

NELL ZINK'S NICOTINE: AN ECO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Eco criticism study emphasizes the human-nature bond, and how humans influence nature and how nature affects humans. Ecocriticism, in a general sense, encourages one to analyze the world around us while still criticizing societal attitudes about the handling of the environment. This paper hypothesizes that Nicotine is a novel that has an eco-critical dimension. It chose to use literary analysis that was rooted in an ecological mindset that included political and social activism commitments. The aim of the paper is to validate the hypothesis by using the eco-critical analysis of the novel to show how the novel sheds light on the negative aspects of using nicotine in the life. The research starts with introduction to the work and the writer as well as the eco-critical theory, then the analysis of the novel crops up. Conclusion closes the paper as it exposes the findings.

Keywords: Nicotine, Nell Zink, Eco-critical Theory, Postmodernism, Environmental Study

Introduction to the Writer and the Novel

The novelist, Nell Zink was born in 1964. She is an American writer who has written her first novel that is entitled, *Mislaid*. She has been listed as a winner of the National Book Award. Her second novel, *The Wall creeper*, was named by The New York Times as one of top 100 books of 1914. (Alter, 2015) in what concerns her career, Zink is very serious in her writing of her novels that she once said:

*"I was so tired of Franzen saying that I should take myself seriously as a writer and I wanted to make very clear that there's a very clear distinction between taking your career seriously and taking your writing seriously. So, I wrote the first part of a new novel, called *The Wallcreeper*, in just four days to show him that I knew what I was doing as a writer."* (Ellis-Petersen, 2015).

In this sense, she does not take time to write her masterful novels. The second novels, her second novel, *Mislaid* is just like the first one is very good. It is described by Kirkus Reviews as "a brief yet masterful novel of epic breadth." (Kirkus, 2014).

Zink has a very distinctive ability in creating an attractive dialogue in her novels. Describing her dialogue, Dwight Garner said, "I could listen to Ms Zink's dialogue all day; she may be, at heart, a playwright." (Dunthorne, 2018)

About Zink's third novel, *Nicotine*, Joe Dunthorne claims that, "there is recklessness and freshness to this complex tale that is at its best when its elements of horror and humor collide." On the other hand, he has criticized the complication that the plot of the novel has. (Ibid).

Eco-criticism Theory

This paper follows the eco-critical theory as method of analyzing the novel, but what is the Eco-critical theory? Eco-criticism is a term that is used for the observation and study of the existing relationship between literature and the environment. The approach takes an interdisciplinary viewpoint and analyzes the works of an author in the context of the current environmental issues. As Estok indicates, eco-critics usually take nature as one of the primary factors since they believe that the evolution of society is solely dependent on life and its forces (8). Language and social elements are not the only factors making up the world. Nature is one of the factors responsible for the existence of humans. Mainly, this paper relates the novel, *Nicotine*, to the environment by showing the harmful effects of nicotine and tobacco on the environment, which includes the fact that it leads to global warming.

Over the years, literary works have documented the relationship existing between humans and the environment. Some of the works such as those by Edward White cites the journey of Adam and Eve through the Garden of Eden and that of Odysseus across the Mediterranean Sea show instances where human paths have crossed with nature. Eco-criticism in literature commenced in the late 18th and early 19th century, which is an era that saw the rise of environmental writing and its importance in the culture of the Americans (Estok 9). From this, one can see that eco-criticism emerged from the rise of environmental writers in America and spread to Britain in the 1820s and 1830s after learning of nature writing in America. Transcendentalists in America such as Thoreau wrote about nature and ways it could influence the spiritual and intellectual growth of the society. Thus, eco-criticism became a theoretical study in literature in the 19th century. Besides, eco-criticism emerged from the great environmental writing witnessed over the years.

Some of the features of environmental writing include a connection between how humans have crossed with nature in different ways. Eco-criticism views nature as important for the survival of humans (Estok 9). Most eco-critics try to understand how nature comes to play in a literal piece. The theory aids in global understanding of eco-critical practices through environmental issues such as global warming as depicted in literary works.

Main Points Brought Out In the Novel

The novel, *Nicotine*, by Nell Zink focuses primarily on the ways different people smoke and the addictive effect of nicotine drugs. The book consists of different descriptions of smoking. One of the characters, Rob, is addicted to smoking nicotine in a way that he cannot get an erection while also he claims to be asexual as well (Zink 30). At one instance, the character, Rob, tears his cigarette apart, pulls out the tobacco, and chews it while spitting. Rob's behavior is ravenous, which is just a tip of the exciting bits of the book (Zink 32).

