



Cloud Imagery in Baudelaire: From Toxicity to Ecological Imagination

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Abstract

This ecocritical analysis of Baudelaire’s *The Spleen of Paris* examines cloud imagery through three lenses: its symbolic meaning in the urban environment, its role in conveying toxic discourses, and its representation of an idealized natural state. Clouds, as natural symbols, reflect the tension between nature and the industrialized city, evoke complex emotions, and reveal the erosion of human-nature connections. Moreover, they symbolize pollution, social alienation, and the yearning for a harmonious natural world. This analysis enriches our understanding of Baudelaire’s ecological philosophy and offers new perspectives for ecocritical research.

Key words: Charles Baudelaire; *The Spleen of Paris*; Cloud imagery; Ecocriticism; Toxic discourse; Environmental imagination

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INTRODUCTION

While Charles Baudelaire, a prominent symbolist poet of the 19th century, has received significant attention in literary studies, his works have been relatively under-explored within the framework of ecocriticism. Nevertheless, scholars have begun to delve into Baudelaire’s ecological thought from various

perspectives. James Whitlark (2016), for instance, was among the first to introduce an ecocritical lens to Baudelaire’s oeuvre, emphasizing the poet’s ecological consciousness and his challenge to traditional notions. Whitlark argues that Baudelaire’s “madness” offers a more coherent ethical and aesthetic perspective. Other researchers have focused on animal themes, nature views, and connections to Romanticism and paganism in Baudelaire’s works. Domestic scholars, such as Yang Yibo (2012) and Lai Junwei (2019), have explored the connotations of Baudelaire’s nature view from different dimensions, highlighting the ecological thought embedded in his works. Domestic scholars have paid more attention to the construction of Baudelaire’s nature view and his reflections on the urbanization process. However, existing studies still have some shortcomings. Most studies concentrate on Baudelaire’s intuitive perception of nature and ecological concerns, with insufficient exploration of deeper ecological philosophical thoughts. Secondly, the research objects mainly focus on Baudelaire’s works as a whole, lacking in-depth analysis of specific works and images.

As a classic work that delves into modern urban life, *The Spleen of Paris* expresses the poet’s complex emotions towards modern civilization through detailed depictions of various scenes and characters in the city. The image of “clouds,” which runs throughout the book, serves as an intersection of nature and human emotions, carrying rich symbolic meanings. It is both a projection of the poet’s complex emotions about nature, city, and humanity, and a vehicle for expressing his anxiety about modern life and his yearning for an ideal natural state. This paper aims to employ Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical theory as the primary theoretical framework, combined with close reading, to conduct an ecocritical interpretation of the cloud imagery in Baudelaire’s *The Spleen of Paris*, and to delve deeper into his ecological philosophy. Buell’s ecocriticism emphasizes the interactive relationship

between literary works and the natural environment, as well as the shaping role of literature on environmental ethics. Through this theoretical perspective, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the ecological concerns embedded in Baudelaire's works.

CLOUDS AND THE SECOND ENVIRONMENT: NATURAL POETRY AND INDUSTRIAL WASTELAND

Lawrence Buell eschews the binary opposition of "nature" and "city," preferring instead the more nuanced concept of "environment," which he defines as encompassing both "the 'natural' and the 'artificial' aspects of the perceptible world...Changes in the physical nature of humanity have made the two domains increasingly difficult to distinguish" (2015: 3). This innovative conceptualization opens up new avenues for exploring the complex interplay between nature and the urban. Baudelaire's poetry provides a compelling case study for this perspective. The urban milieu that Baudelaire inhabits is precisely what Buell terms the "second environment."

Within Baudelaire's poetic landscape, clouds, as symbols of the primordial, serve as a touchstone for the natural world. Yet, these clouds are often depicted as suspended in "polluted air" (2018, p.25). The stark contrast between the purity symbolized by clouds and the clamor and pollution of the urban night highlights the corrosive and alienating effects of the "second environment" on nature.

Nineteenth-century Paris, the backdrop to Baudelaire's poetry, exemplifies a world "whose physical environment is increasingly altered by capital, technology, and geopolitics, and by what are sometimes called the consumption or replication of nature" (2015, p.7). The Industrial Revolution, with its attendant urbanization and environmental degradation, transformed the city into a complex "second environment" where human society and the natural world were inextricably intertwined.

