

# A Paragon of Environmental Stewardship in Bond's Select Short Stories

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## Abstract

Human life is intricately intertwined, interconnected and interrelated with nature. Every human being has a strong penchant towards the natural world, including forests, animals and aquatic ecosystems that have a fascinating power to influence human life conquering their hearts while blessing and helping them to achieve their desired goals. Human beings recognising their profound reliance on nature, assume the role of custodian and stewards of Mother Earth. With a heightened environmental responsibility, individuals are entrusted to safeguard, preserve and conserve the natural world. This article will explore the environmental stewardship of human beings by examining their roles, responsibilities and actions in ensuring the preservation and protection of the environment for the benefit of current and future generations. Drawing inspiration from notable figures such as Ruskin Bond, this article would attempt to help an individual to serve as exemplars of environmental stewardship fostering a harmonious coexistence with the natural planet.

**Keywords:** Human, Custodian, Stewardship, Environmental responsibility, Ruskin Bond, Preservation, Nature.

## Introduction

The profound influence of humans on the environment and the interconnected climate systems has led to a reconsideration of our existence in a recently recognised geological era known as the Anthropocene. This implies that human societies have begun to depend more and more on many features of Planet Earth which in turn depend more and more on us. The enchanting force of nature has an undeniable influence on human life, as expressed by D.H Lawrence, who says; "Nature and man's life is so interlinked that it is not easy for human beings to separate themselves from its influence because nature is stronger than man". In the words of Ian Somerhalder "We depend on nature. Now, nature's depending on us." Thus, human survival relies on nature and in turn, nature relies on us for its preservation.

The UN World Chapter on Nature has the following points to remind us of our dependence on nature: "Life depends on the uninterrupted functioning of natural systems which ensure the supply of energy and nutrients. Civilisation is rooted in nature which has shaped human culture and influenced all artistic and scientific achievements." Nature stands majestically tall and has been an enduring source of inspiration for writers, poets, philosophers, artists and experts throughout history. In this light, it becomes the duty of humanity to act as stewards, defending, caring for and conserving nature against

harm and deterioration. Consequently, humanity bears the responsibility in direct and indirect ways, ensuring a harmonious coexistence for present and future generations.

The term “Paragon” refers to a person who is regarded as a perfect or prime example of a particular quality or attribute, standing as the pinnacle of excellence and inspiring others to strive for comparable greatness. Over the past four decades, the concept of ‘environmental stewardship’ has emerged as a key tool with which to define the environmental ethics of various organisations at different decision level. Within the domain of stewardship, one encounters a constellation of moral virtues, such as loyalty, temperance, solidarity, diligence, justice, integrity, practical rationality and judicious application of resources. However, the embodiment of environmental stewardship transcends the mere role of safeguarding and conserving natural resources, extending towards a commitment to diminishing one’s environmental footprint and advancing the noble cause of sustainability. Therefore, as suggested by J.F Craghan ‘Human beings must be “authors of life and not proliferators of death.’

Ruskin Bond a renowned Indian author has often been celebrated for his profound connection and deep reverence for the natural world. He is widely recognised as an environmental steward due to his intense union with nature and his efforts to raise awareness about environmental issues through his literary works. For over a half century, Bond has celebrated the wonder and beauty of nature. His heartwarming relationship with nature, the hills and trees of the Himalayas is perceptible through every leaf that covers his work. His works often embody a sense of love for nature and expressed his concerns about the impact of human activities in the natural world. One may approach nature to conquer her or exploit her but Bond is filled with love for her and he chooses to live with her in total harmony. Niranjan Mohanty writes: “Bond’s adherence to the world of flora, fauna, hills, insects and the animals is a result of his commitment to the place he was born. The woods, the hills and the flocks of birds, insects and the trees all draw his attention with such impassioned intensity that at once he feels an inner urge to lose his own identity in them” (46).

### **Dust on the Mountain**

The short story *Dust on the Mountain* skillfully penned by Ruskin Bond provides a thought provoking glimpse into the dark reality of relentless environment destruction, characterised by the ruthless exploitation of our planet’s green resources. This narrative, oftendescribed as a ‘green massacre’ center around the life of a young boy, Bisnu who embarks on a life-altering journey from his village to the city in search of a livelihood. Bisnu initially secures a job as a teaseller in a cinema during film intermission. He encounters two young boys, Chittru and Bali and becomes an affectionate friend with Chittru. This employment stands in stark contrast to the agrarian work typical of his home village, all the while prompting Binsu to reflect on his sister and mother back home and worry about their well-being, as his earnings prove insufficient to support them.