In the narrative, every individual portrayed in like-minded but has been labeled as something else such as gay, rapist, monster, and tomboy among others. Besides, Penny ends up on the receiving end considering that she is naïve and has uninformed perceptions concerning her Colombian heritage (Devers n.d). The entrance of Penny to the land of *Nicotine* is one aspect showing the wildness of the novel. Moreover, Zink works well in developing the characters of the people in the story.

Zink, in her novel, has realized the potential of the rapid moving of Americans from nicotine addiction. One thing worth noting from the story is the fact that smoking is one of the many factors that cause death among young people. Besides, smoking is preventable. As seen in the novel, most of the settlers residing in 'Nicotine' are young people who feel that their lives should not be dictated (Zink 35). The teenage is the critical period in the formation of the smoking habit. In the world today, smoking is still on the rise among young people. Moreover, most of the people that smoke in their adult and old age acquired the behavior from their teenage (McKenzie n.d).

From the story, one can see that different factors drive an individual to smoke. One of the reasons behind smoking is loneliness. Penny's father whom she loved dearly dies leaving her alone since her mother and two elder brothers considered her a stranger (Zink 18). After the death of Norm, Penny is evicted from her father's house, and her brothers offer her the abandoned house at New Jersey where she would live after removing the settlers that had found shelter in the homestead. Penny's loneliness made her fall in love with the lifestyle of the settlers. With this in mind, the girl did not evict them but instead resided there as a settler. From this, one can see that different life issues could lead one to adopt some behaviors such as smoking, which explains why smokers should not be shunned by society.

Nonetheless, the home commonly referred to as *Nicotine* is a semi-organized illegal group house in Jersey City. The primary purpose of the house is to advocate for the rights of people using tobacco. However, most of the free time of the people in the novel is used to discuss sex and drugs, which is common talk among jobless and homeless individuals. Zink

refers to such negotiations addressed in the house as the result of globalization and modern life (Zink 24). Globalization has brought about the decay of morals in society. Different behaviors such as smoking among young people due to frustrations are due to modern life since globalization led to the erosion of cultures. In the past, a child would have a place to reside when one or both parents die. The modern lifestyle is different mainly in cases where a child does not have the affection of one parent and siblings, as it was the case for Penn who was left with no other option but join the settlers in 'Nicotine.'

Most smokers have claimed to experience discrimination. From this, one can see that discrimination against smokers is not an imagination that Zink came up with to make an exciting story (Zink 25). Instead, most smokers are ostracized on a day-to-day basis. However, one thing that Zink does not account for in the narrative is the harmful effects of the tobacco products on the environment. The author focuses on some of the hazardous health issues resulting from smoking behavior.

From reading the novel, one can see that dissolution of identity comes into play regardless of one's political orientation, gender sexuality, and other belief systems. Zink does not write about the regional identity or race of the settlers residing in 'Nicotine (Zink 29).' One character, Sunshine, tells Penny that living in the homestead is context-dependent, which implies that the people there are united by only one thing, which is smoking and consumption of tobacco (Galef 4). A reader is likely to notice the existence of a vague feeling that Zink is maybe leading them on towards the use of tobacco. Although much of her writing is satirical, unclear lines of satire can be distinguished.

People in the world today live in an era of global dissolution and the collapse of climate. However, not many comprehend these issues. One can notice the existence of despair in the light-hearted novel. For instance, Zink writes that a cigarette aids in fighting intense humidity in the dark and the dim firefly of the drug flies upwards and brightens with an intake of breath and later falls and is close to dying (Ogburnn.d). The passage may have been written to slow a reader's attention and allow them to reflect on the writing instead. Finally, the novel ends with another form of dissolution, which shows that the world is not a permanent place for one to reside. The home is transformed into a different community center. The ending appears to be contradicting to the author's views all over the narrative and books title, Nicotine. From the passage, a reader learns that nicotine drug does not kill a person directly but instead, it makes smoking an addictive vice.

Nicotine as Eco criticism

Nicotine is a novel that discusses smoking evidently from a group of settlers united by the fact that they all smoke tobacco and live in the same homestead. The narrative shows a reader that nicotine is addictive. However, it fails to acknowledge the fact that nicotine,

which is present in all tobacco products, could have adverse environmental effects not only to the people who consume the drug but also to the people living in the world at large. Nicotine shows the plight of squatters that have undergone discrimination in society due to their smoking habit. It is essential to understand the fact that people face discrimination due to various reasons. Some of the causes of discrimination include engaging in behavior that society does not deem fit. In 'Nicotine,' the settlers who have formed a smoking base due to the discrimination they face in the community.

