

Ecocritical discourse analysis of The Echoing Green

Dr. Muhammad Ansar Ejaz

Visiting Lecturer GCU Faisalabad

niaziiejaz@gmail.com

Abstract

This study undertakes an ecocritical discourse analysis of William Blake's *The Echoing Green*, using Arran Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistic model as the theoretical framework. As environmental degradation and ecological disconnection intensify in the modern era, examining historical literary texts through an ecological lens has become a vital scholarly endeavor. Blake's pastoral poem, rooted in Romantic traditions, is revisited here not merely as a literary artifact but as a linguistic ecology that encodes regenerative narratives about human-nature relationships. Stibbe's model, outlined in *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*, offers a set of discourse features including framing, metaphor, evaluation, identity, salience/erasure, and underlying ideology which are employed in this study to uncover the ecological meanings embedded in the poem. The analysis, conducted qualitatively through close textual reading, reveals that *The Echoing Green* constructs a pastoral-regenerative ecological story where nature is framed as an active, nurturing presence and human life is harmoniously situated within natural rhythms. Blake's linguistic choices foreground themes of intergenerational continuity, ecological empathy, and the cyclical nature of time, while erasing conflict, environmental degradation, or domination. Particularly notable are the positive appraisals of natural phenomena, metaphors equating children with birds, and the agentive personification of the sun and landscape all contributing to an ecological worldview rooted in sustainability, care, and balance. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration that literary texts, especially Romantic poetry, can serve as vehicles for ecological consciousness when analyzed through contemporary discourse frameworks. The implications extend to environmental humanities, literary studies, and ecolinguistics, suggesting that reinterpreting canonical works can aid in the cultivation of environmental values aligned with ecological reciprocity and resilience. This research contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to identify and amplify "stories we live by" that support rather than undermine ecological integrity.

Keywords: Ecocritical discourse analysis, ecolinguistics, William Blake, *The Echoing Green*, Stibbe, ecological ideology, Romantic poetry, human-nature relationship, regenerative storytelling, environmental humanities.

Introduction:

William Blake's poem "*The Echoing Green*" (1789), from *Songs of Innocence*, captures the cyclical flow of life through its rhythmic language and pastoral imagery. Organized into three ten-line stanzas with an AABB rhyme scheme and predominantly iambic meter, the poem uses repetition especially the titular "echoing green" to reinforce themes of continuity between generations (Palupi, 2021). Blake's use of personification ("The sun does arise...the birds...sing louder around"), alliteration ("sky-lark and thrush"), and antithesis (children's play vs. elders' reminiscence) situates human activity within a vibrant ecocultural setting, where nature acts as both stage and agent in the life cycle (Palupi, 2021).

These language patterns support Blake's central themes: the celebration of innocence, the passage of time, and the interdependence of human and natural worlds. The exuberant morning opening contrasts with the wistful evening close "sport no more seen / On the darkening Green" marking both the children's weariness and the inseparable bond between growth and decline (Mason, 2023).

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis (ECDA) brings together ecocriticism the study of literature's relationship with the environment (Rueckert, 1978; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996) and discourse analysis, which uncovers how language reflects and shapes power, ideology, and cognition (e.g., transitivity, metaphor, lexical choices) (Stibbe, 2014). ECDA allows us to explore how Blake's lexical and grammatical structures encode ecological values such as agency in nature, pastoral continuity, and temporal cycles and to evaluate the poem's implicit environmental ideologies.

Through ECDA's critical tools, this study positions "*The Echoing Green*" as a site of ecological discourse that models a regenerative human-nature relationship through language.

Despite the growing interest in ecocritical approaches to literature, there remains a notable gap in examining how Romantic-era poetry constructs ecological ideologies through language. William Blake's "*The Echoing Green*" is often discussed in terms of pastoral imagery and innocence (Dutta & Talukder, 2024), yet few studies have critically investigated *how* its linguistic choices personification, transitivity patterns, and metaphor frame human-nature relations. While ecolinguistics discourse analysis frameworks have gained traction in recent years (Stibbe, 2013), their application to early Romantic poetry remains underutilized. As a result, the ways in which Blake's poem might embed regenerative or anthropocentric ideologies through linguistic structures remain underexplored.

