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ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF GALAMSEY IN GHANA: A ROMANTIC PASTORAL ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF HOPKINS'S *BINSEY POPLARS*

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АНАЛИЗ НА ВЛИЯНИЕТО НА НЕЗАКОННИЯ ДОБИВ НА ЗЛАТО В ГАНА – РОМАНТИЧНО ПАСТОРАЛНО ЕКОКРИТИЧНО ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ НА „ТОПОЛИТЕ НА БИНСИ“ ОТ ХОПКИНС

Humanity's persistent neglect and overexploitation of nature have precipitated a rising concern regarding environmental issues, such as land and forest degradation and climate change. These issues have taken center stage in both literary and non-literary discourse. This study explores how literature serves as a tool to expose human injustices toward nature and the environment. Through ecocriticism and textual analysis, Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem *Binsey Poplars* is examined to highlight the ecocritical issues raised in the context of illegal mining in Ghana, commonly known as Galamsey. The study discusses the devastation caused by Galamsey activities in Ghana, which mirrors the destruction depicted in the poem. The analysis reveals that Ghana's forest reserves and water bodies are under constant threat, and if these threats are not mitigated, there is a significant risk that nature will suffer irreparable damage. The research adopts a qualitative paradigm, allowing for a detailed textual analysis of the eco-critical issues in the poem and their reflection of the destructive impact on Ghanaian water and forest reserves. By understanding these eco-critical issues in Ghana through literary analysis, we gain insights into how literature can serve as a vehicle for character change, empathy-building, and the dissemination of ideas. Furthermore, this approach illuminates how writers navigate and challenge prevailing societal problems through their works. The study concludes that ecocriticism as a theoretical framework not only offers a refreshing perspective for interpreting poetry but also brings to light critical environmental issues that threaten the safety and sanctity of the environment.

Keywords: *ecocriticism; environment; ecopoerty; Galamsey.*

Постоянното пренебрежение и свръхексплоатация на природата от страна на човечеството са причина за нарастващата загриженост относно екологичните проблеми, каквито са деградацията на земите и горите и климатичните промени. Тези въпроси заемат централно място както в литературния, така и в нелитературния дискурс. Настоящото изследване разглежда ролята на литературата като инструмент за разкриване на несправедливостите на човечеството спрямо природата и околната среда. Чрез екокритика и анализ на текста се изследва поемата „Тополите на Бинси“ от Джерард Манли Хопкинс, за да се подчертаят екокритичните въпроси, повдигнати в контекста на незаконния добив на злато в Гана, известен като *галамсей*. Изследването обсъжда опустошенията, причинени от дейностите на *галамсея* в Гана, причинили разрушението, описано в поемата. Анализът показва как горските резервати и водоемите на Гана са под постоянна заплаха. Ако тези заплахи не бъдат овладени, съществува значителен риск природата да понесе непоправими щети. Изследването прилага качествен парадигматичен подход, който позволява детайлен текстуален анализ на екокритичните въпроси в поемата. Литературният анализ на тези

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въпроси води до прозрения за това как литературата може да служи като средство за изграждане на емпатия и разпространение на идеи. Освен това този подход хвърля светлина върху това как писателите се ориентират в обществените проблеми и ги отразяват в своите произведения. В изследването е направен изводът, че екокритиката като теоретична рамка не само предлага нов поглед към интерпретацията на поезията, но поставя и критични екологични въпроси относно защитеността и свещеността на околната среда.

Ключови думи: *екокритика; околна среда; екопоезия; галамсей.*

1. Introduction

Illegal mining operations in Ghana have destroyed much of the country's agricultural land, as well as polluted many water bodies. This has subsequently led to water shortages in some parts of the country (Hilson & Maconachie, 2020; Wireko-Gyebi et al., 2020). The saddest part of this is that most of these illegal mining operations are carried out by foreign nationals who use heavy machinery in their illegal activity. Although Galamsey is not new in Ghana, the employment of heavy machinery such as excavators, bulldozers, and chafans is a newer addition (Yeboah, 2023). Illegal mining affects the government's commitment to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Ros-Tonen et al. (2021) opine that the government of Ghana has made attempts to clamp down on illegal mining using military interventions, legislation, and alternative livelihood programmes. For instance, Article 36 (9) of Ghana's 1992 Constitution stipulates that the state would take necessary steps to preserve the environment for future generations. Article 41(k) further stipulates that protecting the environment is the responsibility of all citizens. These constitutional provisions, coupled with the creation of the Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology and the Ministry of Lands and Natural underscore the country's commitment and responsibility to protect and maintain the environmental and natural resources. Unfortunately, however, these programmes have failed to yield any results. According to Crawford & Botchwey (2020), the last decade has seen the rise of both domestic and foreign illegal mining operators in the country. Unlike in the past when mining primarily occurred on land, it now also takes place on riverbanks and riverbeds. This can be attributed to the steady appreciation of the price of gold from 2004. Galamsey has caused the contamination of major water bodies nationwide.

