspective, exploring literary and cultural history can be condensed into three major and recurring themes: (1) Portrayal of pastoral life traditionally showcases shepherds or rural dwellers in an idealized, simple, and innocent state from the complexities of city life. Alternatively, it depicts rural inhabitants as brutish and backward. Reflecting on this evidence, the movement often drives the plot while informing relevant issues. (2) The city as second nature focused on the pleasures and challenges of urban life without drawing rural comparisons. In this context, the capital city, or metropolis, is a complex network of cultures and sub-cultures, offering opportunities and social mobility. However, further exploration portrayed the city as a place of personal loneliness, social alienation, and financial vulnerability. (3) Science fiction, particularly utopias and dystopias, has played a significant role in portraying imaginary utopian and dystopian places. Within this framework, utopia refers to an imaginary ideal place, while dystopia is a make-believe, terrible dwelling. Depending on individual perspective, most utopias also possess potentially dystopian dimensions. This research is categorized under the pastoral version, presenting country folk as brutal and backward, as stated at the novel's beginning.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative method to gather and analyze non-numerical data such as texts, videos, or audio (Kaharuddin et al., 2023). This aimed to comprehend descriptive data, including concepts, thoughts, or experiences (Abidin & Kaharuddin, 2021; Arafah et al., 2023b). The acquired data was used to identify literary works such as ecocriticism. However, this qualitative research needed more mathematical work (Purwaningsih et al., 2020), while the acquired data was extracted from the novel *The Revenant*, written by Michael Punke. The central data source stemmed from the novel "The Revenant", authored by Michael Punke, which chronicles the events in the life of Hugh Glass, an American frontiersman in the 1823 Missouri Territory. It is vital to note that the term "revenant" within the context of the novel denotes an individual who has returned from the dead to inflict fear upon the living (Punke, 2002). Data collection extended to various literary works, journals, books, and online articles to enrich the findings. Additionally, the ecocriticism theory proposed by Cheryl Glotfelty was used to describe the findings.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Nature's Role as a Provider for Human Needs: Exploring the Profitability and Wilderness of Natural Resources

In the 1800s, Fort Brazeau relied heavily on hunting as an occupation. However, Hugh Glass, a skilled woodsman and sharpshooter, practised this craft at a young age. In August 1823, Glass embarked on a fur trading expedition along the Missouri River with a group of ten men led by Captain Andrew Henry. Despite the challenges posed by the untamed environment, these individuals were determined to make the trade successful. Viewing nature simply as a means to fulfil personal needs, the fur traders depicted in *The Revenant* had a mindset that prioritized exploiting the natural world without concern for environmental preservation. This narrative served to clarify the impact of human activities, such as hunting, on the environment.

Data 1

THE BUFFALO CARCASS WAS PERCEIVED BEFORE IT WAS SEEN. Announcing its presence with a cloud of swirling flies. The air was charged with the buzz of their frenzied activity as if the carcass had its own voice. Despite the relentless scavenging, sinews still embraced the skeleton, preserving its form. However, even the dignity of the majestic, bushy head and the imposing black horns had been tarnished, stripped bare by the relentless birds that had gouged out its eyes (Punke, 2002, p. 101).

The effects of hunting on the ecosystem are discussed in the book. After killing a buffalo, fur traders took the meat and other valuable parts, leaving behind only the bones and head, as discovered by Hugh Glass. The passage concentrates on how humans willingly disrupted the natural balance to meet personal needs by hunting animals.

These humans hunted animals for food, particularly meat, and also engaged in deforestation activities while camping near the Missouri River with the eleven-man team known as the Glass group. In the novel, Hugh Glass is asked by the group captain, Andrew Henry, to go scouting and hunting for food with Black Harris.

Data 2

Captain Henry asked Glass and Black Harris to scout the following day. Glass looked up, overwhelmed by the inability to respond to the beckoning call of sleep (Punke, 2002, p. 23).

Glass noticed plum trees scattered among the willows, a lucky break because these individuals intended to grind pemmican from the combined fruit and meat (Punke, 2002, p. 23).

The following morning, Glass embarked on a solo scout around the campsite and discovered that another group had fallen and used plum trees. Glass also found scattered tree trunks used by the group to grind food. Instead of simply cleaning up the mess, Glass decided to take the opportunity to improve the environment, leaving it in a better condition. Glass ensured the group of the benefits that would be realized from the resources by using the trees, which illustrates the human tendency to exploit nature for personal gain.