In "Twilight," Baudelaire connects clouds to the urban sky, painting a picture of "soft, hazy colors" and "transparent mists of night" that envelop the city. The cloud is thus both a part of nature and a part of the city, defying simplistic binary categorizations.

Baudelaire's clouds, while symbolizing the pristine, free, and unpolluted natural world, are frequently shrouded in "polluted air." This "pollution" is not merely physical; it also represents the moral and spiritual corruption of urban life. The poet's vivid depictions of "the clamor and pollution of the urban night" highlight the stark contrast between nature and the city. The cloud, as a symbol of the pristine, becomes increasingly fragile and powerless in this context.

In poems like "A Carcass," Baudelaire offers a scathing critique of urban life, revealing the dehumanizing

effects of the "second environment." The city, with its superficiality and moral decay, alienates individuals from their authentic selves and from nature. The poet's portrayal of urban dwellers as alienated and spiritually bankrupt underscores the corrosive impact of industrialization on the human psyche.

Baudelaire's exploration of clouds in *The Spleen of Paris* offers a profound meditation on the relationship between humanity and the natural world in the context of industrialization. The cloud, as a symbol of both nature and the human condition, serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the tensions and contradictions of modern urban life. By exploring the concept of the "second environment," we can better understand the ways in which human activity has transformed the natural world and the implications of these transformations for human experience.

Secondly, clouds serve as a spatial extension and complement to the unique urban skyline. Buell emphasizes the concept of ecological unconsciousness, suggesting that humans possess an inherently incomplete understanding of their embeddedness within their environmental context as individuals and social beings. Ecological unconsciousness implies both the potential for a more complete awareness and the constraints on realizing this potential (2010, p.156). Human perception of the environment can be inhibited or distorted by various factors. Baudelaire's description of "the heavy, dirty air of Paris" in "The Glass-Maker" can be seen as a manifestation of such negative environmental perception. The polluted air and the accompanying gray clouds reflect a visceral sense of the environment among inhabitants of industrialized cities, a sense that may only represent a fragment of ecological unconsciousness, as people may not fully comprehend the root causes of environmental problems or their broader ecological implications.

The "brown zones" characterizing 19th-century Paris as an industrial city reflect a lack of environmental justice. The environmental degradation manifested in polluted air and clouds negatively impacts the sustainable development of urban residents. Behind this lies the neglect of the environment during industrial development and the failure of relevant stakeholders to assume their environmental responsibilities. By depicting such urban landscapes, Baudelaire prompts reflections on ecological justice, as Buell advocates, encouraging people to focus on the fairness and justice inherent in environmental issues.

Buell's concept of the "second environment" underscores the profound transformation of nature by human activity within urban contexts. The interplay between clouds and urban spaces exemplifies this intricate relationship between nature and the human-altered environment. The dynamic nature of clouds influences not only the visual and atmospheric qualities of urban landscapes but also reflects the complex emotions of the

poet, aligning with Buell's assertion that environment and human emotion are intertwined in ecocritical analysis.

In "The Cake," the observation that "this scene clouded my landscape, and I saw that the calm joy the two boys had previously felt had disappeared without a trace" demonstrates how urban landscapes can shift from bright and serene to dark and oppressive due to the presence of clouds. This transformation reflects both the impact of the environment on the poet's emotions—his joy waning upon seeing the clouds—and the reciprocal influence of his emotional state on his perception of the urban landscape. The landscape ceases to be merely a physical manifestation and becomes imbued with emotional and cultural significance.

Just as ecosystems are characterized by dynamic equilibrium, urban landscapes evolve in response to moods and experiences. The changing states of clouds trigger corresponding changes in urban landscapes, symbolizing the interplay of elements within the urban ecosystem. For instance, the gathering of clouds can suggest the accumulation of events or emotions, while their dissipation can symbolize the release of distress or pressure, highlighting the complexity and fragility of urban ecosystems.