According to Barenblitt et al. (2021), some 47,000 hectares of vegetation were converted to mining at an annual rate of 2600 hectares. They claim that almost half of this mining took place between 2014 and 2017. Furthermore, around 700 hectares of this mining occurred within protected areas, as recorded by the World Database of Protected Areas (Barenblitt et al., 2021, p. 1). Scholars (e.g., Barenblitt et al., 2021; Gyamfi, Appiah-Adjei, & Adjei, 2019; Lisseth Casso-Hartmann et al., 2022; Takyi, Hassan, El Mahradi, & Adade, 2021) believe that in addition to deforestation, growing illicit mining activity in recent years has the potential to harm human health, access to drinking water, and food security.

From a non-literary perspective, the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Goals (SDGs), notably SDGs 6 and 15, call for the long-term preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity. According to these global goals, we must guarantee that by 2030, the world has universal and equitable access to clean and cheap drinking water for everyone. Furthermore, we must halt biodiversity loss, manage forests effectively, combat desertification, and conserve, restore, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 15.2). This goal should have been accomplished by 2020. It is frustrating that debates about these aims are still ongoing in 2024. The goals have not only been met, but they have actually taken a step back, all due to the precarious behaviours of humans. For Suglo et al. (2021), concerns about the devastation of the natural environment and the effects of climate change should dread the actions of illegal mining in Ghana. The Galamsey problem must thus be dealt with radically. While there are several ways to environmental maintenance and monitoring, the current study views Ecocriticism as an alternative strategy that promotes the preservation of nature, the environment, and the ecology. Literary writers, in their efforts to educate and criticise their societies of the ills that adversely affect the environment incessantly try to represent and explore eco-critical issues in their works. According to Yeboah et al (2023: 8), "ecocriticism is mainly concerned with how literature responds to environmental issues".

Glotfelty (2007: xviii) adds that “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” In simple terms, Glotfelty (2007) asserts that ecocriticism is a critical field of study centred on the human-environment relationship, particularly pertinent in an era of widespread environmental crises. Ecocriticism can thus be viewed as a branch of critical studies that examines how literature functions as a medium to explore, inform, and highlight various environmental issues, while also suggesting practices for managing or mitigating these issues.

In recent times, environmental concerns have garnered attention from numerous countries and educational institutions (see Opoku & Boachie, 2020; Tang et al., 2021). However, within the realm of literary studies, particularly in Ghana, this subject remains largely unexplored. Despite the vast array of literary works produced globally, including poems addressing environmental themes, there seems to be a lack of analysis regarding the impact of human activities on the environment, which scholars have often overlooked, considering them to be of a sublime nature for unclear reasons. Nevertheless, Mondol et al. (2014) argue convincingly for the relevance of the environment in literature.

Literature is one of the prolific realms to criticise human actions that affect the ecosystem (Hou, Kang, & Xu, 2022). It is treated as a kind of means: an instrument of moral instruction. According to Andimba (2017), literary writers possess a unique way of semiotising their emotions to demonstrate their concerns and capture the interdependence between humans and the environment. In Ghana, illegal mining activities are increasingly problematic. The effectiveness of combating the problem necessitates a better grasp of its origins, consequences, degree, and familiarity with climate, soil, water, and land cover, as well as socioeconomic aspects, and authors of fictional literature such as poets have long expressed these worries. As everything is interrelated, human activities have a significant impact on how we interact with the world. Humans are clearly a part of the natural environment. It is simple to understand how different aspects of our lives have shaped the society we live in. According to Ge, Zhang, Dong, & Yang (2021) humans have long been inextricably intertwined with rivers, lakes, and wetlands in search of water, food, medicines, and habitation. However, overexploitation has severely depleted the ecology. According to Baddianaah et al. (2022), several unfavourable effects, including pollution, excessive water use, (and in the case of Ghana, the detrimental consequences of illegal mining activities known as “*Galamsey*”,¹) have been brought on by a variety of factors. They include urbanisation, intensification of agriculture, flood mitigation, and reasons for financial stability (ibid. 2022). Because of such arbitrary attitude, humans place in the ecosystem is likewise quite vulnerable. Today, the globe mourns because of global warming, deforestation, depletion of the ozone layer, climate change, natural catastrophes, air pollution, decline in water reserves, bad soil conditions, desertification, and a long list of issues caused by human activity. (Lawrence et al., 2022; Yeboah et al., 2023). According to Kalemba (2010), the survival of nature depends on today’s people who are trained to be caretakers of the environment. For Karni, (1990), if people are ever to be aware of nature, they must realise that every action has a consequence. Thus, to sustain the ecosystem for tomorrow, it is imperative that every human activity be scrutinised.

