

"The Dragon Stole the Sun": An Ecocritical Reading of the Role of the Dragon in Sandy Asher's Thunder Mountain

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecological concerns exposed through the portrayal of the Dragon in the play *Thunder Mountain* (2003) written by the famous children writer Sandra Fenichel Asher, better known as Sandy Asher. It is the contention of the present researcher that Asher explores the relationship between the environment and its inhabitants, and humans through the Dragon and the children protagonists. I further contend that

despite its minimal appearance, Asher gives the mythical creature of the play, the Dragon, ambivalent roles, the destroyer and also the saviour. The first role is prevalent in the first part of the play until the audiences learn, through the children protagonists, that it is a direct result of the humans' attacks on the Dragon. The second emerges only in the final scene with the help of the children protagonists. Therefore, these roles are clarified, only, when analyzed in relation to the children protagonists' constructive role in

"The Dragon Stole the Sun": An Ecocritical Reading of the Role of the Dragon in Sandy Asher's *Thunder Mountain*, Vol. 4, Issue No. 2, April 2015, p.p. 155 - 186.

the play. The objective of the paper is thus to shed light on how the Dragon's portrayal and its interaction with the children protagonists aims at engaging children in current ecological problems instigating them to act and save nature from the adults' aggression on it in the light of Ecocriticism.

Keywords: Ecocriticism- Drama- Sandy Asher- Children's Theatre- Children's literature- Children's Environmental Texts- Environment- Ecology- Mythical creatures- Dragons.

المخلص

يتناول البحث القضايا البيئية في مسرحية الأطفال "جبل الرعد" Thunder Mountain للكاتبة الأمريكية

ساندرا فينيشيل آش، التي تعرف أيضًا باسم ساندي آش، من خلال شخصية التنين. حيث تتعرض الكاتبة لعلاقة البشر مع البيئة، وذلك من خلال علاقة التنين مع الطفلين بطلا المسرحية. فبالرغم من ظهور التنين في مشهد واحد إلا أن آش قد أعطت هذا الكائن دورًا بيئيًا مهمًا جدًا يلقي بظلاله على العمل كله. الدور الأول هو ظهور التنين كمصدر للدمار البيئي. هذا الدور يحتل الجزء الأكبر من المسرحية حتي يكتشف الأطفال المشاهدون من خلال بطلي المسرحية أن ما فعله التنين بالبيئة هو مجرد رد فعل لتعدي وهجوم البشر المستمر على البيئة والتي يرمز لها هذا الكائن. أما الدور الثاني والمهم هو ظهور التنين كمنقذ للبيئة بمساعدة الطفلين في نهاية المسرحية. وبالتالي يهدف البحث إلى

القاء الضوء على تلك الأدوار التي يمكن
تتضح من خلال علاقة التنين بالأطفال
ودورهم في حماية البيئة. وسوف ينتهج
البحث منهج النقد البيئي Ecocriticism
لتحليل أدوار التنين وتوضيح المشاكل
البيئية التي تتعرض لها المسرحية بهدف
توعية الأطفال ببيئتهم، و محاولة إنقاذها
مما يفعلها الكبار بها.

Introduction

Thunder Mountain (2003), the winner of the Pittsburgh One-Act Play Festival in 1999, is one of the successful plays written by the famous children writer Sandra Fenichel Asher, better known as Sandy Asher. The play exemplifies the growing interest of writers for children in raising the awareness of their audiences towards nature. *Thunder Mountain* presents a dismal overview of

environmental problems, which are caused by man. It is my contention that the play reflects the complex relationship between the environment and its inhabitants and humans through the Dragon and the children protagonists. Despite its minimal appearance, Asher gives the mythical creature of the play, the Dagon, ambivalent roles, the destroyer and also the saviour. The first role is prevalent in the first part of the play until the audiences learn, through the children protagonists, that it is a direct result of the human attack on the Dragon. The second emerges only in the final scene with the help of the children protagonists. Therefore, these roles are clarified, only, when analyzed in

relation to the children's

constructive roles in the play. Both roles fully expose the threats and destruction man constantly causes to nature which in turn will lead to his, as well as the other creatures of nature, suffering and eventual death. Thus this paper seeks to explore the ecological concerns presented to the young audiences through the portrayal of the Dragon as both the destructive and eventually saving force of nature in the light of Ecocriticism.

