

## Theatre's 'Green' agenda: An ecocritical analysis of Lucy Kirkwood's proto-environmental play *The Children*

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### Abstract

The fact of manmade prompted global warming and climate change is incredibly evident, yet the required universal action to handle this existential problem is still indolent. The growing need for an instant reaction to the current environmental emergency becomes a necessity and forms a new reality nowadays. There is an imminent threat that will overwhelm the entire realm if major preemptive actions are not taken in response to peoples' repulsive behavior towards the environment. In this respect, the present paper intends to illuminate the ability and intent of Green Theatre in redirecting the course of the universal conduct towards nature in a path that can result in a constructive ecosocial reformation. Following this argument, the ecocritical theory is applied in analyzing Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2017) in an attempt to figure out the play's ability in meeting a 'Green' agenda amidst a terrifying disorder of manmade and natural disasters. Kirkwood's cautionary disaster play succeeds in making a tense drama out of the catastrophic results of human meddling in the natural sphere. Thus, patronizing this kind of eco-friendly Theatre and placing it into the frontier in the noble fight for the sustainability of natural and human existence can foster a collective potential awareness to actively indulge in 'Green' morals and practices that can lead to environmental safety and integrity.

**Keywords:** Green theatre, proto-environmental drama, sustainability, ecocriticism, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*

### 1. Introduction

The ongoing debate around the issue of climate change and the destructive imprint of mankind on the environment has been extended for plenty of years. While this debate continues, the growing levels of high temperatures, global warming, natural calamities and rising sea levels hover over almost every aspect of human life. In this present threatening atmosphere, inspired authors, playwrights, performers and intellectuals decide to react to the climate change crisis that threatens the existence and sustainability of man and nature. They are attentive to their social responsibility in “promoting awareness of climate science” and its active role in “engendering the cultural shift that is required to initiate positive change” (Mayall, 2016, p. 32). Over the years, artists are always present to take the lead in “recording and reflecting the state of society and the natural world within which society exists” (Abrahams, 2016, p. vii). From an ecocritical perspective, this artistic action towards climate change and other environmental concerns can be seen as an aesthetic projection and examination of “the twenty-first century Frankenstein monster . . ., posing both a moral and a psychological paradox for us all” (Hassall, 2017, p. 2).

The combination of the two terms ‘Green’ and ‘Theatre’ might foster a multitude of various implications on the levels of both theory and application. Merging these two diverse entities within their unique constructs signifies the synthesis of theatre and Green performance to form a cohesive eco-artistic reaction. In this respect, this paper intends to scrutinize how drama and theatre performances can initiate positive eco-social change. It sheds light on the ways by which theatre contributes to people’s perception of ecological concerns, their relations to the environment and what it means to be human in the context of climate change. The focus is placed upon the power of theatre, in the form of Green Theatre practices, as a literary catalyst that can develop an insightful understanding of the Earth as home and re-direct peoples’ collective tendencies towards environmentally ‘Green’ and constructive morals and deeds. According to Chaudhuri, “Ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And the arts and humanities, including the theatre, must play a role” (1998, p. 26). This ecocritical call may trigger questions like: Why theatre and drama in particular? Does the environment truly require the playwrights’ and theatre performers’ intervention? And how the resulting art can be utilized in initiating a constructive ecological reformation?

In his article “Imagine That: What the World Needs Now is Art Sweet Art”, Bill McKibben (2005) expounds upon his ecocritical theory that proclaims man and nature to be inseparable and forever entwined. He demands artists and theatre makers to embrace an actively aesthetic response to the worldwide ecological emergency. In this respect, he upholds theatre as an influential artistic venue that can significantly address the aspects and implications of the catastrophe in an attempt to fix the conduct of mankind towards the environment. He calls for “playwrights, poets, and artists to create works which will place climate change deeply in the imagination” (Ashden, 2005, p. 9). He states that this noble mission necessitates a synthesis of research and practice, involving the theatre theory, ecology, sociology, psychology, and the various applications of Green philosophy. As part and parcel of the modern Green concept and theatrical practice, Green Theatre holds relevance to forms of global environmentalism and provides grounding in the contemporary Green theory. It is sometimes referred to as Eco-theatre in the sense that it represents an interest in particularly sustainable and eco-friendly practices in the theatrical experience.

The conception of Green Theatre as a socio-didactic artistic expression is particularly significant amid the current debate revolving around environmental problems like global warming, climate change and the threat of disappearance of some parts of the world underwater among others. Though representing two distinctive features of ecology and literature, the fusion of the two fields engenders a robust mechanism to evoke change. Many advocates of Eco-theatre, including Augusto Boal (2001), uphold theatre as a “weapon”, “a means of accessing identity”, and initiating “social revolution” (p. 14). This ecocritical stance resonates the radical shifts in theory and practice entitled by modern Green advocates who embrace the conception that the human creatures and their surrounding nature are in a constant bond. This Green notion provides a common conceptual ground for the assumption that any manmade conduct, involving the theatrical one, is part and parcel of the natural structure and is, in return, active in producing and reproducing social and cultural constructions. Thus, embracing the Green Theatre principle is liable to enhance the social and theatrical communities in general and inspire further developments in theatre propagating a proto-environmental agenda.