Furthermore, the uncertainty, distress, and potential crisis symbolized by clouds reveal the complexities of urban life. This goes beyond the interaction between nature and emotion, encompassing societal structures, economic development, and other factors. For example, social inequality and inequitable resource distribution can lead to the emergence of "brown zones," characterized by gloom and oppression, much like the presence of overcast skies. Thus, when appreciating urban landscapes, we should adopt an ecocritical perspective, as advocated by Buell, to consider the complex interplay of environmental, social, and economic factors and their impacts on different groups, while acknowledging the underlying social roots of urban environmental issues.

Buell's concept of the "second environment" highlights the significant rift between nature and the urban environment, a product of human transformation. In this context, architecture and human populations dominate, creating an artificial environment starkly contrasting with the natural world. From an environmental ethics standpoint, this artificial environment gives rise to numerous issues. Baudelaire's clouds, in contrast, symbolize the unfettered freedom and sublime grandeur of nature. In "Windows," he writes, "Beyond the waves of rooftops, I see a mature woman, wrinkled, impoverished, always bent over, never going out." The juxtaposition of the cloud's unrestrained nature with the confined urban dwellers and rigid architecture underscores the severing of the human-nature connection within the urban "second environment." The cloud represents an idealized, repressed natural state, reflecting individuals' latent yearning for nature within urban contexts.

From a landscape ecology perspective, urban landscapes are the result of human alterations to natural landscapes. These alterations can modify ecological processes and functions, impacting ecosystem stability and sustainability (1996, p.77). Through a Buellian ecocritical lens, the symbolism of clouds offers a critique of the urban "second environment." Urban architecture and populations represent the order and rules imposed by industrialization and urbanization, transforming nature. Conversely, the free-flowing nature of clouds hints at the repressive and limiting nature of the urban "second environment." It reveals how the pursuit of urban development and order often neglects the value of nature and human emotional needs, leading to alienation within urban life. The symbolic significance of clouds in "The Stranger" provides insights for improving the ecological conditions of the urban "second environment." As cities are products of human transformation of nature, the free and lofty nature of clouds showcases the allure and power of the natural world. This suggests that urban planning and development should preserve natural spaces and integrate natural elements, fostering environmentally sustainable and equitable urban ecological models. Such approaches can mitigate the environmental problems associated with excessive urbanization and address the needs and rights of diverse populations.

The city has evolved into a "second nature" space, replete with human artifacts, standing in stark contrast to the primordial natural environment. This dichotomy is vividly illustrated in poems such as "The Madman and Venus" and "Anywhere Out of the World." In the former, the described natural park, including the sky adorned with clouds, exudes vitality and tranquility, forming a striking contrast to the urban cacophony and artificiality. In the latter, the city is composed of marble, light, and minerals, representing an artificial landscape that stands in opposition to the individual's longing for a free and natural state. In these contrasting depictions, clouds, though not explicitly emphasized, symbolize the natural world severed from the urban "second environment," highlighting the division between city and nature.

From a Buellian ecocritical perspective, the symbolism of clouds offers a critical examination of the urban "second environment." The artificiality and clamor of the city, as exemplified by the urban structures in "Anywhere Out of the World," represent a human-dominated environment that has been excessively transformed. This environment restricts individual freedom and suppresses the human yearning for nature. The free form of clouds, in contrast to the fixed structures of the city, suggests the limitations and constraints of the urban "second environment" on humanity.

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THE SYMBOLIC TOXICITY OF CLOUDS: A STUDY OF POLLUTION AND ALIENATION

Lawrence Buell, in *Toxic Discourse*, posits that toxic discourse is an interconnected set of themes, its power stemming in part from the urgent demands of industrial culture and in part from deep-rooted Western attitudes. This discourse challenges traditional environmental protectionist notions, emphasizing the interdependence of humans and the environment and the social and psychological impacts of toxicity. In Baudelaire's poetry, the cloud image becomes a key vehicle for this toxic discourse, reflecting the pollution and social and psychological "toxicity" of urbanization. In "The Painter's Desire," the image of "a sinister yet intoxicating moon stirred by a storm-tossed cloud on a wild night" evokes a turbulent and ominous atmosphere. Here, the cloud transcends its natural state, intertwined with the storm and ominous ambiance, suggesting an underlying unease and sense of danger towards the environment, a reflection of a potential "ecological unconsciousness" perceiving a "toxic" environment.