Sandy Asher "is an award-winning author of seven young adult novels, more than 50 short stories, 70 poems, six plays, a nonfiction book and many articles. She has taught creative writing to children and adults" (qtd. in Cramer 44). "Sandy," as Judith Bugniatet writes, "has written

numerous poems, plays and novels. She is a regular contributor of stories and articles to magazines" (*The Alan Review* 4). In her remarkable article "On Writing for Monkeys, Martians, and Children," Asher addresses the reason behind being a writer for children, "As adults, we enjoy books. But as children, we love them. They become part of our lives, part of our selves, forever" (677). Asher continues to explain why writing for young audiences is important, "They are at a time of life that is full of conflict and change." (678). She adds, "For them, yesterday is for learning from, today is for living, and tomorrow is full of options. I find that exhilarating. Childhood is a time of hope and determination" (678). Recognizing their needs of

self-realisation, Asher addresses the problems of her young audiences:

Forming a sense of self - Who am I? What are my goals and interests? [...] How should I deal with other people, girls and boys, family, friends, enemies? How do I take charge of my own life? How do I take responsibility for it? *What is my place in the world and in history?* These are the problems young people face, and for the most part, they face them alone. (*Something About the Author* 29 emphasis added)

Asher does not merely stop at exposing issues of the self but attempts to highlight the relationship between children and their environment. Being aware that "The 2000s have been

characterised as the environmental millennium and the era of eco-criticism" (Hanna Helavuori 3), I believe that Asher, as a writer for children and young audiences, deals with a serious environmental problem, namely, the destruction man causes to nature. She seeks to enlighten the children by shedding light on how the environment has been cruelly and incessantly destroyed by humans because they have gradually separated themselves from it. This long-recurring transgression on nature shows humans' assumption of dominance over the environment:

We have an economic style whose dynamism is too great, too fast, too reckless for the ecological systems that must absorb its impact. It makes no difference to those systems if

the oil spills, the pesticides, the radioactive wastes, the industrial toxins they must cleanse are socialist or capitalist in origin; ... The problem the biosphere confronts is the convergence of all urban-industrial economies as they thicken and coagulate into a single planet-wide system everywhere *devoted to maximum productivity and the unbridled assertion of human dominance*. (Roszak 11 emphasis added)

With such ongoing destruction of the natural world, Asher aims at instigating the audience to act. Massey and Bradford argue that "A socio-cultural assumption which pervades Western thought is that human survival depends on

dynamic, self-motivated people whose awareness of environmental concerns allows them to reflect on their relationships with the environment and to take responsibility for their actions" (110 emphasis added). Because the play targets children, Asher clearly motivates the young audiences to become "responsible" of saving nature. In its evident call for children to protect the environment, I believe that the play carries out the same task that children's literature performs in its discussion of environmental problems:

[It] does not merely reflect what happens in local and global settings, but persuasively constructs settings and environmental events in order to

socialize children into ways of being and behaving. The values presented to children are contingent upon the views and values of the adults who produce environmental texts. If readers adopt the subject positions offered by environmental texts, they may potentially assume the worldview that such texts propose; that is readers' understandings of ecocitizenship may be constructed as they engage with texts. *In this way, children's literature responds to environmental issues and attempts to enlist readers in taking action, encouraging them to reflect on the world as it is, and to imagine future scenarios if environmental degradation proceeds*

unabated. (Massey and Bradford 110 emphasis added)