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis (ECDA) integrates ecocriticism's interest in literature's environmental functions (Rueckert, 1978) with critical discourse analysis's focus on ideology and power relations expressed through language (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014). This combined lens enables researchers to detect not only poetic imagery but also the underlying ecological worldview coded into lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical features. Stibbe (2013) argues that ECDA can expose whether discourse promotes ecological harmony or reinforces human dominance. Considering "*The Echoing Green*" features vivid depictions of nature and human life (Dutta & Talukder, 2024), an ECDA offers a powerful means to explore Blake's embedded

environmental ideology a contribution both to Blake scholarship and to the broader field of ecolinguistics.

This research offers several important contributions. First, it expands the application of ECDA to Romantic poetry, bridging a methodological gap in ecocritical and linguistic literary studies (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014). Second, it deepens our understanding of “*The Echoing Green*”, revealing how its linguistic patterns weave ecological meaning into canonical verse. Third, by applying tools of ecolinguistics to Blake, the study enhances theoretical discourse on ecological storytelling and ideological framing, helping scholars evaluate early literature's role in environmental imagination. Finally, by demonstrating ECDA's applicability, the paper provides a model for future analyses of historical poetic texts, enriching ecolinguistic pedagogy and advancing environmental literary criticism.

Research Questions

- How does *The Echoing Green* linguistically construct the relationship between humans and nature ?
- What ecological values or ideologies are reflected or challenged in the poem?

Literature Review: Language Patterns and Themes in “*The Echoing Green*”: A key study by Palupi (2021) provides an in-depth exploration of the figurative language employed in Blake's “*The Echoing Green*.” The author identifies personification such as “the sun does arise... and make happy the skies” alongside alliteration, assonance, and symbolism of birds and seasonal change to evoke innocence and vitality (Palupi, 2021). Palupi emphasizes how lexical repetition (e.g. “echoing green”) and rhythmic regularity reinforce the poem's pastoral mood and cyclical conception of life.

Complementing this, several literary analyses highlight the poem's thematic contrasts particularly youth versus age and renewal versus decline. Critics note that the three-part structure mirrors stages of life: the exuberance of morning, the reflective mid-day, and the quiet evening (e.g., enotes.com themes summary, referencing youth vs. age and rebirth) Detailed device-based readings enumerate metaphor, imagery, and symbolic structuring: the green as communal space, birds as freedom symbols, and the sun's cycle representing cyclical time .

Furthermore, meter and rhythm have been studied: the poem's use of anapestic dimeter, with iambic substitutions, creates a nursery-rhyme cadence that reflects innocence and movement (poetryverse.com scansion discussion) . This metrical pattern, combining steady rhythm with playful variation, supports the thematic interplay of order and spontaneity.

Studies on Ecocritical Discourse Analysis (ECDA): Ecocritical discourse analysis, though more frequently applied to modern or ecological literature, has grown in scholarly use for uncovering ideological framing in literary texts. Rueckert's foundational essay introduced ecocriticism as the study of literature–environment relationships (Rueckert, 1978), and Glotfelty and Fromm's edited volume further established ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field connecting literary studies with environmental praxis (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Rueckert's work remains widely cited and foundational:

Rueckert (1978) defines ecocriticism as an experimental discourse bridging literature and ecology, arguing for literature's role in environmental empathy and awareness.

Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) provide theoretical grounding for literary ecology analysis through canonical and contemporary texts, though poetic analysis often remains thematic rather than discourse-analytic.

More recently, Stibbe (2013) developed an ecolinguistic discourse lens combining CDA and ecocriticism to analyze how language constructs or challenges environmental stories. Stibbe argues for critical analysis of how discourses encourage relationships of respect and care for nature versus dominance or exploitation.