The "rushing" and "stirring" of the cloud, along with the ominous atmosphere it creates, symbolizes social unrest. For instance, the rapid social changes, class divisions, and inequities of nineteenth-century Paris, like a rushing cloud, brought about anxiety and crisis. This social instability and discord represent a form of social "toxicity" that influences people's psychological states and perceptions of life. As Baudelaire suggests, the dandy "can be a bored person, or a suffering person" (2007, p.88). Psychologically, this ominous cloud image can induce fear, anxiety, and confusion within individuals. In modern society, people face numerous pressures and challenges, and such ominous cloud imagery can exacerbate psychological burdens. It reflects the psychological "toxicity" individuals may experience within their social environments, such as uncertainty about the future and concerns about their own circumstances.

Simultaneously, the cloud image, through its unique artistic representation, reveals the underlying "toxicity" at the social-psychological level. Baudelaire, through his depiction of clouds, metaphorically presents the underlying social and psychological unrest and suffering,

enabling readers to more intuitively perceive these hidden societal issues.

Lawrence Buell's ecocritical theory posits the city as a complex ecosystem where human activities have transformed the natural environment, and this transformation, in turn, has alienated humans from nature. The various elements within the city, including altered natural elements and the products of industry and culture, are intricately linked to human existence and psychological experiences. In Baudelaire's poetry, the image of "a city through which fog creeps, crossing rivers, where the phonograph sings your glory, and the printing press expresses your wisdom" presents a multifaceted urban landscape. The fog and river, as natural elements, symbolize the deterioration of the urban environment, such as air pollution, a consequence of urban development. The piano and printing press, on the other hand, represent the city's cultural and industrial activities.

The presence of fog can signify human alienation. On one hand, as a polluted natural element, the fog reflects the estrangement of urban dwellers from a healthy natural environment. Living in such polluted air, breathing unhealthy substances, represents a physical alienation, a disruption of the harmonious relationship with nature. On the other hand, the fog can symbolize spiritual confusion and disorientation. In the city, individuals may lose their sense of direction due to complex environments and life pressures, much like being lost in a fog.

The cultural and industrial activities represented by the phonograph and printing press also embody human alienation. While the piano sings of glory and the printing press expresses wisdom, these may, from an alienated perspective, signify an excessive reliance on cultural and industrial products to define one's value and meaning. In the pursuit of glory and wisdom within the city, individuals may neglect their true feelings and inner nature, becoming alienated by cultural and industrial standards. For example, people may prioritize achievements in piano playing or printed works over their genuine needs and feelings.

Baudelaire, through this poetic image, reveals the alienating effects of the city by combining elements such as fog, rivers, pianos, and printing presses. The deterioration of the natural environment and the development of cultural and industrial activities together create an environment that alienates individuals both physically and psychologically. This aligns with Buell's ecocritical theory, which emphasizes the impact of urban environments on individuals and the resulting alienation.

Lawrence Buell, in *Toxic Discourse*, underscores the multifaceted impact of a toxic consciousness, encompassing material, social, and psychological dimensions, as toxicity corrodes both lives and minds. Within the context of urbanization, this toxic

consciousness manifests in various ways, alienating urban dwellers.

In Baudelaire's works, we observe a series of issues arising from urbanization. In "The Good Child," the frenzied nature of urban festivals disorients individuals, representing the urban cacophony that robs people of tranquility and direction, plunging them into spiritual confusion. This reflects the spiritual "toxicity" of the urban environment. In "The Widow," the park corner becomes a gathering place for the city's failures and the emotionally wounded, reflecting the urban environment's detrimental effects on people's lives and psyches. It hints at the cruelty and indifference of urban life, leaving individuals with nowhere to turn after failure, embodying alienation at the level of individual existence.

"The Poor Man's Eye" exposes the issue of the wealth gap, a structural problem within urban society. This social "toxicity" erodes the quality of life and social harmony, causing class divisions and antagonisms, fostering self-loathing among the poor and indifference among the rich, thus alienating individuals at the social level. "The Man of the Crowd" suggests that the urban environment intensifies loneliness, leading to spiritual emptiness and moral decay. High-rise buildings and a fast-paced lifestyle alienate people, fostering interpersonal coldness and a lack of empathy, thus alienating individuals spiritually and morally. "The Beautiful Dorothee" highlights the oppressive nature of urban heat, affecting work efficiency and enthusiasm for life, reflecting the dual constraint of the urban environment on the human body and spirit, alienating individuals from their own nature.