B. *A Harmful Relationship: The Exploitation of the Environment by Humans*

In several Western religious and philosophical traditions, the non-human world was often perceived as existing mainly for the benefit of human beings (Arafah et al., 2020; Kaharuddin et al., 2022), and this mindset led to the exploitation of nature. The beginning of *The Revenant* featured a letter by William H. Ashley announcing the introduction of a new competitor in the fur trading company. The urgency to outpace this new competition compelled the group, led by Captain Andrew Henry, to quickly reach Fort Brazeau. The protagonist, Hugh Glass, was also left in a dire situation after being attacked by a bear and snake while left with only a razor. This dire circumstance prompted Glass to exploit the environment for safety while seeking retribution.

In the afternoon, before the grizzly bear incident, Captain Henry assigned Hugh Glass and another individual named Black Harris to embark on a scouting mission. Subsequently, these men were tasked with procuring meat supply through hunting.

Data 3

The scouts set up camp for the night after taking down a buffalo or deer. The wildlife was abused, wood was collected, and two or three little fires were built in the small, shaped like a well (Punke, 2002, p. 70). The wolf-skinned man looked up briefly and then disappeared into the woods (Punke, 2002, p. 70). Both men engaged in hunting activities using a rifle belonging to Glass. In this research, it is evident that hunting and shooting buffalos for profit exploits nature. In addition, the killing of animals in the woods was solely for commercial gain. For instance, an individual was observed wearing a coat crafted from wolf skin, intensifying the exploitation of nature, particularly animals.

After several days, Hugh Glass reunited with the other comrades, led by Captain Henry, while confronting Jim Bridger, who had deserted them earlier, failing to come across John Fitzgerald. Captain Henry offered to make amends for leaving Glass and believing in Fitzgerald's false claim of death. In addition, the captain recruited Red and Chapman to accompany Glass on the quest to seek revenge against Fitzgerald, who had stolen some personal belongings. These men come into a herd of buffalo stuck in the snow while travelling.

Data 4

Glass confidently crested a butte and halted in his tracks, observing a small herd of approximately fifty buffaloes huddled together about a hundred yards away.

... Despite briefly considering shooting another cow or calf, he quickly reasoned that there was already more than enough meat.

Then, struck with an idea, Glass moved within forty yards of the herd, took aim at a giant bull, and fired. He then reloaded and swiftly shot another bull (Punke, 2002, p. 259).

As these men ventured into the wilderness, every opportunity was seized to hunt buffalo for sustenance, armed with a sophisticated rifle. Glass meticulously aimed and fired while the companions assisted in bringing down the magnificent beasts. The objective extended beyond merely obtaining food; these men intended to use the buffalo skins to construct boats to navigate the river, which was a more time-consuming alternative to land travel. With accurate shots, eleven bulls were felled, which were skillfully skinned and dissected using trusty blades.

Red and Chapman positioned themselves next to Glass, who was diligently reloading the rifle. Chapman inquired, "Why?" as the calves appeared to be of better quality for consumption.

Glass responded, "It is the hides I am after, for crafting a bullboat."

After five minutes, the serene valley was now the sombre scene of eleven lifeless buffalo. Though the bounty exceeded the immediate requirements, Red and Chapman's adrenaline-fueled actions were consumed by an unyielding frenzy. Amidst the chaotic aftermath, Glass diligently reloaded, with unwavering determination, even as the barrel became fouled from the rapid succession of shots. Only once the charge was securely in place and the pan primed did

Glass cautiously approach the nearest bull, ready to continue the necessary process. Chapman got on the ridgeline and looked around, making a noise, while Red used the new knife (Punke, 2002, p. 260).

From this viewpoint, the book does not express remorse for hunting, killing, and causing harm to nature. Humans often tried to justify hunting in various ways; some argued that it was necessary to maintain the circle of life or the ecosystem. Meanwhile, others claimed that wildlife should be perceived no differently from harvested crops (Noske, 1997). It was also reported that humans intentionally destroyed nature to reap the benefits, even though Hugh Glass's life depended on natural resources.