Therefore, this paper seeks to shed light on the ecocritical study of the pressing issue of illegal mining in Ghana, as depicted in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem *Binsey Poplars* (1879). The study aims to achieve two primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to examine the representation of nature in the poem through a detailed analysis of Hopkins’s work to uncover the ways in which the poet depicts the natural world. Secondly, the study aims to analyse how these representations of nature in the poem align with the environmental destruction caused by illegal mining in Ghana. By drawing parallels between Hopkins’s literary expressions and the real-world consequences of Galamsey activities, the research highlights the relevance of eco-critical themes in understanding contemporary environmental issues in Ghana. The analysis not only underscores the significance of literary works in reflecting and critiquing societal problems but also emphasises the urgent need to address the ecological damage inflicted by illegal mining practices. Based on the foregoing discussion, the research tries to answer the following questions.

¹ Galamsey: “Galamsey’ is a corrupted term derived from the phrase “gather them and sell.” It refers to the illegal practice of collecting and selling mineral resources, particularly gold. This activity, predominantly undertaken by young adults, results in the destruction of water bodies and creates significant water-related challenges for the community (Biney, 2019).



1. How is nature represented in Gerard Manley Hopkins's *Binsey Poplars*?
2. How are the representations of nature expressed in Gerard Manley Hopkins's *Binsey Poplars* consistent with the destruction of the environment by illegal mining in Ghana?

2. Ecocriticism: The approach to the study

The word Ecocriticism is a derivative of two words: ecology and criticism. According to Glotfelty & Fromm (1996: xix), "Ecocriticism is the study of the link between literature and the physical environment." Yeboah et al. (2023) expatiated that William Rueckert introduced the notion of ecocriticism in his 1978 study, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. In this study, Rueckert discusses numerous significant subjects at the interface of literature and ecology. The author also proposed interpreting literary writings as "living organisms" (Rueckert, 1978: 108), which interact with their surroundings. He contends that, much as biological organisms adapt and respond to their environment, literary works may be viewed as dynamic entities that react to and reflect ecological situations. This parallel highlight the ability of literature to change and adapt in response to changing environmental conditions. Just as Buell (2005: 27) observed:

The newer environmental criticism is likely to continue to press for more cosmopolitan ways of understanding the work of ecodiscourse in the canon of original concentration, even as it takes in a wider range of literary history so as ultimately to include, in principle, any text whatsoever.

Buell's (2005) argument clearly demonstrates that ecocriticism seeks to sustain the standards and required ways of navigating through the environment without damaging it in any way.

In addition, scholars (see Khan, 2019; Justine, 2021; Iwuji, 2023; Yeboah et al., 2023) have regarded Rueckert's work as a foundational text in the field of ecocriticism that offers a novel perspective on how literature can contribute to our understanding of environmental issues and ecological consciousness. In his essay, Rueckert (1978) begins by highlighting the pressing ecological crisis facing the planet. He emphasises the urgent need for increased awareness and proactive measures to address environmental degradation and the adverse impacts of human activities on nature. Rueckert's argument suggests that literature has a significant role to play because it serves as a powerful medium for raising awareness about the environmental challenges we face. Iwuji (2023) argues that literature and ecological concepts are deeply intertwined so much that literary works has the potency to help readers understand and appreciate the natural world. This relationship as reflected in literature "advances the argument of not only the role of humans in the destruction of the environment but also the question of what can be done to uphold the sanctity of nature" (Yeboah et al., 2023: 8). In this context, Buell argues that the ecological crisis is fundamentally a "crisis of the imagination" (Buell, 2005: 28), suggesting that its resolution relies on discovering improved ways to envision nature and humanity's relationship with it.

For Ryan (2020), ecocriticism involves analysing literary texts for their ecological content and implications, as well as considering how literature can influence and reflect environmental consciousness. This methodology opens up new avenues for literary analysis which allows scholars to explore the ways in which literature engages with ecological themes and promotes environmental awareness.

By concentrating on the literary examination of how nature is portrayed in literary works and the literary constructions of the environmental catastrophe in eco-literacy discourses, ecocriticism seeks to combine literary criticism with environmental issues. Clark (2019) argues that ecocriticism offers a challenge to literature to engage with the problems of the current environmental crisis. Thus, ecocriticism directly addresses both nature (including natural landscapes) and the environment (landscapes, both natural and urban). Platz (2012) has opined that one of the fundamental objectives of ecocriticism is to identify and evaluate human attitudes toward nature and to foster a feeling of responsibility for the devastation that life's left hand does to its right hand through imprudent practices.