The presence of a mythical creature in *Thunder Mountain* alerts to the need of preserving nature and protecting other forms of life without which man's life would be threatened because the Dragon emerges as the last of its kind. It also raises issues of coexistence and the need to rectify man's attitude towards nature and its inhabitants. These messages coincide with the ideas and notions of Ecocriticism, defined by John Drakakis as, "explor[ing] the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production" (par. 1). Hope Sabanpan-Yu also asserts that "What makes ecocriticism

distinct from many other literary theories is that its study reveals and *encourages the need for the conservation of nature*" (160 emphasis added). Jasmine Fernandez further defines Ecocriticism in the following way:

Ecocriticism, a holistic approach to literature that seeks to examine the relationship between man and his environment, *maintains that literature cannot be approached in a way that sets man and nature in opposition to each other. Instead, it must be approached in a way that examines man as a part of an ecosystem, he is neither master nor slave to it, but simply one part of an intricate system.* (188 emphasis added)

Ecocriticism evidently seeks to bring man back to nature urging him to fully grasp the inseparable bond he shares with the environment which has been severed. Indeed, Dallmayr argues in the preface of *Return to Nature?: An Ecological Counterhistory* that, "As it seems to me, nature in modern times has tended to be marginalized, colonized, and abused. In the dominant strand of modern Western thought, nature survived only as an exile or resident alien" (ix). "The return to nature," the preservation of the environment and saving its different creatures, which are the core issues of Ecocriticism, are also the target messages of the play. In fact, the various environmental messages embedded in the play through the mythical

creature, namely, to value nature and protect it and all creatures from the adults' arrogance, blindness and destruction, is what makes Ecocriticism a suitable approach to the play which will unravel the environmental concerns and also the implicit call made by the dramatist to instigate the children to save the environment, through the Dragon and his relation with the children in the play.

Controlling Nature: The Dragon as the Source of Ecological Destruction

From the beginning of the play, Asher establishes the Dragon's connection to nature. Historically speaking, dragons as mythical creatures have always emerged in myths around the world as closely associated with elements of nature:

Wherever dragon is found, it displays a special partiality for

water. It controls the rivers or seas, dwells in pools or wells, *or in the clouds on the tops of mountains*, regulates the tides, the flow of streams, or the rainfall, *and is associated with thunder and lightning*. Its home is a mansion at the bottom of the sea, *where it guards vast treasures*, usually pearls, but also gold and precious stones. *In other instances the dwelling is upon the top of a high mountain: and the dragon's breath forms the rain-clouds. It emits thunder and lightning.* (Smith 82 emphasis added)

This strong bond that dragons shared with nature is clarified when viewing these creatures in Chinese myths, "The dragon in China has always been considered a bringer of luck, and ... *The dragon is associated with ...*

thunder" (Eason 36 emphasis added). In *Dragons and Tigers: A Geography of South, East, and Southeast Asia*, Barbara A Weightman also comments on the image of the dragon and its symbolism, "Dragons and tigers represent the dynamic forces of power and change. They are symbols long associated with South, East and Southeast Asia. [...] In Daoism, yang or goodness is controlled by a green dragon; yin or evil is controlled by a white tiger" (2)⁽¹⁾.

Similarly, Wilson states:

The dragon's earliest associations may have been with the stars, designating a group of seven constellations in the Chinese sky. Since these constellations appeared in the

east in spring, the dragon came to represent that season as well as its nurturing rains and lengthening, warming days. It also became associated with the sun which brings dawn to the dragon's quadrant. (286 emphasis added)

However, in western thought, the image of dragons is that of hostile and "evil" creatures as Eason contends, "gradually during Christian times, as with serpents, dragons became regarded as a symbol of pure evil, and so a number of the Christian saints were credited with slaying dragons. Accounts of these appear in literature and art" (46 emphasis added). Both the positive and negative images of dragons are found in the play. However, Asher

focuses on the negative image of the Dragon as the destroyer in the first part of the play stressing the strong relation that this creature has with nature through its unmistakable association with thunder and lightning as the children Thomas and Joanna confirm:

Thomas: [...] No one had ever seen this dragon, and yet no one ever doubted that it was there. *Whenever lightning and thunder exploded in the sky above the mountain-*

Joanna: villagers in the valley below swore *they could hear the dragon's terrible roar-*

Thomas: *And see the fire that flamed in its breath.* (120 emphasis added)

The Dragon's destructive bond

with nature is further evidenced in the play through its act of stealing the Sun; the result of which is the absence of light, warmth, rain, fertility and abundance and the prevalence of barrenness and sterility. Unlike the role of the Dragon as the bringer of life and fertility and as the protector of nature in Asian myths, as has been mentioned, the mythical creature in this play is the source of ecological destruction as it has ruined the entire village. By stealing the sun, the village has sunk in a never-ending abyss of darkness, signified in the darkness of the stage (111), with no one from the adult villagers willing to act. The effect the Dragon has on the environment and on humans is further accentuated in the suffering of the characters of the play who appear "cold, weak with hunger,

and wary" (111) as mentioned in the stage directions and who elaborately explain to the audiences their present condition:

Peter: (looks up, over audience heads, toward Thunder Mountain, shakes his fist and shouts): *Cursed dragon! Return the sun to its rightful place in the sky before my poor sister dies of your treachery- and the selfishness of this miserable village!*

(As Peter sinks to his knees in despair, Thomas and Joanna hurry on, sharing the weight of a basket of apples between them. They also carry a candle or lantern.)

Joanna (running to Peter's side): Peter! What's wrong? Are you ill?

Peter: *More sick at heart than in body. My sister is dying from lack of nourishment, and no one in this village will help her.*

Thomas: They're all worried about their own families. *There's sickness everywhere since...*

. . .

Joanna: Since the dragon stole the sun.

Thomas: *Since our farms began to wither and rot.*

Peter: *Since our neighbors began to hoard everything they have- [...] (emphasis added 112-113)*

The above dialogue reflects the effect of the Dragon on the children and on nature. It is only later on that the audiences learn

that the Dragon's negative effect on nature is a direct result of man's greed which led to the raids on the Dragon, forcing the other adult dragons to abandon the place, thus leaving this creature alone to watch over the eggs. As a counter action, the Dragon has retaliated by stealing the sun to warm the eggs and to save her offspring. Thus, the negative image of the Dragon as the destroyer of nature is created as a result of the avarice of humans who have constantly sought to kill the creature and not to peacefully coexist. It is this conflict between humans and the Dragon that has rendered the village, described by the Baker Apprentice as "forsaken" (111), a wasteland which negatively influences the characters physically and emotionally. To elaborate, in his article "The

Forest of Literature," Robert Pogue Harrison comments on how the "Soul and habitat [...] are correlates of one another" (216). In the above exchange, Peter's words that he is "more sick at heart than in body" show how he, as a resident of the village, is physically influenced by the habitat which has become barren after the disappearance of the sun and also emotionally affected by the illness as well as the selfishness of the villagers neither offer help to one another in this ordeal nor even attempt to find a solution to save nature. On the relationship between the dwellers and the environment, Neil Evernden rightly states:

The whole world is simply
fodder and feces to the
consumer, *in sharp contrast to*

the man who is in an environment in which he belongs and is of necessity a part. The tourist can grasp only the superficialities of a landscape, *whereas a resident reacts to what has occurred. He sees a landscape not only as a collection of physical forms, but as the evidence of what has occurred there.* To the tourist, the landscape is merely a façade, but to the resident it is "the outcome of how it got there and the outside of what goes on inside." *The resident is, in short, a part of the place, just as the fish is a part of the territory.* (99 emphasis added)

Being part of the place, the dwellers of the village are witnesses to the great and drastic

changes that the environment has undergone; the result of which the inhabitants themselves have considerably changed, becoming selfish, and continue to do so till reconciliation between man and nature and its inhabitants takes place. If the situation in the village continues in the same way, humans will perish, as the three children later on admit. This degradation of the environment is an adverse reaction to man's unjust and atrocious attacks and trespassing on nature and its inhabitants.