## **2. Ecocriticism: Literature and ecology at crossroads**

In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, p. xviii). It focuses on “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert, 1978, p. 72). In this respect, it intends to study literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary perspective, where literary scholars examine texts that elucidate environmental issues and shed light on the numerous means by which literature deals with the theme of nature. This theory of “literary ecology” was first introduced by Joseph Meeker in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972). However, the term ‘ecocriticism’ was coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay entitled “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*”. As a broad critical approach, ecocriticism covers territories of Green cultural philosophy, ecopoetics, and environmental literary criticism. In 2001, Simon Estok notes that “ecocriticism has distinguished itself ... firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections” (p. 220).

In its mutual exchanges with humanities and the other social sciences, ecocriticism intends to “analyze and promote works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature” (Gomides, 2006, p. 15). Ecocritics have developed eco-friendly conceptual stances since the burst of environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the mid-1980s, the ecocritical theory was powerfully established, primarily through the work of the Western Literature Association. However, in the U.S., ecocriticism is often marked by its affiliation with the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which hosts a regular conference discussing environmental issues in literature and environmental humanities in general. Since the late 1990s, new branches of ASLE and affiliated organizations have been extended almost all over the world (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 63). The ecocritical second wave colors the 2000s with a more intricate consideration of the ethics and applications of the ecological Green theory. It makes a remarkable distinction from the first one by prompting issues of environmental justice, environmental resources distribution, and minority and socioeconomic effects related to ecological shifts.

### **3. Greening the theatre**

The climate change predicament creates a new reality that theatre—like everything else in the world—is facing now. It represents an immediate threat and a real danger to the world’s safety, equity and sustainability. Thus, it becomes urgent to develop a positive stance towards the environment to be able to provide a safe place for future generations. This noble mission should not be limited to ecologists, but the cultural sector with all its tributaries should play an active role as well:

The cultural sector has a unique ability to imagine and experiment with alternative futures, question the status quo, see the world differently and explore the future with audiences and participants. Without the cultural sector playing its part in helping current and future society to move towards a more sustainable way of life, this essential shift will not happen. (Creative Carbon Scotland, 2019)

The dynamic response to the climate disaster formulates a matter of collective social responsibility. Playwrights and theatre performers have already begun to take firm steps in response to the crisis. In so doing, they aim to effectively address the problem in an attempt to trigger collective social awareness towards a positive ecological stance. While still maintaining its amusing intent and entertaining content, theatre is liable to raise questions, implications, debates and encounters in addition to echoing the concerns and the chaotic state of generations facing a scary and startling change. In this respect, "we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a resilient recovery plan that is fair and tackles the climate and ecological crisis with urgency. We cannot let this opportunity pass us by" (Julie’s Bicycle, 2020). However, in order for theatre to be part of this noble mission, it has to set a new document and alter its practices. Theatre practitioners have already taken the initiative to prompt this potential change by establishing alliances, shifting to recycling and seeking alternative eco-friendly resources, in addition to staging proto-environmental plays and performances.

The sustainability issue might, at first glance, infer artistic austerity and minimization of resources, but, in fact, it just requires and calls for new working mechanisms. Yet, it is always the theatre’s flexibility and creative capability to recreate itself that can engender the theatrical doctrine to adapt to the ever-changing realities. Working together, theatre-makers and ecological specialists have collaborated on the *Theatre Green Book* (2021). It is established as a collective principle in three volumes, with a designated intention to make the theatre’s buildings, operations and productions more sustainable. It provides clear standards for that change and sets out the path

to a 'Green' and sustainable theatrical experience. Its clear, practical and detailed strategies are proposed to guide all those involved in the theatre industry to change their practice in order to make more sustainable plays and performances. They intend to channel that change via a set of new promises that can cope with this immense challenge. Their work is going to mold and direct the future theatrical practices. As a result, producing 'Green' or sustainable shows becomes an end in itself. A play or a theatrical performance can adopt the climate change crisis as a central thematic concern in its plot in a way that aesthetically echoes the ongoing appalling reality.