2.1. Romantic Ecocriticism

When examining a text through the lens of nature, one cannot overlook the importance of the Romantic paradigm. Rooted in the classical tradition and deeply ingrained in Western culture, it remains a crucial mode for investigation among ecocritics (Hutchings, 2007). Romantic ecocriticism, though traced back to the romantic period of the 1790s, gained prominence in the 1990s and can be comprehensively examined through four seminal texts: Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991), Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994), James McKusick's *Green Writing* (2000), and Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000). The central argument of these texts is that the origins of environmentalism are embedded in the Romantic era's attitudes towards nature. In an age characterised by pollution and unchecked industrialisation, the Romantic emphasis on the intrinsic value of place, dwelling, and organic interrelationships offers insights into living harmoniously with the natural world. According to Mortensen (2004), the Romantic ecocriticism which is characterised by its emphasis on the grandeur and beauty of landscapes, particularly sublime mountainous regions is enduring despite the limited biological diversity. Romantic ecocritical ideology advocates a perspective wherein humans are not proprietors of the Earth but rather stewards, responsible for its care and preservation, not just for themselves but also for all species (Bate, 2000: 73).

It is worth noting that the evolution of ecocriticism in Romantic literature from the 1990s to the present day reflects a significant shift in scholarly approaches and perspectives. Davies (2018) opine that in the 1990s, ecocritics primarily sought parallels between modern environmental attitudes and the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, as we progress into the twenty-first century, scholars began to critically reassess and expand upon earlier idealist frameworks in Romantic ecocriticism. One of the key developments in the evolution of ecocriticism in Romantic literature is the move away from idealist frameworks that celebrated Romantic ecological holism (see Verderame, 2012; Davies, 2018; Roberts, 2018). Idealist Romantic ecocriticism, which focused on highlighting the harmonious relationship between humans and nature in Romantic texts (Yilmaz, 2023), has been subject to critique in recent scholarship. Timothy Clark, for instance, has provided incisive analysis on the limitations of idealism in ecocriticism, advocating for a more rigorous understanding of Romantic texts (Clark, 2015).

Moreover, contemporary scholars emphasise the importance of situating Romantic literature within its historical context to better understand human-environment relationships. This historical contextualisation allows for a deeper exploration of the transformations and discontinuities between the Romantic period and the present day (Davies, 2018). This particular manifestation of Romanticism provides for the understanding of the ecocritical analysis of illegal mining activities in Ghana by suggesting a framework for responsible Earth stewardship. Although, Hopkins's poem is many years old, it still speaks to contemporary environmental issues such as deforestation as seen in Ghana through the activities of illegal mining operations.

2.2. Synopsis of the Poem: *Binsey Poplars*

Binsey Poplars is a poem written by Gerard Manley Hopkins, an English Victorian poet. The poem was composed in 1879 after Hopkins visited the village of Binsey near Oxford and discovered that a row of poplar trees he had admired on a previous visit had been cut down. The poem reflects his lamentation and contemplation over the loss of these trees and the impact of human intervention on nature. In the poem, Hopkins begins by describing the poplar trees and their significance to him. He portrays them as tall and graceful, their leaves rustling in the wind. The trees had a spiritual and aesthetic value to him, providing a sense of solace and beauty in the natural landscape.

However, Hopkins soon reveals that the trees have been felled, presumably due to human intervention. Their absence deeply affects him, and he expresses his distress and sorrow over their loss. He mourns the destruction of something he held dear and laments the drastic change in the landscape that was once adorned by these majestic trees. As the poem progresses, Hopkins argues that humans often fail to recognize the intrinsic value of nature and the spiritual connection it offers. He believes that the destruction of the poplar trees represents a disregard for the beauty and sanctity of the natural environ-



ment. Towards the end of the poem, Hopkins finds solace in the idea of divine redemption, suggesting that the trees may find their place in a greater plan. He hopes that God, in His benevolence, will restore and resurrect the trees in a spiritual sense, giving them a higher purpose. The replacement of the trees, which ran from Binsey north to Godstow, did not happen until 2004 when replanting was resumed. It is unclear who is to blame for this heinous “tree-i-cide,” but the speaker assures that whoever chopped these trees down had no idea what they were doing. They weren’t simply removing a few trees; they were profoundly transforming nature. The natural environment is altered when a tree is cut down.

The poem is considered a work of eco-poetry because of its examination of nature and the environment. The poem is focused on the natural world, specifically the poplar trees and the landscape surrounding them. Hopkins vividly describes the beauty and significance of the trees and emphasised their aesthetic and spiritual value.