Over the years, global warming, which is the significant rise in temperatures of the earth surface due to climate change has been on the rise. Different factors such as tobacco products have a role to play in the degradation of the environment. Tobacco products, as indicated by Hiemstra et al., harm the environment in ways beyond air pollution and intensive littering of cigarettes (5). In addition to that, the processes involved in the growing of tobacco, manufacturing and delivering the products to retailers has terrible and severe damages, some of which may be irreversible, to the environment. Amidst all the discrimination that takes place among smokers in the novel, smoking is hazardous to the environment especially when smokers concentrate at one point as it is the case in 'Nicotine.' Hiemstra et al. assert that from the beginning to the end, the life cycle of tobacco products is polluting and yields a lot of environmental damage (6). Proceeding from this, one can see that the squatters in the narrative are causing adverse environmental changes from their smoking habit, which will be the primary focus in this section.

The smokers at 'Nicotine' as per the story by Nell Zink are gradually increasing the demand for tobacco in the region. As the demand increases, the suppliers will have to get more stock from the producers. From the novel, one can see the fact that some of the characters such as Rob, one of the smokers' activist and among the settlers living in the house is addicted to the drug such that he even eats it and spits it afterwards. One of the common cause binding Rob and other housemates in Nicotine is the fact that they are all smokers (Zink 30). Further, the surrounding community considers smokers as outliers. As a result, the people look down upon them while at the same time they demean them. The city does not allow smokers to do their regular activities outside since they claim that nicotine is poisonous. Besides, the characters do not know about the harmful effects of the drug towards the environment, which may have warranted discrimination from the society.

The polluting process of tobacco commences at the growth stage. Hiemstra et al. note that growing tobacco is a direct cause for deforestation (10). In most situations, forests are often cleared to allow for planting of tobacco in the land. Deforestation is hazardous to the environment as it contributes to climate change. It is essential to understand the fact that deforestation is the second leading cause of global warming (Hiemstra et al. 10). Trees play a significant role in creating a green environment. Cutting down trees will reduce the

amount of water that evaporates to the atmosphere hence reducing rain. From this, global warming is likely to result. The squatters in the novel, *Nicotine*, are increasing demand for tobacco, which implies increased cutting down of trees.

Nevertheless, the burning of wood is another process involved since it helps in curing tobacco. Wood fires result in the emission of carbon dioxide, which is one of the greenhouse gases. Such emissions often influence the overall atmosphere of the earth. Considering that trees also act as storage for carbon dioxide for photosynthesis, the clearing of forests and subsequent burning of wood to cure tobacco could lead to the release of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere in hours mainly due to the lack of vegetation in the region. With time, global warming could result. Subsequently, deforestation is another cause of climate change, reduced fertility in the soil while at the same time disrupts the water cycles. An investigation on the production, promotion, and usage of tobacco in the developing or emerging nations has led to conclusions that for every 300 cigarettes produced; one tree is used to aid in the curing of the tobacco leaf (Palloni et al. 1250). The settlers from the novel are increasing the demand and supply for cigarettes, which eventually increases the tobacco products manufactured. From this, one can see that the increased usage of the drug as seen in the novel, *Nicotine*, could yield increased deforestation that would lead to global warming at the end.

Further, the process involved in the manufacture of cigarettes could cause environmental damage considering the amounts of water, energy and other resources utilized. The operations include shredding and assembling of tobacco, which uses different metals and energy, preparing and treating tobacco that needs different chemicals and additives and the production of rolling paper, which generates wastes and increases deforestation. Cornelia & Shih indicate that article comes from trees (10). For the rolling paper of the cigarettes to be produced, trees need to be cut. Eventually, global warming would result due to the lack of vegetation to tap excessive carbon dioxide from the atmosphere as well as the loss of moisture in the environment. The squatters at '*Nicotine*' are increasing the manufacture of tobacco, which yields global warming eventually.

Consequently, for tobacco to reach the people in '*Nicotine*,' it has to undergo distribution and transportation. Tobacco grown in one nation is usually shipped to other countries for it to undergo different processing and manufacturing (Hodgson n.d). Diesel gas used in tracks is carcinogenic and is harmful to the environment hence causing global warming (Saleem et al. 945). From this, one can see that even though Zink describes the say at '*Nicotine homestead*' as peaceful and worth admiration, the activities conducted at the house affect millions of people in the world (Zink 34). Although smoking cigarettes and using other tobacco products may seem enjoyable and thrilling to the young people most of which failed to go stop school and ran away from home, their actions could be adverse to the

society (Yang & Lee 50). From this, one would agree with the acts of the society members of discriminating against the smokers in the novel. The society condemning such actions may know that the acts of the small group of people could be detrimental to the entire population.

Additionally, once tobacco reaches the hands of the settlers residing in 'Nicotine', more pollution results from the consumption of the drug. Smoking tobacco leads to the generation of smoke commonly referred to as secondhand smoke that often contains over 7,000 chemicals most of which are toxic. Although the settlers consume the drug in hiding, the resulting pollutions could be toxic to both the indoor and outdoor environments as indicated by Gurtner et al. (307). In addition to that, third-hand smoke released by tobacco consumers can affect the overall quality of air. Over time, the atmosphere could become toxic since it gathers in dust, surfaces, and objects in the event of consumption in an indoor environment. Most of the covers and objects are likely to end up in landfills, which further risks the environment to extreme pollution.