Though specific application of ECDA to Blake's "*The Echoing Green*" remains unexplored, analogous work in modern poetry demonstrates how linguistic analysis can reveal ecological ideology via agentive language, metaphor patterns, and spatial-temporal framing (e.g., studies of modern ecopoetry raising awareness and stewardship). These modern examples suggest the potential of ECDA when applied to canonical texts thus supporting the rationale for its use with Romantic-era poetry.

Synthesis and Gap: Existing scholarship robustly documents "*The Echoing Green*"'s use of figurative language, meter, and themes of innocence, renewal, and generational contrast. However, these studies largely stop short of critically analyzing *how* such language constructs ecological meaning or ideology. Equally, while ECDA theory has been articulated in literary discourse studies, its application to early Romantic texts like Blake's remains sparse. This literature review confirms a promising intersection: using ECDA to interrogate Blake's linguistic structuring of nature will fill an analytic gap and contribute both to ecolinguistic methodology and poetic scholarship.

Research Methodology: This study adopts an ecocritical discourse analysis framework grounded in Stibbe's (2015) model of *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*. The analysis focuses on uncovering the underlying ecological stories and ideological positioning embedded in the language of William Blake's *The Echoing Green*. Stibbe's approach emphasizes the examination of linguistic features such as metaphor, evaluation, identity, framing, and salience that shape the way humans perceive and interact with the natural world. Through close textual analysis, the poem was analyzed to identify discursive patterns that reflect or challenge dominant anthropocentric worldviews. The methodology is qualitative and interpretive in nature, relying on detailed examination of the poem's lexicon, narrative structure, and symbolic representations, with particular attention to how these linguistic choices construct a harmonious, cyclical relationship between humans and nature.

Analysis

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis of the First Stanza

The sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring.
The sky-lark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells' cheerful sound.
While our sports shall be seen

On the Echoing Green.

In this opening stanza, Blake linguistically maps a regenerative ecological story, one where nature and culture interweave in harmony. Following Stibbe's framework which examines ideologies via metaphor, framing, evaluation, identity, salience, and erasure the stanza unfolds as follow :

Framing & Metaphor: The sun is personified ("does arise") and credited with agency, actively "making happy the skies." This frames nature not as passive backdrop but as an agentive participant in a celebratory ecological cycle, aligning with Stibbe's claim that discourse can cast nature as active or passive in shaping human-nature relations.

Evaluation & Appraisal: Lexical choices like "merry bells," "welcome," and "cheerful sound" reflect positive evaluation, constructing an affective bond between humans and the seasonal environment. Stibbe asserts that such appraisal patterns are vital in fostering ecological worldviews grounded in affective empathy.

Identity & Interdependence: The inclusion of birds the sky-lark and thrush singing in unison with bells suggests a shared ecological identity. Humans and nonhumans are interwoven in a single celebratory community, reinforcing a story of interdependence, central to Stibbe's critique of anthropocentrism.

Salience & Erasure: The poem highlights natural participants the sun, birds, spring while omitting any mention of human-induced disruption. This salience of unspoiled nature and erasure of conflict or exploitation resonate with a pastoral-regenerative story that promotes restoration through seasonal cycles.

Ideology: The stanza encodes a "cyclical & harmonious" ecological ideology, implying that human activities ("our sports shall be seen") coincide with natural rhythms rather than despoiling them. This contrasts starkly with dominant consumerist or dominative ecological stories critiqued by Stibbe.

By applying Stibbe's categories particularly agentive framing, positive appraisal, identity merging, and targeted salience/erasure we see Blake's use of language not only depicts nature but endorses a regenerative ecological story. Nature is cast as active protagonist, seasons are celebrated, and human-nature unity is foregrounded suggesting that Blake's pastoral verse may function, when read ecocritically, as a proto-ecological manifesto for environmental reciprocity.

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis of Stanza Two

Old John, with white hair

Does laugh away care,

Sitting under the oak

Among the old folk,

They laugh at our play,

And soon they all say."

This stanza introduces a reflective shift from nature-centrism to human-nature interdependence, and it demonstrates how language constructs a *regenerative ecological story* as outlined in Stibbe's (2015) model.