3. Review of Related Studies

There is enough evidence of the analysis of ecocritical concerns in literary works. Among scholars who have investigated how literary writers have raised people’s awareness about the atrocious activities that harm the environment include Andimba (2017); Asiamah (2021); Dodd (2000); Gbr (2023); and Mishra (2016). Gbr (2023) for instance provides an exploration of eco-poetry and ecocriticism through the lens of Linda Hogan’s work. The study highlights the urgent need to address Nature in literature, especially poetry, in the face of the escalating ecological crisis. The discussion on deep ecology as a philosophical theory that challenges human domination of Nature adds depth to the analysis, showcasing Hogan’s role as an eco-poet advocating for the rights of non-human entities to flourish. Gbr (2023) additionally explores the concept of eco-poetry as a contemporary form of poetry with ecological messages that emphasizes the importance of seeking harmony between humans and the natural world. Drawing on Bate’s (2000) perspective on eco-poetry as a tool to shift readers from an anthropocentric to a bio-centric viewpoint, the study effectively connects Hogan’s work to broader environmental concerns.

It is also imperative to note the contribution of African literary writers to the promotion of the safeguarding of the environment through ecocriticism. African literature has emerged as a important platform for exploring the complex interplay between environmental issues and literary expression. Two significant works in this field are Asiamah’s (2021) and Andimba’s (2017) studies, both of which offer insights into how African writers engage with environmental themes. Asiamah’s (2021) work for instance explores how African literature addresses environmental issues through a unique cultural lens. The author contrasts Anglo-American environmental literature, which often idealizes pristine nature and wilderness conservation (Hersey, 2018), with African environmental literature that grapples with urban slums, environmental degradation, and the impact of colonialism. This contrast underscores that concepts of “nature” and “environment” are not universal but are deeply influenced by cultural and historical contexts.

A significant strength of Asiamah’s analysis lies in the identification of thematic elements that are recurrent in African literature, such as the tension between tradition and modernity, the impact of extreme weather on human life, and the exploitation of natural resources by multinational corporations. These themes illustrate that African authors are not only aware of environmental issues but also integrate them into their narratives in a way that reflects local realities and indigenous knowledge systems. Furthermore, Asiamah’s discussion of postcolonial ecocriticism reveals how African writers challenge Western-centric environmentalism. By foregrounding issues such as land dispossession, the psychological impact of specific landscapes, and the sacredness of natural elements, African literature offers a rich tapestry of environmental concerns that are often overlooked by traditional ecocriticism. This approach aligns with Buell’s (2005) definition of ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary movement focused on how literature expresses environmental awareness and concerns.

Andimba’s (2017) work, on the other hand, employs a more focused theoretical framework of ecocriticism to analyse specific literary texts. The author emphasises the role of poetry in highlighting humanity’s relationship with nature, using vivid imagery and language to underscore the consequences of human exploitation. The study critiques the anthropocentric view that nature is “blind, deaf, and stu-

pendous,” suggesting instead that nature has its own order and agency. A key aspect of the analysis is the use of ecocriticism to challenge the dominant narrative that only science can solve environmental issues. By drawing on William Rueckert’s pioneering work in ecocriticism (Rueckert, 1978), Andimba (2017) demonstrates that literature, too, has a vital role in addressing ecological concerns. This perspective broadens the scope of ecocriticism to include literary contributions to environmental discourse, thereby validating the significance of language and narrative in shaping our understanding of ecological issues.

In the context of Ghana, Yeboah et al. (2023) looked at the ecocritical inscriptions in selected African poems, particularly from Ghana. Their study aims to examine how literature, specifically poetry, serves as a tool to raise awareness and caution about human mistreatment of the environment. The study employs a close textual reading of selected contemporary Ghanaian poems for a detailed examination of the poets’ language, imagery, and themes. Focusing on Ghanaian poets, the study provides an exposition into local perceptions of environmental issues. This cultural perspective is important for ecocritical studies in Ghana, as it helps to understand how cultural values and traditions influence environmental attitudes and behaviours. Yeboah et al. (2023) demonstrates that the poets’ works serve as a reflection of the societal and cultural contexts in which they are embedded, providing a lens through which to view the interconnectedness of culture and ecology in Ghana.

However, the study focused on four poems by Ghanaian poets. In my opinion, the study could be further strengthened by incorporating a more extensive corpus of poems, thereby providing a broader representation of ecocritical themes in Ghanaian poetry. Additionally, a comparative analysis with other African or global ecocritical works could situate Ghanaian perspectives within a larger context to enriching the study’s relevance and depth. The current study, taking into consideration all these gaps focused the analysis, Gerald Manley Hopkin’s poem *Binsey Poplars* a non-African poem that seemingly speaks to African and Ghanaian ecological challenges.

Regardless of these limitations of the studies, the broader implications are significant for the field of ecocriticism. The studies highlight the need for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to environmental literature, one that acknowledges the diverse ways in which different cultures perceive and interact with nature. This is particularly important in the context of African literature, where historical and socio-political factors have shaped environmental discourse. Moreover, these studies underscore the potential of literature to contribute to environmental conservation and sustainability efforts. By raising awareness and fostering a deeper appreciation for the natural world, literary works can inspire action and promote a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.