#### **4. Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*: Current global crisis and aspirations for a 'Green' future**

The second decade of the 21st century, particularly, has witnessed sincere attempts to handle the contemporary ecologically threatening shifts. Some dramas have been mainly didactic, presenting scientific terms; while others knock the alarm bell by focusing on the apocalypse and the effect of people's daily practices towards the environment. In addition to the individual attempts, entire theatrical venues and troupes are involved in this noble activist movement, including but not limited to the Royal Court, which has produced and presented many plays in this respect. However, it has been noted that in most of the eco-plays, children are presented as inheritors of ecologically charged filthy burden. In Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, past errors continue to afflict present-day characters and the generations to come. The play is one of the latest examples of the growing theatrical attempts to communicate challenging questions about the environment and humanity's future. It involves thinking not only about humans, but about technologies, species, substances and ecosystems. What made *The Children* ecologically incentive is that, without being inane didactic, global warming and climate change take center stage as the play accelerates from the everyday tribulations of an apocalyptic present situation. Kirkwood establishes links between the present-day situation and the eco-social forces that will shape the future. In this respect, the play tips thrillingly back and forth between conversations and a series of monologues comprised of environmental catastrophes, using the language of apocalypse.

*The Children* has its premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in 2016 and staged on Broadway in December 2017. The play is set in a small cottage on the

British East coast, where Hazel and her husband Robin make a modest life for themselves in the aftermath of an ecological calamity. A post-earthquake tsunami swept the area and destroyed the plant's cooling system. The spouses are retired nuclear scientists who used to work in the plant in the 1970s. They receive an unexpected visit from Rose, an old coworker they have not seen for a long period. She has come up with a serious petition that will shift the course of their lives. As the action develops and past relations unfold, the audiences become more acquainted with the impact of this disaster on Hazel and Robin, and their friends and family as well. Towards the play's end, Rose finally reveals her intent. She is creating a team of retired scientists in an attempt to repair the plant's radioactivity and the spoiled atomic equipment. She argues that it is not ethically fair that young scientists risk their lives to clean up what the older folks did. Finally, the spouses are convinced and agree on Rose's request despite its potentially deadly end.

Kirkwood is an acclaimed British dramatist and screenwriter who has won and been nominated for many awards. She took inspiration for her play from an ecological disaster that occurred in Japan in 2011. A 9.1-level earthquake sent a tsunami crashing over Fukushima and destroyed the Daiichi nuclear plant, causing wide atomic pollution that exceeded the allowed radiation levels. This ecological disaster affected almost all forms of life in this area, raising the pressing question: How do human activities threaten biodiversity and ecosystems' stability? In her 2019 interview with *The English Theatre*, Kirkwood claimed that she had wished to write a play about climate change, but she was not sure how to approach the subject:

I had been trying to find a form for a long time to write about climate change in a way that was emotionally rather than intellectually driven. What is important and theatrical to me is not the facts of climate change —we all know the facts now. (Interview with Lucy Kirkwood, p. 4)

The signals and manifestations of the corrosive imprints of human practices on the environment are overwhelming to be overlooked. "What is interesting to me is this: if we know the facts, why are we failing so catastrophically to change our behaviors?" (p. 4) Kirkwood wonders. Thus, *The Children* is a theatrical impulse born out of the playwright's sincere desire to affect socio-ecological change.

From an ecocritical perspective, Kirkwood's play confronts many contemporary challenges that are both alarming and traumatic for the

audiences. They are all traced to environmental problems that afflict this generation and the others to come. It is one of the significant plays that has been written and performed concerning climate change and its impact on the present generations and future ones. Kirkwood's drama pays tribute to the environmental problems and the consequential displacement that the characters experience, along with their physical and psychological effects. In this respect, the play is preoccupied with ecological calamities, whether it be natural or man-made. A violent earthquake hits the city to the extent that Hazel "saw the road cracked down the middle" (Kirkwood, 2018, p.11). This results in a tsunami that makes the tide out for miles; Hazel "waded through it [house] up the stairs, the carpet squelching and something else, something dreadful, a smell a feeling a hopelessness" (Kirkwood, 2018, p. 18). It also hits the nuclear power plant, causing its destruction and the release of atomic radiation in the surrounding: "I felt like I could *see* it the radiation hanging in the air a sort of ... a sort of filthy glitter suspended" (Kirkwood, 2018, p. 11). The afflicted area loses all forms of natural life and is nominated by the government as an "exclusionary zone". Hazel and Robin are forced to leave their farmhouse, which "makes a world of difference to [their] peace of mind" (Kirkwood, 2018, p. 12) as Hazel expounds. The play impressively fuses and echoes the destruction of the outside world with that of the inner selves.