The destruction of nature is not only clear in the village, but also on Thunder Mountain, the abode of the Dragon, further clarifying how the damage caused to nature affects all forms of living beings including the

Dragon itself. Joanna says, "There's not a berry left anywhere on this mountain," to which Thomas replies, "Everything's dried up and blown away on this awful wind" (119). The effect of the Dragon's act of stealing the sun accentuates how saving the environment is a mandatory action that guarantees the survival of the Dragon, of nature and also of the villagers:

Thomas: I know. I'm beginning to forget what it was like to be warm, what it was like at all- before.

Joanna: You must remember, Thomas. There was sunshine - warm on our faces. It came streaming through the windows of our cottage, making golden patterns on the floor.

Thomas (trying to remember):

when you speak of it, I can almost feel it. It woke me every morning.

Joanna: Yes! and birds sang in the trees.

Thomas: Peter brought us fresh eggs sometimes –

. . .

Joanna: and when we walked to school, wildflowers bloomed in the meadow–

Thomas: I remember! All purple and red and blue and gold!

Joanna: And people smiled at one another. (116-117)

The edenic image of the past state of the village strongly contrasts with the current devastation. It is the sterility of nature symbolized by *Thunder Mountain* that compels the children to reminisce and also to

keep a living mental image of the past, where the land was promising, in order to regain it again. Therefore, saving the environment from the destructive humans and also from the vengeful Dragon emerges as a quest, the final way of resolving man's conflict with nature and his constant attacks on it:

Thomas (after exchanging a glance with Joanna): we've come to a decision, Joanna and I.

Joanna: we're going to climb Thunder Mountain-

Thomas: And confront the dragon.

Peter: Thomas! Joanna! How can you think of such a thing?

Joanna: *We're willing to beg or bargain.*

Thomas: *or reason with the creature, if we can.* (114)

The children's ecological awareness leads them to save nature by climbing Thunder Mountain and peacefully persuading the Dragon to release the sun. By doing so, they are saving themselves and all forms of living creatures. Thomas and Joanna's brave decision to save and protect their environment clarifies how Asher is clearly instigating her young audiences to act, making the play perform the same significant task that environmental texts do:

Children's environmental texts - that is, texts which thematize contemporary ecological issues - reflect shifting global agendas and predict future possibilities. One of their primary functions is to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow by

positioning readers as ecocitizens, dedicated both to sustainable development in the local sphere and also to global responsibility. (Massey and Bradford 109)

Asher's exploration of the children's connection to nature creates a sense of awareness in the children's minds and hearts towards their environment. The play thus invites the children audiences to re-think about nature and also to play a role in its preservation. Therefore, the protagonists' words "beg," "bargain," and "reason" imply a state of understanding and respect to the Dragon, symbolically nature. They stand in opposition to the adult villagers, who, read in the light of Hope Sabanpan-Yu's general words on humans throughout the ages, "believed they are superior to nature" (161).

On a similar note, Dallmayr states:

One of the urgent issues in our time [...] is human survival in the world, in the midst of a nature whose resources are relentlessly exploited and perhaps eventually depleted [...] *However, the roots of the problem reach much further back, at least as far back as the onset of Western modernity and its attendant separation of 'man' and 'nature'.* [...] *From this time forward, nature was increasingly treated as a mere resource, utensil, or instrument for human and social benefit.* (1 emphasis added)

The human domination on nature is strongly sensed in the exploitation of nature and all creatures that were viewed as tools at the service of man. Indeed, as Woodroffe, Thirgood and Rabinowitz aptly

state, man's abuse of nature is not only limited to "food and furs for millennia" (13), but his exploitation extends to the extreme as he is seen committing crimes against animals "for sporting or cultural reasons" (13). Thus, the willingness of the children protagonists to embrace nature contrasts with the dominance of the villagers who viewed the Dragon as an "instrument," and thus have constantly made their raids on the Dragon's Lair seeking its annihilation as the three stories of three men representing different ages prove. The following extract is but one story that clarifies the villagers' greed:

Joanna: Men from the village
climbed to the highest peak of
Thunder Mountain –

Thomas: To track the dragon to its
secret lair

Joanna: Where it was said, gold
leaf covered the walls –

. . .