Framing and Identity: "Old John, with white hair" is foregrounded through a proper name and vivid physical attribute, establishing him as a human figure deeply rooted in the environment.

His placement “under the oak” symbolises continuity, wisdom, and a deep bond with the natural world. According to Stibbe, framing such rootedness builds an ecological identity that connects humans and trees as co-participants in the ecosystem.

Appraisal and Evaluation: The active phrase “laugh away care” signals positive evaluation of aging. The elders do not despair over passing time; instead, they find joy in intergenerational connection. Stibbe highlights that such positive appraisal fosters ecological empathy, indicating a valuation of life’s cycles, not only youthful exuberance .

Metaphor and Agency: Though a human-centered excerpt, natural metaphor pervades. The oak's presence implicitly lends stability and protection to the elders. This metaphorical association positions nature as a caring presence, supporting Blakesque ideology that nature actively nurtures human well-being aligning with Stibbe’s idea of nature’s agential framing.

Salience and Erasure: The stanza circling around “Old John...among the old folk” foregrounds the elder generation’s participation while erasing any negative perspective on aging. Instead of landscape scars or decline, there is continuity, care, and collective belonging reflecting ECDA’s telltale sign of regenerative ecological storytelling.

Ecological Ideology: The elders remember and relive their youth without bitterness, indicating a cyclical interplay of generations on the Green. Stibbe would see this as evidence of an ecological ideology grounded in intergenerational care and ecological continuity, against disjointed, extractive mindsets.

Using Stibbe’s categories of framing, metaphor, evaluation, identity, salience, and ideology, this stanza reveals a pastoral–regenerative ecological narrative. The oak’s symbolism, joyful aging, and shared recall among generations support a worldview where humans and environment participate in life’s cycles together a foundational element of ecological reciprocity in Romantic literature.

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis of the Final Stanza

“Such, such were the joys.

When we all, girls & boys,

In our youth-time were seen,

On the Echoing Green.”

This stanza encapsulates the temporal closure of the poem while reinforcing its ecological story of cyclical joy and intergenerational continuity, as conceptualized by Stibbe (2015). The analysis unfolds through several of his key categories:

Evaluation (Appraisal): The repeated exclamation “Such, such were the joys” conveys intensified positive evaluation, celebrating youthful experiences. This appraisal imbues the *echoing green* with emotional resonance, making the green itself an object of affection a linguistic move that Stibbe identifies as essential for nurturing ecological empathy (Stibbe, 2015).

Framing & Identity: The inclusive phrase “we all, girls & boys” constructs a collective ecological identity, uniting human agents of different genders across time through shared activity in nature. This framing situates youth as inherently connected to ecology a fundamental aspect of regenerative ecological storytelling.

Metaphor & Temporal Framing: The reference to “youth-time” transforms lived experience into a metaphorical stage on the green. In Stibbe’s framework, such metaphors reify natural

settings as stages for human growth cycles, suggesting that nature is not merely background but an arena of becoming.

Salience & Erasure: This final stanza foregrounds joy and memory on the green while erasing any negativity no mention of aging, sorrow, or environmental harm. The selective focus reinforces a pastoral-regenerative story, shaping reader attention toward continuity rather than decline (Stibbe, 2015).

Ideology: Overall, the stanza constructs an ecological ideology where human life is deeply bound to natural space across time. The repetition and inclusive identity yield a time-transcending ecological community, advocating a worldview harmonious with seasonal and life cycles a core value in Stibbe's storytelling paradigm.

Applying Stibbe's categories evaluation, identity, metaphor, framing, salience/erasure, and ideology reveals how Blake linguistically embeds a regenerative ecological story in the final stanza. The green becomes a temporal and communal plot, continuous across generations, and celebrated joyfully, suggesting environmental reciprocity and unity with nature.