C. *The Impact on Human Beings*

The interconnection profoundly influenced both humanity and the natural environment. Hugh Glass bore the brunt of this impact, which had been proven to be catastrophic.

Data 5

Upon entering the clearing, a deep growl filled the air as a powerful animal with black eyes fixed its gaze on Glass. The creature stood poised, processing the unfamiliar scent mingling with the cubs. It faced Glass directly, its coiled and taut body exuding sheer muscularity, with massive shoulders and thick forelegs and a distinctive silvery hump that unmistakably identified it as a grizzly bear (Punke, 2002, p. 25).

Given this scenario, Hugh Glass encountered bear cubs at play while out on a hunting trip. Unaware that the mother was nearby, Glass approached the animals, sensing danger; the mother bear attacked Hugh Glass, who was perceived as a threat due to the proximity and rifle. The attack reflected the defensive instinct of the mother bear and the fear of humans. It also concentrated on the consequences of Hugh Glass's actions as a hunter and how the treatment of nature can evoke aggressive responses.

Data 6

Glass was often unconscious due to the injuries. They could sometimes drink water but could not eat solid food because of the wounds in the throat. Glass fell twice while being moved, and the second time broke two of the stitches in the throat. The throat injuries made Glass unable to speak, and the only sound they could make was a weak wheezing noise as they breathed (Punke, 2002, p. 41).

Glass struggled with the repercussions and pain resulting from the bear attack, a direct consequence of actions towards nature. The injuries incurred were significant, rendering Glass incapable of tending to basic needs, including breathing without assistance. The injuries to the throat restricted the ability to swallow water, and in this vulnerable state, the other companions abandoned Glass, taking possession of personal belongings, thereby intensifying the suffering. This encounter with the bear served as a poignant reminder of the potential risks inherent in previous actions.

Data 7

The day after being abandoned, Glass awakened from unconsciousness only to be confronted by a snake. It struck at the wounded throat, reacting as if with the intent that Glass had treated nature badly.

Hugh Glass started to crawl (Punke, 2002, p. 3). When the snake emerged, Glass had no idea how long he had been lying there (Punke, 2002, p. 72). At last, the snake let go of its lengthy, perpendicular body to Glass's torso. The snake rewrapped itself and attacked again before he could roll away. The snake had its fangs buried in Glass's throat, preventing him from screaming this time (Punke, 2002, p. 73).

Glass was determined to seek revenge against the companions for abandoning him at Fort Union, a distant outpost from the current location at the Grand. Despite the excruciating pain, Glass dragged himself across the unforgiving terrain for weeks until he was discovered by two Indians, who happened to be colleagues from the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

Data 8

Upon examining the situation, one of the individuals in the mentioned group successfully apprehended a contorting white worm and brought it to Glass for inspection. Subsequently, Glass reacted with a visceral expression of horror, frantically attempting to address his wounds and ultimately succumbing to a fit of retching at the disturbing notion of this parasitic intrusion (Punke, 2002, p. 142).

Upon discovering worms in the back wounds, the Indians decided to provide Glass with proper care while transporting him to a Sioux camp for treatment. This showed the significant impact of the relationship with the environment, as Glass endured great pain due to the non-human attack.

From this viewpoint, humanity must consider the relationship with the natural world because human desires often neglect nature's crucial balance. Therefore, the current challenge lies in using nature while maintaining this balance in the modern world. It is also important to approach the contemporary world as an opportunity to coexist harmoniously with nature (Asriyanti et al., 2022).

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the novel *The Revenant* focuses on the close relationship between humans and the environment. Regarding this aspect, humans are an integral part of the ecosystem, and their actions significantly impact the environment. However, the development and progress pursued by humans often led to destructive environmental consequences. Therefore, the main character exemplifies this destructive relationship with the environment. Hugh Glass

showed that the indifferent attitude towards nature resulted in damage by hunting and cutting down trees without considering the long-term effects on the environment. The novel also portrays the detrimental impact of these actions, including the scattering of carcasses and fallen trees in the forest and the decline in the population of hunted animals.

The environmental imbalance caused by these actions affected both the non-human inhabitants of the forest and humans. Glass suffered a severe injury during a bear attack, focusing on the impact of the adverse relationship with the environment. Therefore, *The Revenant* concentrated on the harmful and unbalanced relationship between the main character and nature, resulting in significant environmental damage and negative consequences.

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