Joanna: For the sake of these
riches, three men dared the
dragon's wrath.

. . .

Joanna: ... the first was a young
man, brash and brave, and
stronger, people said, than
any who had ever lived.

Thomas: ... Before he left the
village, he bragged of his
strength to all those who
would listen and he claimed
he would wrestle the dragon
with his bare hands.

Joanna: (in a deep voice): "The
creature will give up its
treasure,' he cried, "*and I
shall force it to carry
everything back to the village*

*for me like a common beast of
burden."*

Thomas: And so he began to
climb. Days passed—

Thomas & Joanna (intoning the
words ominously): But he
was never seen again. (119-
121 emphasis added)

The above story together with
the two other stories that the
children narrate on Thunder
Mountain, the Dragon's abode, tell
of men ranging from young to old
who attempted to attack nature in
the figure of the Dragon. In fact,
the three stories, collectively, are a
testimony to the villagers' relation
with their land. They reflect the
link between the environment and
the other characters, for as May
maintains, stories compound both
setting and people:

A story is a product of
connection that maintains a
field of contact not only among
people but also between people
and place. To be part of
a community is to be part of its
story, and if the land is filled
with ancestral stories then
"community" includes the
rocks, trees, streams, pathways,
and animal Others of that
place. *Stories create a matrix
of belonging, a living tissue
between past and present and
between human and non-
human communities.* (94
emphasis added)

The stories told, which can be
considered "ancestral stories,"
form a link between the villagers'
"past" and their "present."
Moreover, they stress the
blindness of humans towards their

unity with nature and underscore how the village, Thunder Mountain and the Dragon's lair have always been interconnected. This connection is what Asher seeks to emphasize throughout the play. It is only when this bond was severed because of the greedy humans that nature was destroyed. In fact, the desire of the three men to kill the Dragon is an emblem of man's selfishness and insatiable desire to subdue nature. Consequently, the death of these men is symbolic of the inevitable death of humans should they continue to destroy nature and kill creatures whose "removal affects the structure of entire ecosystems" (Woodroffe, Thirgood, and Rabinowitz 10). The stories narrated by the children confirm how the Dragon has been

victimized by humans who have always been the source of evil and how children are aware of this fact and that is indeed the real reason behind their journey, to rectify what the selfish adults, who have always been ignorant of ecological issues, have done.

The Dragon as the Saviour of Nature

The Dragon's other role, which has been gradually introduced through the stories that shed light on the injustice of adults, is clarified in the final scene. Of all the men of different ages who dared approach the Dragon's lair on Thunder Mountain, it is only these children who exhibit full understanding of the strong bond with nature by attempting to converse and "reason" with the

Dragon. Because of their ecological awareness, they do not meet the same fate of the three men. On the contrary, the Dragon, initially the source of threat, sympathizes with them and accepts their peaceful means of coexistence. It is with their help that the Dragon is able to understand the relation between herself, humans and nature:

Dragon: [...] There is nothing left on the mountain for me to eat. It is nearly time for the eggs to hatch, and I fear I will not live long enough to raise those I've tried so hard to save.

Thomas: *Then you don't understand what you've done?*

Dragon: I found the warmth my brood needs to hatch. And everything since has gone

wrong. *No, I do not understand.*

Joanna: *Hiding the sun has caused the mountain to die- and all your food with it.*

Thomas: *It's the same with us in the village. Hiding what we have from one another, we grow ill ourselves.*

. . .

Joanna: Then you see what must be done. The earth will grow more for you to eat only when you return the sun to the sky- for all to share.