Confronted by this harsh reality, Bisnu embarks on a quest for alternative employment with two options before him: seeking a job in Delhi or joining Chittru in the hills to work in limestone quarries. Ultimately Bisnu opts for the later becoming a cleaner for Pritam, a truck driver responsible for transporting limestone from the quarry to the depot. In this role, Bisnu who grew up amidst the serene, green-carpeted mountains of his village and had lots of appreciation for nature with no thoughts of harming nature is horrified by the gradual destruction of the trees. Bisnu sadly pours out his pain on the devastation of the forest in the following lines:

“The skeletons of a few trees remained on the lower slopes. Almost everything had gone grass, flowers,

shrubs, birds, grasshoppers, ladybirds. A rock lizard popped its head out of a crevice to look at the intruders. Then, like some prehistoric survivor, it scuttled back into its underground shelter” (496).

Bisnu secures a job as a cleaner boy working for Pritam, a truck driver known for his reckless driving habits. One day on a steep road, Pritam is driving erratically, honk his horn loudly. Suddenly, a mule crosses the road and Pritam swerves to the right to avoid it not realising that the road ahead curves to the left. As a result, he loses control of the truck leading to a dangerous accident. Fortunately, a sturdy oak tree prevents the truck from further disaster, ultimately saving Pritam and the others on board. In gratitude, Pritam, acknowledges that “it was the tree that saved me. Remember that boy”(502). The concept of environmental stewardship is beautifully explained by Bond, as the oak tree saves them from catastrophe. Humans should be responsible stewards of the environment to receive nature’s support in return.

This incident ultimately brought him to his realise the stewardship.

“This is my home and these are my fields. Even the snow is mine. When the snow melts I would clear the fields, nourish them and make them rich. I will work on my land. It is better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it” (64).

The attitude of Bisnu to return to his home and work his farm speaks of deeper connection and care for their environment. Here, we find a shift from exploitation to preservation of nature. Thus, nature is not passive or indifferent but actively participates in the well-being of all living creatures. Humans should recognise this and engage in responsible stewardship to maintain a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world.

### **My Father’s Tree in Dehra**

*My Father’s Tree in Dehra* projects the eco-friendly aspects of hills and the writer’s nostalgic visit to Dehra many years after his father’s death. The story recounts the efforts taken by an individual to convert the barren land to flowering plants. It emphasises the enduring relationship of human beings with nature and the ecosystem. The author raises his tone with much pride that his father loved trees and was happy to plant them not only in his garden but also woods and a commonplace of Dehra. He remembers going “armed with cuttings and saplings,” into the jungle, “planting flowering shrubs between the Sal and Sheesham trees.” (300) His father once said, “If people keep cutting trees, instead of planting them, there’ll be no forests left at all, and the world will be just once vast desert.”

John Muir, a key philosophical figure in the American conservation movement centered his beliefs on the idea that nature has intrinsic value and should be preserved for its own sake. He strongly supports the notion that preserving forests is crucial for maintaining the health of the planet and safeguarding natural beauty. “The young Bond spends an entire day, planting trees on a small rocky island and his father tells him that the trees used to move and they will move again. See how they reach out with their arms.” (300) Though this is a very powerful motivating force given to Bond, it also constitutes a compelling call to action for the worldwide human family urging them to engage in tree planting and preservation in order to transform the Earth into a paradise for future generations. It emphasises the expectation that every household’s leader should instill in their children the vital lesson of valuing and safeguarding their immediate surroundings, fostering a harmonious connection between people and their environment.

When Bond revisits Dehra after the demise of his father, he goes through a plethora of poignant memories and emotions firmly rooted in his heart, just as how the trees stood tall and strong. In trying to locate the

island going across the dry river bed, his eye is caught “by the spectacular red plumes of the coral blossom.” He notices the hills and that parrots live there, and that a number of shrubs, grasses, and plants have grown up under the trees he and his father planted. The author feels that the trees “know” him and they “whisper” and “beckon” him near to them. He says, “.... That the trees used to move and they will move again. See how they reach out with their arms. I noticed the tendril of a creeping vine, that was training near my feet as we sat there, doing nothing in particular in the best gardens, timehas (sic) nominee. I found that the tendril was moving almost imperceptibly away from me and towards my father. Twenty minutes later, it had crossed the veranda steps and was touching his feet. Thus, in India, is the sweetest of salutations. This is probably a scientific explanation for the plant’s behaviour – something to do with the light and warmth on the veranda steps – but I like to think that its movements were motivated simply by affection for my father.” (119)

As a motherless child, Ruskin Bond sought solace and comfort in the embrace of Mother Nature. His journey with his father played a pivotal role in shaping him into a naturalist and advocate for environmental conservation. His father’s unwavering faith in the interconnected web of living organisms within nature became deeply ingrained in his consciousness. Later, after his father’s tragic demise, Ruskin Bond found the hills provided him with a strong sense of parental security and the trees and plants that surrounded him took on the role of protectors. These natural elements came to symbolise the enduring spirit of his beloved father. “In his small forgotten corner of the world, my father’s dreams are coming true and the trees are moving again” (146).