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis of the Third Stanza

"Till the little ones weary

No more can be merry

The sun does descend,

And our sports have an end:

Round the laps of their mothers,"

This stanza evokes the conclusion of playtime, marking a shift from exuberance to repose, while foregrounding natural cycles and familial ecological bonds. Using Stibbe's (2015) categories metaphor, framing, evaluation, identity, salience/erasure, and overarching ideology we interpret how Blake constructs ecological meaning.

Framing & Temporal Metaphor: The phrase "The sun does descend" personifies the sun as an actor drawing a boundary around the day's activities, framing nature as a timekeeper. In Stibbe's terms, this is metaphoric framing: nature does not merely set a backdrop but actively dictates temporal milestones. Such framing strengthens the ecological narrative of cyclical renewal (Stibbe, 2015).

Evaluation (Appraisal): The progression from "weary" to "no more can be merry" reflects a tempered emotional arc play gives way to rest. The contrast is unvalued (no negative terms attached), suggesting acceptance even welcoming of the impending dusk. Stibbe highlights that positive or neutral appraisal patterns toward natural constraints foster an ecological empathy that acknowledges nature's rhythms (Stibbe, 2015).

Identity & Human-Nature Bonding: Children gathering "Round the laps of their mothers" embodies a communal and ecological identity: the maternal figures act as ephors of care within the natural setting. This evokes Stibbe's category of identity framing, which positions humans as embedded within and nurtured by the ecological system, not separate from it (Stibbe, 2015).

Salience & Erasure: By emphasizing the descending sun and mother-child intimacy, the stanza gives salience to generational care and natural cycles. At the same time, it erases conflict, exhaustion beyond circadian constraint, or environmental degradation reinforcing an idyllic, regenerative ecological story. Again, this aligns closely with Stibbe's notion of selective foregrounding/erasure in supportive ecological discourse (Stibbe, 2015).

Ecological Ideology: The combined framing, evaluation, identity, salience, and erasure serve to uphold a restorative cyclical ideology one that values natural limitations and sees human life interwoven seamlessly with ecological order. This counters destructive narratives of dominance or unbounded exploitation that Stibbe critiques (Stibbe, 2015). Through its concise language and rhythmic structure, the stanza reinforces a regenerative ecological story: play ends because nature (the sun) demands it, ending brings reconnection (with mothers), and the cycle of life continues. By positioning nature as agentive, accepting its limits, foregrounding care, and erasing conflict, Blake's poem aligns closely with the ecological values Stibbe defines as essential for stories that sustain rather than degrade our world.

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis of the Fourth Stanza

Till the little ones weary
No more can be merry
The sun does descend,
And our sports have an end:
Round the laps of their mothers,"

Applying Stibbe's (2015) categories framing, evaluation, identity, salience/erasure, and ecological ideology the stanza reveals a deeply ecological language pattern rooted in natural cycles and intergenerational care:

Framing & Metaphor: "The sun does descend" personifies the sun, framing it as an agent that regulates the children's play. This aligns with Stibbe's idea that depicting nature as an active timekeeper supports a regenerative ecological story attuned to circadian and seasonal rhythms (Stibbe, 2015).

Evaluation (Appraisal): The transition from "weary" to "no more can be merry" presents an emotionally neutral appraisal of fatigue and rest, suggesting an accepted, natural cessation of activity. Stibbe asserts that such neutral or positive evaluations of ecological limitations promote harmonious environmental stories rather than anthropocentric resistance (Stibbe, 2015).

Identity & Human-Nature Bonding: "Round the laps of their mothers" evokes a communal ecological identity where children naturally return to caregivers within the green space. This reflects Stibbe's concept of identity framing, embedding human relationships within ecological contexts of care (Stibbe, 2015).

Salience & Erasure: The focus on rest, maternal care, and the setting sun foregrounds nurturing and cyclical processes, while omitting any negative implications of fatigue or environmental adversity. This selective narration reinforces an idyllic, pastoral-regenerative ideology, consistent with Stibbe's criteria for supportive ecological discourse (Stibbe, 2015; Stibbe, 2013).