4. Methodology

This study employs the qualitative research paradigm as its aim is to provide an understanding of how environmental issues have been presented in the poem *Binsey Poplars*. While qualitative research is concerned with sample(s) that can provide many responses to the research questions (Creswell, 2009), the aforementioned poem was sampled purposively. This poem was chosen because it is part of the approved poems the Ghana Education Service (GES) has selected to be taught in senior high schools across the country from 2020 to 2025. Among other poems selected by the GES, it is only Hopkins’s *Binsey Poplars* that talks about environmental issues. The study further employs a close textual reading of the selected poem. Arya (2020) has argued that the important role of textual analysis involves its ability to decode the complexities within a text, specifically the use of textual analysis to understand human behaviour, societal trends, and cultural narratives.

The study also adopts the Romantic Ecocriticism theory for analysing the ecological issues in the poem by projecting the detrimental effects of our continuous neglect and destruction of lands and water bodies through illegal mining activities (Galamsey) in Ghana. Particular attention will be given to how the poet has employed language in a creative and skilful way to unravel the ecocritical issues in the Ghanaian context and the world in general. The poem addresses a critical environmental issue in Ghana, but somehow this poem has not been critically examined outside the classroom. Therefore, this study is meant to bring awareness of the dangers of Galamsey as expressed in this poem.



5. Discussion of results

5.1. The Poem and Nature

Nature is represented in *Binsey Poplars* as a source of beauty, vitality, and spiritual significance. The poem portrays the natural world, particularly the poplar trees, as a reflection of divine creation and a symbol of interconnectedness. In the opening stanza, the poetic speaker describes the poplar trees as “my aspens dear” to recognise the value of the trees. This shows that the speaker has a caring relationship with them. He sees the trees as part of his existence. The speaker further describes the branches of the trees as “airy cages.” The airy cage serves two purposes: life-giving and protection. Aggerwal & Gupta (2022) have argued that trees provide oxygen, food, shelter, and prevent global warming, which makes them vital for human life and personal liberty. Thus, the poem has demonstrated the importance of nature in the lives of humans. Without oxygen, man will cease to exist. This comes as no surprise since Kozłowski & Song (2022) observed that trees are indispensable for maintaining the balance of our environment. According to the authors, trees play an important role in nurturing and protecting the natural world “they provide numerous benefits that are essential for the survival of various life forms” (Kozłowski & Song, 2022, p. 3). Domke et al. (2020) have also contended that trees contribute significantly to carbon sequestration, absorbing carbon dioxide during photosynthesis and thereby reducing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This process is vital in mitigating climate change and maintaining air quality. In the current study, the destruction of the poplar trees is depicted as a loss to the ecosystem and the local community. It is therefore imperative to protect trees to prevent them from disappearing, especially through human activities such as illegal mining operation in Ghana.

Trees have deep-rooted cultural and spiritual significance (Roba, 2021), as reflected in various ancient texts. Indian literature, particularly in works such as the Panchatantra and Jataka Tales, portrays trees as central to human life and spiritual well-being (see Haberman, 2017; Kumaravelu & Gnanadurai, 2023a; Kumaravelu & Gnanadurai, 2023b for further discussion about the cultural and spiritual significance of trees). In the African culture, similar in other cultures globally, trees serve as a source of shade where the community meets for socialisation (Traoré, 2019). Yeboah et al. (2023) adds that elders in some African communities sit under trees to make decisions and perform important traditional rites. Todua & Ketsbaia (2021) also argue that trees often symbolise knowledge and enlightenment. A typical example is the Bodhi tree, under which the Buddha attained enlightenment (Mayeda, 2005). This symbolism extends to other religious and cultural narratives to illustrate the tree’s role in spiritual awakening and wisdom. Such depictions in literature underscore the tree’s importance in human culture and education that reinforce the interconnectedness between humans and nature.

Aside from the shade it provides and its cultural significance, trees serve as a home for many animals like birds and squirrels. Therefore, by cutting down trees, we deny ourselves oxygen for survival, we destabilise the soil and cause havoc to the homes of wildlife, and we uproot a part of our cultural identity. This is the reason why the speaker in *Binsey Polars* mourns the loss of the trees and laments the disruption of their natural habitat. This reflects an understanding of the interconnectedness of nature and the impact that the loss of one element can have on the entire ecosystem.