Ecocritically speaking, the environmental disaster and the subsequent process of displacement have made each of the three characters to psychologically suffer in varying degrees. Robin undergoes a state of denial; he goes every day into the "exclusionary zone" to supposedly look after his animal farm, which had already died out of the disaster. When Rose shows sympathetic feelings towards his state, Robin shows an uncanny response: "No I sort of...I dunno, I quite enjoy it. I cry a lot. Sometimes I get to the end of the day and I realize I've been crying for...six or seven hours" (Kirkwood, 2018, p. 53). On the other hand, Hazel endures a state of psychological mess. This is apparent in her speech to Rose, recollecting the terrible memories of the calamity and its implications: "I cried, Rose, I just sank down at the bottom of the stairs...and I was just...crying ...the mess was just overwhelming. It was overwhelming Rose" (Kirkwood, 2018, p. 18). The disaster has also left its physical as well as psychological imprint on Rose herself. As the play opens, Rose has been splattered with blood from a fierce nosebleed—a plot detail that cannot be overlooked in a chilling play about the aftermath of an atomic disaster. After



the calamity, she moved to the United States and tolerated breast cancer so fierce to necessitate her two breasts being amputated. She is alone, in the very sense of the word, having no family—no children, no spouse. Thus, it can be truly said that all the three characters suffer from a real sense of physical and psychological displacement as if the Earth becomes no safe place for its inhabitants.

*The Children* draws on concepts and insights from environmental activism with interrogations of inter- and intra-generational environmental justice lurking at the core of the dramatic depiction. It examines the moral, personal and cross-generational complexities thrust forward by climate change and other environmental concerns. Redemption, compensation, and attempting salvation for the catastrophic results of human meddling in the natural world constitute the play's ecocritical morale. In her morose play, Kirkwood features the primitive tang of life lived in a destroyed landscape, raises crucial inquiries about this worldwide calamity and sets directions for sustainable solutions. This is embodied in Rose's proposed mission that she dramatically refrains from revealing until the play's very end. She follows up what is going on in the plant: "This morning there was a radiation spike. They should be pulling them all out [the scientists working there now] but they can't, there are major leaks in unit 2, somehow there's contaminated water flooding into the discharge channel" (Kirkwood, 2018, p. 45). Rose is aware of her generation's ecological misdeeds and feels guilty for its implications on the present and upcoming generations:

We built a nuclear reactor next to the sea then put the emergency generators in the basement! We left them with a shit-show waiting to happen and no evacuation procedure! And then they were the ones standing in the dark, trying to fix something we could have predicted, we should have predicted, opening valves by hand, even though it was already too late! (Kirkwood, 2018, pp. 48-49).

The play tackles enormously pressing current conceptions about humans' obligation to the earth, to one another and the present and future generations. It presents intricate, recognizable characters struggling with an ethical dilemma that the entire world is confronting nowadays. In *The Children*, Kirkwood embraces the ecological advocacy 'think globally, act locally'. The play echoes the doctrine of sustainable structures in its claim to minimize resources. The 90-minute play is located in one setting and features only three characters. This closed setting forces Kirkwood's characters to make a moral

decision with no means of physical escape. Kirkwood's choice of the play's title is also eco-critically symbolic in that it apparently refers to Hazel and Robin's children, but it can also be seen as a gesture to the young and upcoming generations who will vulnerably inherit such a contaminated burden. Kirkwood ironically puts it, "the state of a child is to feel you can't affect your world, and the whole play is a conversation about how we can affect our world" (Interview with Lucy Kirkwood, 2019, p. 3). Responsibility has been an ongoing conversation in the present-day situation. The habits and practices of previous generations have made life more challenging for younger ones. *The Children* is not only a play to call environmental concerns; it also triggers audience members to consider the actions they take, their consequences and how they could affect the future. In a world reeling in chaos following a devastating environmental disaster, the play raises questions about who is responsible and what the solution looks like. As the show ends, the audience members are left with lingering and haunting questions: Whose job is it to clean up this mess? How do human actions direct the course of the world's existence? What about the future? Does one generation owe to the next? And what kind of legacy do/will we want to leave behind?

## **5. Conclusion**

From an ecocritical perspective, the play is a call for action as well as a dramatic means of rejecting finitude. What is distinctive in *The Children* is Kirkwood's artistic treatment of dramatically charged ecological catastrophe in a realist manner, involving both formal experience and futurist setting. The play is a gripping revelation that confronts mankind with the potentially devastating impact of their choices. In terms of self-sacrifice and social commitment, each of the three characters reacts differently to this ethical challenge according to their priorities and complicated loyalties. Rose decides to take responsibility and compensate for their past deeds. Her rationale is that having been involved in the problem making, they should solve it. Robin agrees on Rose's request; then Hazel does. At first, she is worried about her four children and wonders why she should be deprived of the right to see her grandchildren grow up before her own eyes. Eventually, she realizes that she has to self-sacrifice for the sake of a potentially safe future not only for her own children and grandchildren but also for the generations to come. After wholeheartedly assuming their redeemable ecological mission, the play's end marks a final projection. The curtains close with a peaceful glimpse, where the

two women practice yoga and Robin smokes a cigarette, while the tide hits the shore and the waves come and go, in a brilliant reference that there is still hope for a sustainable and ‘Green’ future ahead for ‘*The Children*’.

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