Dragon: [...] I was strong when I captured the sun and buried it deep within the mountain. Now I am weak.

Thomas: Then eat what we've brought you! And use the strength it gives you to save

us all - including yourself.
(129-130 emphasis added)

The words of the children clarify how Asher subverts the typical image of children educated by others so that they become capable of teaching and also correcting the mistakes of the adults. They thus enlighten the Dragon and also audiences of all ages of the unavoidable sense of connection that unifies the whole universe. It is only with this awareness that nature can be restored as Glendinning rightly asserts, "*What happens is the return of the things that we've lost: a more solid sense of ourselves, a sense of connectedness to our deeper selves, to other people, to the world, to the animals, and a deeper communication with soul,*

body, and Earth" (40 emphasis added). Similarly, Linda Hogan comments on the connection humans have with the natural world:

We are of the animal world.
We are a part of the cycles of growth and decay. Even having tried so hard to see ourselves apart, and so often without a love for even our own biology, we are in relationship with the rest of the planet, and that connectedness tells us *we must reconsider the way we see ourselves and the rest of nature.* (qtd in Dreese 78-79 emphasis added)

The adults' failure to identify their unity with nature led to its destruction. It is the children who truly exhibit a state of

understanding and enlightenment of this unity and ultimately transfer it to the Dragon, a fact which leads to her change. She eventually emerges as the saviour of nature after being persuaded by the children to bring back the sun, a symbol of the return of life and the success of the children in their mission:

Dragon: [...] For their sake, I must accept your kindness, and I thank you for it. (*Music* plays, as *Thomas* and *Joanna* happily share their food with the *Dragon*. Her energy renewed, *Dragon* roars joyously. *Music* fades.) Oh, I do feel better than I have in a long, long while.

(She exits. *Lightning*. *Thunder*.

A long and arduous *Roar* as

Dragon releases the sun, bathing the stage in glorious light. *Music*. *Thomas* and *Joanna* whirl and dance together in sunlight.)

Thomas: The sun!

Joanna: Oh, I'd forgotten what a joy it is to feel warm! (130 emphasis added)

Significantly, the *Dragon's* rectifying act of returning the sun and the hatching of the eggs at the end of the play are symbols of the continuation of life, the reconciliation between nature and man and his acceptance to coexist peacefully with nature's inhabitants. The happy ending proves how there is always hope in the children, and in coming future generations to rectify their ancestors' deeds and to save the environment:

Joanna: Thank you for what you've done!

Thomas: *You'll see now- everything
will mend, here on the
mountaintop and down in our
village below.*

Dragon: *The mending began when
you shared your food with
me.*

Thomas: *the mending began when
Peter carried it to us from
all of our friends.*

Joanna: *The mending began with
the first step of the journey
that brought us together.*

Dragon: Now you must return to
your home.

Thomas: We'll come back to visit
you-

Dragon: No! You must never
come back!

Joanna: Not even to see the young

dragons when they hatch?

Dragon: Especially not for that.
Others will follow you, and
they will not be so kind.
(130-131 emphasis added)

The creature that was thought
to be an opposing destructive
force, the source of misery for the
whole town and the epitome of
evil, becomes the savior by the
end of the play thanks to the
children's constructive role.
Hence, the return of the sun will
restore nature's greenery and the
previous harmonious state of the
village. By dramatizing two
opposing roles, as the destroyer
and eventually saviour of nature,
the play sends, through the Dragon,
an environmental message made by
the children to the children,
namely, the need to coexist and

survive with even the wildest and most dangerous creatures in harmony and peace. Anderson believes that "Natural disasters, changing climates, and environmental changes have had major effects on the wild creatures. [. . .] In today's world, the refusal to co-exist is becoming a serious problem. As with many of our natural resources, [. . .] [animals] are in danger of being eliminated" (vi, 92). Applying Anderson's words to the play, it is clear that Asher incorporated the issue of coexistence through the children protagonists and the Dragon that has been abandoned by its clan because of the human threats.