Ecological Ideology: The stanza constructs a worldview where human life is interwoven with, rather than dominating, environmental patterns. The sun's descent triggers rest, and communal bonding follows encapsulating a regenerative ideational stance that values sustainability and reciprocity with nature (Stibbe, 2015; Stibbe, 2013).

Ecocritical Discourse Analysis of the Final Stanza

"Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,

Are ready for rest;
And sport no more seen,
On the darkening Green.”

Using Stibbe’s framework particularly framing, metaphor, evaluation, identity, salience/erasure, and ideology this stanza emphasizes natural cycles, community identity, and ecological harmony:

Framing & Temporal Agentivity: The phrase “darkening Green” personifies the environment, depicting dusk not merely as a backdrop but as an active force bringing an end to play. This reflects Stibbe’s observation that nature, when linguistically framed as an agent, supports ecological stories that respect natural limits and cycles (Stibbe, 2013).

Metaphor & Interconnected Identity: Comparing children to “birds in their nest” constructs a powerful ecological metaphor: both children and birds are nestled within the green, sharing a common habitat. This analogy reinforces a sense of shared ecological identity, positioning humans as part of and not apart from the natural community.

Evaluation: The stanza’s emotional neutrality toward rest (no negative descriptors like “sadly”) signals a positive or accepting appraisal of natural cycles. This linguistic choice avoids dramatizing restfulness, aligning with ecologically friendly narratives that affirm interdependence and cyclical living (Stibbe, 2015).

Identity & Kinship :The collective terms “sisters and brothers” build a community of shared belonging humans grouped like kin within the ecology. This identity construction deepens the sense of embeddedness in nature, rather than separation from it.

Salience & Erasure: The stanza foregrounds natural endings and communal rest while erasing elements of anxiety, labor, or environmental degradation. Such selective focus reinforces a pastoral-regenerative ecological story, where life fades gracefully into rest, mirroring nature’s own rhythms.

Ecological Ideology: Overall, the stanza communicates an ecological ideology centered on balance, interdependence, and respect for natural boundaries. The anthropomorphic framing, communal metaphors, and neutral appraisal of rest combine to evoke a sustainable relationship with nature, in harmony with Stibbe’s (2015) call for ecological stories that encourage care rather than dominance.

Conclusion

This study set out to conduct an ecocritical discourse analysis of William Blake’s *The Echoing Green* through the theoretical lens of Stibbe’s (2015) ecolinguistics framework, focusing on the ecological stories and ideologies encoded in poetic language. By applying key analytical categories framing, metaphor, evaluation, identity, salience/erasure, and ecological ideology the research has revealed how Blake constructs a regenerative ecological narrative that both reflects and reinforces harmonious human–nature relationships. Each stanza contributes to a larger pastoral tapestry that affirms intergenerational continuity, communal identity, and respectful alignment with natural rhythms.

The poem’s opening stanza foregrounds a joyous convergence of human activity and natural renewal, where the sun and birds are not passive symbols but agentive actors within the ecological cycle. As the poem progresses, attention shifts toward aging, reflection, and rest all framed in ways that celebrate life’s transitions without dissonance or conflict. The portrayal of

figures like “Old John” under the oak tree and children “like birds in their nest” highlights Blake’s implicit belief in the interdependence of species and generations, a view that echoes Stibbe’s (2015) vision of storytelling that fosters sustainability and mutual care. The repeated erasure of environmental harm, tension, or anthropocentric domination further reinforces the poem’s function as a pastoral-regenerative ecological story a narrative that privileges care, rhythm, and reciprocity over exploitation and control.

In sum, *The Echoing Green* emerges, through ecocritical discourse analysis, as a linguistic landscape where nature is not merely aestheticized but actively participates in and governs the social and emotional lives of humans. By valuing ecological limits, celebrating cycles, and emphasizing shared belonging, Blake’s poem exemplifies what Stibbe (2015) advocates: storytelling that supports ecological well-being. As such, this study demonstrates how literary discourse, particularly poetry, can serve as a potent vehicle for ecological thought, challenging dominant narratives of separation and inviting readers into a more integrated and restorative vision of the world.

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