The image of clouds also conveys relevant information. It not only symbolizes the cyclical changes of nature but also conveys Baudelaire's concerns about industrial civilization's encroachment on nature, depicting the conflict between humans and the natural world, reflecting the threat to ecological balance. Its fleeting nature symbolizes both the boundless freedom of nature and the human fear of uncontrollable forces and the destruction of nature. This indicates that in the process of urbanization, a toxic consciousness alienates urban dwellers in multiple ways, altering their relationship with nature.

THE SKYLINE AS ECOLOGICAL SYMBOL: IMAGINING SUSTAINABLE URBAN FUTURES

In the lens of ecocriticism, environmental imagination is a pivotal concept, exploring how literary works represent the human-nature relationship and envision ideal environments. Lawrence Buell, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, emphasizes the significance of environmental imagination in literary studies, asserting it as a central focus of ecocriticism. Baudelaire's frequent use of cloud imagery provides a unique lens to examine

his environmental imagination and the underlying ideal of human-nature harmony.

Living in 19th-century Paris, a city undergoing rapid urbanization and industrialization, Baudelaire witnessed a host of environmental problems such as air and water pollution, and the compression of natural spaces. Against this backdrop, Baudelaire's cloud imagery transcends mere natural description, reflecting his yearning for an ideal environment and his concern for the real environmental predicament. In "Soup and Clouds," Baudelaire's cloud imagery serves as a crucial entry point to explore his environmental imagination and its connection to Buell's ecocritical theory.

From an ecocritical perspective, the "mobile houses that God builds with vapor" – clouds – in the poem are endowed with unique symbolic significance. Described as "marvelous buildings made of intangible materials," these clouds reflect Baudelaire's idealized imagination of nature. This imagination resonates with Buell's notion of an ideal natural state, characterized by mystery, beauty, and transcendence. Clouds here symbolize an ecological utopia, representing a pure, ever-changing, and undisturbed natural environment.

However, the reality of Baudelaire's urban environment starkly contrasts with this idealized natural state. The rapid industrialization and urbanization of 19th-century cities exacerbated environmental problems. Against this backdrop, Baudelaire's use of cloud imagery expresses his longing for an ideal nature while hinting at the predicament of the real environment.

In the poem, the character of "my dear little madwoman" intertwines with the cloud imagery. Her invitation for dinner is juxtaposed with the poet's fascination with the clouds outside, suggesting a dislocation between humans and nature in real life. Baudelaire may be expressing through this contrast how humans in urban environments become increasingly distant from nature, engrossed in material and mundane lives, neglecting the beauty and importance of nature.

Furthermore, the line "Are you going to drink your soup right away, your silly purchaser of clouds..." further emphasizes this contradiction. Soup represents the material needs and worldly desires of real life, while clouds symbolize the ideal of nature and spiritual pursuits. Through this contrast, Baudelaire reveals the dilemma faced by humans in the urban environment: whether to pursue material satisfaction or return to nature and seek a harmonious coexistence with it.

Drawing on Buell's theory, Baudelaire's poem reflects the ecocritical concern for the human-nature relationship. The cloud imagery, beyond being a mere description of a natural phenomenon, is a representation of an idealized natural state and a reflection on the realities of environmental problems. Through this unique literary expression, Baudelaire calls for a re-examination of

the human-nature relationship and a pursuit of a more harmonious and sustainable way of life.

In conclusion, Baudelaire, through the cloud imagery in “Soup and Clouds,” constructs a contrast between the ideal natural environment and the reality of urban life at the level of environmental imagination, expressing his yearning for a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature and his reflections on the challenges posed by the real environment.

In Baudelaire’s “The Harbor,” the cloud imagery is intricately interwoven with environmental imagination theory, profoundly expressing the ideal of human-nature harmony. Baudelaire’s unique depiction of clouds as “mobile architectures” showcases his creative imagination of nature. From an ecocritical perspective, this imagination transcends conventional understandings of clouds. Buell emphasizes that environmental imagination is a process of reconstructing and assigning meaning to nature. Here, clouds are endowed with qualities akin to human-made structures, suggesting a potential dialogue and connection between nature and human creation. The dynamic movement of clouds, similar to the functional changes of buildings, reflects the vitality and orderliness of nature, uniquely expressing the ideal of human-nature harmony. It implies that nature is not entirely independent of human perception and understanding but can resonate with human creations, suggesting an interconnectedness and mutual compatibility between nature and humanity at a higher level of order.