Bond believes that trees have an enduring and sustained presence in our lives. He even goes to the extent of calling them God when he states that they are older than the Cedars of Lebanon. He feels their heart-warming supervision. Bond quotes in *The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond*, “The trees stand watch over my day-to-day life. They are the guardian of my conscience. I do what I think, they would approve the most” (121). Ruskin Bond is against the felling of trees because he strongly believes in the ancient saying ‘**A blessing rests on the house where the shadow of the tree falls**’. In his story *Rain in the mountain*, he quotes from George Morris, who had made an impassioned plea when the tree was about to be cut by a woodman,

Woodman, spare that tree! Touch not a single bough!

In youth, it sheltered me, And I’ll protect it now!

### The Cherry Tree

In the literary masterpiece *The Cherry Tree*, Ruskin Bond unfolds an enlightening narrative that serves as a transformative experience for young readers, instilling in them a profound ecological awareness. Rakesh, a young six-year old school boy, was on his way back from school through the quaint streets of Mussoorie’s bustling bazaar, cherishing a bunch of cherries he had purchased. As he journeyed home, he enjoyed eating them one by one, until he had only three left when he arrived at his grandfather’s residence, where he was staying. Upon arriving home, he offered one cherry to his grandfather, inquiring whether cherry trees brought good luck. His grandfather said, “Nothing is lucky if you put it away. If you want luck, you must put it to some use.” As per his grandpa’s suggestion, he took a spade, dug the soil and planted it in the shady corner of the field and forgot all about it.

Aldo Leopold, a renowned ecologist in his book *A Sand County Almanac*, says that individuals should not merely be passive observers of nature but should actively participate in its preservation and sustainability. Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring*, stresses the detrimental effects of

indiscriminate pesticide use on the environment. Carson encourages individuals to be aware of the consequences of their actions and to channel their efforts toward the well-being of the environment. Wendell Berry, in his essays and poetry, emphasizes the importance of cultivating a sense of responsibility towards the land. He urges individuals to “understand the intricate relationships between humans, their communities, and the environment.”

As time unfolds, the narrative in *The Cherry Tree* takes an unexpected turn when Rakesh discovers a small twig in the garden one morning, realizing with joy that it is the very seed he planted, now flourishing into a cherry plant. The journey of the cherry tree, however, is not without its trials, facing challenges such as damage from a goat and a passer-by. Despite these obstacles, the tree resiliently persists in its struggle for survival. Growing alongside the tree, Rakesh becomes an integral part of its nurturing process, witnessing its tenacity. Rakesh takes on the responsibility of nurturing the tree. He is not content with just waiting for the tree to bear fruit. Instead, he dedicates himself to its well-being. He ensures the tree receives adequate water, shields it from inclement weather and sets up a scarecrow to deter birds and animals.

The tree’s first guest, a caterpillar, was gently relocated with the hope that it would return as butterfly, contributing to pollination and ecosystem health. With each passing season, the tree flourished, attracting honey bees and tiny birds. Despite the birds feasting on its cherries, there were always more blossoms and cherries to share. This harmonious relationship with nature delighted Rakesh and his grandfather, who revelled in the beauty and shade provided by the tree. “Rakesh felt a deep connection to the tree he had planted, finding fulfilment in the act of creation and the responsible stewardship of the environment.” The cherry seed proved to be a fortunate and purposeful gift, embodying the principles of environmental care and nurturing life. We come to know from the story *The Cherry Tree* that Ruskin Bond focuses on preserving and promoting natural elements. His respect for trees can be seen as a form of stewardship in the conservation of the natural beauty of the Indian Himalayas and other regions.

Bond’s *The Cherry Tree* is not just a story; it is a lesson in the art of living in harmony with nature. Through the character of Rakesh, Bond imparts the values of patience, care and the unending beauty that nature has to offer. This tale inspires us to connect with the world around us, to nurture our dreams and to appreciate the small, yet profound, pleasures life bestows upon us. In the midst of our fast-paced lives, *The Cherry Tree* is a tranquil retreat, inviting us to savour the sweetness of life, one cherry at a time.

## Conclusion

Ecologists universally recognise the fundamental importance of trees in terrestrial ecosystems. The canopy of trees creates a specialized habitat that fosters a wide array of biodiversity, shielding the forest floor from extreme temperature and supplying sustenance to a broad spectrum of organisms. Ruskin Bond, a devoted admirer of trees and a proponent of finding solace in the embrace of nature, emphasizes the vital need for environmental stewardship in preserving and safeguarding the natural world. His narratives, namely *The Dust on the Mountain*, *My Father’s Tree in Dehra*, and *The Cherry Tree*, imbue readers with a profound sense of duty towards nurturing and protecting the environment for both current and forthcoming generations.

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