Through the Dragon and the children, Asher also advocates the need to live peacefully with and

also protect creatures from mankind. As Lesnik-Oberstein says, "When aware of a threat to the green world and its creatures, children can be its most passionate and committed advocates" (qtd. in Sue Walsh 157). This aspect is seen in the play for the children are aware of the different dangers that threaten their environment and therefore attempt to save it. Their promise to protect the Dragon and never return shows their awareness of the importance of all creatures and sends an implied ecocritical message of the urgent need for the preservation of all kinds of living beings. Dallmayr rightly comments on man's attacks on nature believing that there must be a stand otherwise the destruction of earth is inevitable, "more recently, the long-standing attack on nature and its effects has triggered a

widespread sense of crisis. As it is rightly felt, if continuing abated, this attack is threatening to destroy not only an external environment but the human habitat, that is the very condition of human life on earth" (2). Using Dallmayr's words, the children's decision of not rectifying the villagers' misconceptions and rumours about the Dragon so that they would "leave her alone" (131) is an attempt to end the attack on the Dragon. In this respect, their promise could be read in the light of Maran's words concerning the "semiotics of nature" that "*everything is connected to everything else*" (465). By protecting the Dragon, they are actually protecting their own lives and rehabilitating their environment. It is the children who

view themselves as part of nature and not as superior to it. They exemplify Maran's words "by accepting the self-description that defines us not by opposition but by complementarity with respect to our environment and other living beings, our ethical awareness could rise remarkably" (467). The children protagonists' "ethical awareness" is present throughout the play and thus they influence the children audiences who identify with them and will ultimately adopt their point of view, and this is the targeted message of Asher.

Applying Ecocriticism to the play, one may discover a certain aspect or "dimension of familiar texts [as well as new ones], with a new alertness to this dimension, a

dimension which has perhaps always hovered about the text, but without ever receiving our full attention before" (Barry 248). Taking this argument into consideration, it is indeed possible to contend, that the village in the play is not simply "emblematic" of the selfishness of the villagers or a symbol of their punishment. It is also a reflection of a possible future environmental disaster, "It is the light from the sun that makes life possible on the planet Earth and if that light dims or dies out, a terrible disaster is bound to follow for all living things in the world, including human beings, for the earth itself [. . .] faces the threat of extinction" (Adekoya 293). This particular depiction of the village without sunlight is emblematic of what man is currently doing to the environment:

Humankind now has the power to "make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by shortsighted human greed." (qtd. in Love 14)

The play thus warns against current and also future environmental hazards caused by the unperceptive humans. For this reason, Asher places the events of the play in an anonymous village which could easily be a microcosm for the whole world, thus adding a universal dimension that renders the message of the

play more profound. The relationship between the Dragon and the people in the village therefore becomes a reflection of man's relationship with nature. Man's arrogance and destructive means are killing the environment, represented in nature and its inhabitants, which is, in turn, backlashing at him.

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Conclusion

With the eco-messages discussed above, the play reflects what Lawrence Buell believes to be the "the role of literature" which is to enable "reflection on the ethical dimensions of environmentalism and in impelling readers to take up "*a stronger ethic of care for nonhuman environment*", so making the world

'a better place, for humans as well as for nonhumans'" (qtd. in Massey and Bradford 111 emphasis added). The portrayal of the Dragon as having two different, yet complementary, roles allows Asher to expose the connection between humans and their environment and this is the contribution of the dramatist. Through them, Asher delivers highly significant ecocritical messages with the aim of compelling the young audiences to take a stand towards the destruction of the environment and also to reach an understanding of the pressing demand for saving nature and for coexistence. It is only when humans are willing to coexist and to protect nature, that the environment can be truly saved.

Notes

- 1- In his article "Daoist Philosophy," Ronnie Littlejohn states that Daoism "along with Confucianism [it] one of the great indigenous philosophical traditions of China" (par.1)

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