Furthermore, as part of the natural environment, clouds, along with the sky, sea, and lighthouse, form a harmonious whole. The vastness of the sky, the movement of clouds, the color changes of the sea, and the flashing of the lighthouse in the poem create a “prism” that provides visual pleasure. This reflects Baudelaire’s imagination of an ideal natural environment, where nature is an organic whole with interconnected and interdependent parts. Buell’s theory also emphasizes that the environment is a complex system encompassing both natural and cultural elements. Clouds play an indispensable role in this system, and their movement resonates with changes in other elements, creating a harmonious atmosphere. This harmony is not merely visual but also ecological, suggesting that each natural element, through its existence and movement, contributes to the stability and beauty of the entire ecosystem, reflecting the ideal state of human-nature harmony where humans can appreciate and integrate into this natural harmony rather than disrupting it.

For souls weary of life’s struggles, clouds and the entire harbor environment become a source of spiritual solace. This suggests that in Baudelaire’s ideal, human-nature harmony can provide humans with spiritual satisfaction beyond material pursuits. When people gaze at the movement of clouds and other natural phenomena, they can maintain an appreciation for rhythm and beauty within themselves. From the perspective of environmental

imagination theory, this reflects the close spiritual connection between humans and nature. Buell’s theory emphasizes that ecocriticism should focus on the spiritual connection between humans and nature. Here, clouds are not merely a physical natural phenomenon but also a spiritual symbol that can touch the human soul. Through their unique form and movement, they evoke a deep-seated human desire for beauty and tranquility, serving as a bridge between the human spiritual world and the natural world, further emphasizing the ideal of human-nature harmony. This spiritual satisfaction reflects the deeper meaning of human-nature harmony, where nature is not only the basis for material existence but also the home of the human spirit. The harmony of coexistence conveyed by Baudelaire through the image of clouds transcends the level of simple material utilization and survival needs. It emphasizes an emotional bond and spiritual interdependence between humans and nature. In this ideal, humans can draw spiritual strength from nature and, at the same time, treat nature with respect and protection. This is consistent with Buell’s emphasis on the comprehensiveness of the human-nature relationship in ecocriticism, including both material and spiritual harmony.

In conclusion, through the image of clouds in “The Harbor,” Baudelaire profoundly expresses the ideal of human-nature harmony from multiple perspectives, including its unique presentation, its role in the overall environment, and its connection to the human spirit. This expression aligns with Buell’s environmental imagination theory in terms of the creative construction of nature, the understanding of environmental systems, and the emphasis on the spiritual connection between humans and nature, providing us with a valuable perspective for a deeper understanding of Baudelaire’s ecological thought and environmental consciousness in literary works.

CONCLUSION

This essay offers an ecocritical interpretation of cloud imagery in Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life*, delving into the poet’s complex emotions towards nature, the city, and humanity. The cloud image serves as a vehicle for Baudelaire to express his anxieties about modern life and his yearning for an ideal natural state. The study reveals that, as a symbol of nature, the cloud forms a stark contrast with the industrialized city, highlighting the conflict between the natural and built environments. The interaction between clouds and urban spaces reflects people’s complex emotions, while also revealing the weakening connection between humans and nature in the “second nature.” Clouds are seen as a metaphor for urban pollution and social psychological “toxicity,” demonstrating the alienating effects of urbanization on individuals. The mutable forms of clouds reflect urban dilemmas and human anxieties. Clouds symbolize an ideal natural state, embodying the desire for human-nature

harmony. However, the stark contrast between reality and ideal highlights the dilemma faced by humanity in the face of environmental issues. Baudelaire's use of cloud imagery is not merely a simple depiction of a natural landscape but a significant vehicle for expressing complex emotions and social problems. The cloud imagery in Baudelaire's works contains rich ecological connotations, reflecting the poet's deep reflection on environmental issues in the industrial age.

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