5.2. Destruction of the Environment by Galamsey

Ghana is well known for its abundant natural resources, which include extensive swaths of rainforest. This is similar to the stunning display of poplar trees that were felled in *Binsey Poplars*. The primary forest of Ghana has likewise gone, as Hopkins noted in the English context with his poem, with what remains mainly restricted to reserves spread throughout the country’s southern third. This idea of the beautiful forests in Ghana can be explored through the first stanza of the poem where the persona describes the beautiful array of poplar trees with “a fresh and following folded rank” (Hopkins, 1879, line 4). The first two lines of *Binsey Poplars* is almost the opening of a Romantic ode: a nature-worshiping paean to a particularly beautiful stand of poplars. For this reason, the poetic speaker addresses the poplar trees, referring to them as “my aspens² dear” (line 1) to show how emotionally connected he is to nature through

² The word “aspens” is used as a synonym for poplars since aspen trees belong to the same family of trees as poplars.

the lens of the poplar trees. The poetic speaker also describes the poplars' branches as "airy cages," (line 1) suggesting that the dense foliage of the trees creates an enclosure or cage-like structure that is light and open. This imagery evokes a sense of beauty and protection. The poetic speaker however laments that these beautiful trees have "All felled, felled, are all felled" (line 3) by no means of any other than human activities. It comes as no surprise as the setting of the poem in the late 1879 marks the height of the Victorian era and the Industrial Revolution. Similar to the Ghanaian case of rapid distraction of the land cover and water bodies, illegal mining activities (Galamsey) contribute immensely to the destruction of trees and forest reserves. According to Barenblitt et al. (2021), roughly 47,000 hectares of vegetation in Ghana were converted to mining at an average annual rate of 2600 hectares. They claim that around half of this mining took place between 2014 and 2017. Furthermore, the World Database of Protected Areas identified around 700 hectares of mining within protected areas (Barenblitt et al., 2021: 1). Illegal mining activities is constantly destroying the forests and the water bodies in the country without the adherence to any regulations. From the poem, Hopkins employment of "Not spared, not one" (line 5) points to how man indiscriminately destroys the trees, similar to the destruction of the forest and water bodies through illegal mining activities.

Traoré (2019:75) also asserts that "trees are revered in Africa as providers of comfort along journey routes and in homes." Simply, aside a generous oxygen producer, trees symbolise communal unity and foster a sense of togetherness in an African communal culture. Yeboah et al (2023) observe that by cutting down trees, we deny ourselves oxygen for survival, we destabilize the soil and cause havoc to the homes of wildlife, and we uproot a part of our cultural identity. The fallen trees in the poem create an image of the devastated situation of forests in Ghana through the actions of illegal mining activities. Operators of these mining activities cut down trees "On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank" (line 8) to create a safe space to mine for minerals. The destruction of the lands and the trees are so enormous that land reclamation is almost impossible. For instance, Awotwi et al. (2021) contend that illegal mining activities in the Pra River Basin significantly change reclaimed soil constituents and impact hydrological components and sediment yield, with Galamsey and small-scale mining producing the most sediment. An aerial view of a forest reserve that has been penetrated by Galamsey has been provided in the figure below to show the seriousness of the effects of Galamsey on the land, trees and water bodies in Ghana.



Figure 1. An aerial view of forestlands destroyed by Galamsey (source: myjoyonline.com)

The figure above recounts the stark tragedy that has befallen the earth at the hands of illegal mining operators from the constant cutting down of trees, abuse of streams, river bodies, and the earth itself. This is similar to the 'felled' trees in *Binsey Poplar* that were "All felled, felled, are all felled/ Of a fresh and following folded rank/ Not spared, not one" According to Schueler, Kuemmerle & Schröder (2011), illicit mining (*Galamsey*) has been accorded the most blame for Ghana's increasing deforestation and



water damage. These practices significantly impede the achievement of SDGs 6.1 and 15.2. According to these global goals, we are to ensure that by 2030, the world had achieved universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all (SDG 6.1). Additionally, we must stop biodiversity loss, manage forests sustainably, fight desertification, and protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 15.2). The accomplishment of this objective should have come to fruition by 2020. It is, however, unfortunate that debates about these aims are still ongoing in 2024.

While Hopkins is saddened to see those poplars taken down, it is crucial to be worried about the rate at which we are diminishing our forest cover since people have the potential to irreversibly affect nature—for the worse. The severity and disregard of illicit mining (*Galamsey*) activities in our various water bodies and forests have become an unembellished national concern (Aboka, Cobbina & Dzigboddi, 2018; Barenblitt et al., 2021; Darko et al., 2021; Duncan, 2020; Fatawu, 2018; Mensah et al., 2015; Usman Kaku et al., 2021).