The people in the homestead burn tobacco use matches or gas-filled lighters, which would, in turn, imply cutting of trees for generation of more matchsticks to increase the supply for the high demand (Barnett et al. 516). In the case of using gas-filled lighters, disposing of the plastic could harm the atmosphere by increasing the number of chemicals that release a high-level of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere.

Further, cigarettes cause accidental fires, which result in death. Cheney et al. indicate that in the United Kingdom and the Northern Ireland region, cigarettes caused 7 percent of the fires that were witnessed in the year 2013-2014 (50). Moreover, cigarettes have been responsible for 10 percent of the fires seen in the United States of America over the last decade. The fires resulting from the consumption of cigarettes could lead to not only deaths but also damage to properties, which implies increased losses (Vuolo et al. 375). The 'Nicotine homestead' is not safe from the fires since the people resided in it are unified by one factor that is the fact that they all use tobacco. Most of the users are aware of the health risks they may be exposing themselves to after using the products. However, the settlers as depicted in the novel, Nicotine, do not know the existence of risks of fire among others from using the drug in the closed room. Besides, Zink does not inform a reader on some of the environmental hazards that may have or resulted from the regular smoking exhibited by the settlers.

The lifecycle of tobacco ends up in the generation of wastes. From the novel, one can see that smokers consider their habit suicidal. Jazz, Rob's roommate, criticizes Rob's method of consuming nicotine. Jazz claims that by smoking the drug, he will get lung cancer that will kill him eventually, which would be different from the tumors that his

roommate, Rob, would reach for eating tobacco (Dunthornen.d). However, these characters may not be aware of the environmental damages caused by their habits, which would eventually affects the entire community and world at large over the years. Rob's habit of chewing and spitting tobacco causes the pellets to settle on the ground (Zink 45). Eventually, the soil becomes polluted and may result in leaching. The universal wastes produced by the drug include cigarette butts. Most consumers of the drug dispose of the butts on the ground or outside the cars for the motorists. The cigarette butts release harmful chemicals that cause environmental leaching (Vuolo et al. 375). In most cases, the butts scatter along green spaces, beaches, and sidewalks among other places. When deposited in water, the result could be contamination of the water eventually leading to the death of fish and aquatic animals. In addition to that, research has shown the existence of harmful substances such as lead, nicotine, ethyl phenol, and arsenic in cigarette butts (Vuolo et al. 375). Although no study quantifies the detrimental effects of deposition of these chemicals on the environment, significant quality of these products could cause contamination in water. Consequently, the consumption of the drug could yield potential human health issues following the bio-accumulation of the chemicals in the food chain.

Primarily, over 6 trillion cigarettes are manufactured every year, which amounts to about 300 billion packages (Duarte et al. 1170). It is essential to understand the fact that packaging wastes are inevitable in any manufacturing company. For tobacco, packaging waste consists of glue, foil, ink, and cellophane. Such wastes have a role to play in increasing the amounts of solid wastes deposited in landfills (Duarte et al. 1170). From the novel, children were born almost every year among the people in the surrounding community. The author of the book fails to tell a reader the harmful effects of smoking they have witnessed causing the uproar on smokers emanating from the community members.

Conclusion

In summation, this paper is an eco-critical analysis of the novel, *Nicotine*, by Nell Zink. The eco-critical approach used in analyzing the novel indicates the harmful effects of smoking that the people in the region were exposing the surrounding community into, which may have prompted their discrimination. Zink appears to encourage smoking behavior while in actual sense smoking could have detrimental effects that could affect generations of people. The analysis shows that the settlers were not only at risk of health issues but also environmental damages such as increased fires.

Besides, they also contribute to the accumulation of toxic wastes in the landfills. All these wastes tend to become environmental hazardous. Besides from that, the manufacture of cigarettes and tobacco products causes environmental pollution. First, deforestation occurs to ensure that trees pave the way for the planting of the tobacco plantations. The cutting down of trees increase the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Eventually, this

yields global warming and extreme climate change that affects all people living in the globe. Other environmental hazards of smoking include the fact that it could lead to accidental fires, which can cause death and damages to properties. Consequently, during the consumption of tobacco by burning, smoke settles on surfaces and objects that could turn out to be accumulated in landfills while also destroy the quality of air within a particular region. As a result, the surrounding population could experience respiratory issues among other problems. The smokers' activists in the literature did not understand the reasons behind the discrimination they experienced from the surrounding community. Besides, they ignored the fact that their smoking habit was affecting the community adversely.

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