In stanza two of Hopkins's poem, he demonstrates the consequences of the actions of humans such as illegal small-scale mining (*Galamsey*). The speaker mourns over the widespread annihilation of the natural world, which occurs because humans fail to understand the ramifications of their actions. The introduction of the preposition *if* at the beginning of the second stanza presents a counterfactual claim of humans' ignorance to the effects of environmental abuse and overexploitation. This speaks to the idea that there is a change and it does not benefit the environment and the ecosystem. The speaker claims that to "delve or hew" (line 10) is to treat the environment harshly and unreasonably. In the event of mining activities in Ghana, operators dig to mine and chop down forests to create space for their mining activities. The speaker therefore issued a warning that because nature (the country) is "so tender" (line 12), even the slightest harm might alter it permanently. The character compares the destruction of the environment to the pricking of an eyeball, an organ with complex and powerful workings. According to lines 13 – 15, he says, "To touch, her being so slender/ That, like this sleek and seeing ball/ But a prick will make no eye at all." This means that even a tiny puncture to the eyeball transforms it into something entirely different from what it was before. This reminds us that everything done through the operation of illicit mining has a negative impact on the natural order.

In fact, even well-intended actions can have this kind of negative impact on the environment. (Gobster et al., 2007). The repercussions of *Galamsey* in Ghana are discussed by Suglo et al. (2021), and they include, among other things, food instability, damage to surface and subsurface water resources, air and noise pollution, and extinction of species. It is not surprising to experience the excessive heat and high temperatures in Ghana in resent time. In February 2024, a study published by the Ghana Meteorological Agency (GMet) indicated that the temperature ranges predicted were rather high, with maximums in the southern part predicted to be between 33°C and 37°C, and even higher temperatures in the northern portions, between 36°C and 42°C.

In addition, Hopkins exemplifies the adverse consequences of abusing nature in the final stanza as he explains how the tree replacement lasted until 2014 – after a century. From this stanza, the poetic speaker argues that the earth held beauties before our time that "after-comers" (line 19) will have no idea of, since they are now lost forever. Similar to the natural vegetation and water bodies of Ghana in some few decades' past, these natural vegetation and water bodies have been destroyed through human activities. Ghana is rich in mineral deposits; chief among them is gold. However, according to Usman Kaku et al. (2021) the majority of rocks containing this mineral are found in water bodies. About 60% of Ghana's surface water bodies are contaminated by hazardous substances including cyanide, mercury, and other organic compounds (with a high percentage of acid) used in the processing of mineral ores, according to research by Yeleliere et al. (2018). Due to the shutdown of many treatment facilities and the resultant unusability of various water bodies, the public has been outraged about the threat that illicit mining poses to Ghana's water supplies and quality (Duncan, 2020). For example, severe turbidity in the River Pra has significantly raised the cost of water treatment and rendered certain plants inoperable, according to Adjei, Amaning, and Adjokatse (2022). It is no surprising therefor that "After commers cannot guess the beauty been" (line 19). The figure below presents River Ankobra within a two years interval. The activ-

ities of illegal mining in the river bed of this river have altered the nature of the water body and indeed, posterity will not have the luxury of experiencing the original state of the river.



Figure 2. An aerial view of River Ankobra before and after Galamsey activities (Source: edemsrem)

The poetic speaker continues in the final stanza that the distraction of the environment is as “ten or twelve strokes of havoc” to “unselve” (lines 20–21) the landscape, or alter it completely that it is no longer itself. Just like the case in Ghana, illegal small-sale mining (*Galamsey*) has altered the forests and forest lives (Snapir, Simms & Waine, 2017). It is therefore through conscious activities such as total abolishment of illegal small-scale mining (*Galamsey*), land reclamation, afforestation, and water management that can solve this menace.

Conclusion

Hopkins’s poem functions as a prophetic vision that offers an anticipatory glimpse into environmental concerns that have become more pronounced in our time. Written over a century before global warming was widely recognized, Hopkins’s work highlights ecological issues that, if heeded, might have mitigated environmental damage. Hopkins’s exposition presents the destruction of the natural environment as evil and unreasonable. As a prophetic vision into the situation of illegal mining in Ghana, the poem points to the extensive destruction caused by illegal mining activities shows how Galamsey operators are thoughtless and heartless.

While lamenting the destruction brought by the logging of poplars, Hopkins also expresses a belief in nature’s inherent regenerative capabilities, attributing this resilience to “God’s Grandeur.” Contrary to popular perception, the recent heat and high temperatures in Ghana can be seen not as a threat but as nature’s method of self-restoration, echoing Jones et al. (2018), who assert that the final stages of ecological recovery are inherently challenging. Through his vivid imagery and evocative language, Hopkins illuminates the dire consequences of human exploitation and ignorance of the delicate equilibrium of the natural world.

The poem stands as a poignant reminder of nature’s irreplaceable beauty and value, urging immediate action to mitigate the destructive impact of activities such as Galamsey. It emphasizes the critical need for sustainable practices, robust environmental conservation efforts, and collective endeavours to protect the ecosystems that sustain all life. Only through such dedicated actions can we hope to preserve the integrity and splendour of our natural environment for future generations.



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