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**From Romantic Reverence to Ecological Responsibility: Changing
Representations of Nature in British and American Literature**

Research Article

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From Romantic Reverence to Ecological Responsibility: Changing Representations of Nature in British and American Literature

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Abstract

One of the longest-standing and conceptually most complex topics of literature is nature. It functions as more than merely the setting of a literary work. It can be a symbol, an emotional trigger, a challenge, a cultural artifact, and a moral player. The article is a comparative one which discusses the portrayal of nature in the following literary traditions: Romantic poetry, the Transcendentalism of the American Romantics, literary Naturalism, and modern environmental writing. Wordsworth's Nature is perceived as a healing and moralizing element which can transform loneliness into imaginative pleasure. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau extend this notion, viewing nature as a source of spiritual knowledge, of self-knowledge and of resistance to the materialist world. Naturalist writers, by contrast, frequently represent nature as impersonal and forbidding, exposing human beings to physical limitation, environmental pressure, and biological vulnerability. Literary nature in the twentieth century is more than the object of aesthetic contemplation; it is a threatened community of the kind that requires moral responsibility, as in the writings of Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. Drawing on Raymond Williams' work on the cultural significance of the term 'nature' and Cheryll Glotfelty's work on the development of 'ecocriticism', the article suggests that literature in the image of nature reflects these factors in addition to being an indicator of human identity, society, progress and environmental ethics. It concludes that literature increasingly challenges the separation of humanity from the nonhuman world and calls for a movement from possession and domination towards interdependence, attentiveness, and ecological responsibility.

Keywords: Nature writing, ecocriticism, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, literary Naturalism, Wordsworth, Emerson, environmental ethics

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Introduction

It may function as a setting, create or reinforce a particular mood, symbolize human experience, influence characters' behaviour, or challenge human ambition. Mountains and forests, rivers, storms, deserts and flowers, animals and changing seasons are not just aesthetic elements of the literature. Often, they serve as vehicles for writers to examine such themes as love, death, identity, war, religion, estrangement, industrialization, and environmental destruction. A storm may externalize psychological turmoil, a withering flower can be a sign of lost love or impending death, a river can be a symbol of continuity, transformation, or an irresistible force. The natural world can also be used to discover a character's personality and moral compass. Attitudes toward the nonhuman world such as reverence, fear, indifference, aggression, often reveal underlying ideas about authority, possession, vulnerability and belonging. Nevertheless, "nature" is not a simple or historically stable category. Raymond Williams famously observes that "Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language" (219). It is the essential nature of something, the sum total of material reality, the non-human world, an ordered creation from God, an ideal world in contrast to civilisation, and resources that can be exploited. The value of nature in literature will then be related to the philosophical, political, religious and economic context in which the work is created. A pastoral poem, a colonial adventure narrative, a Naturalist survival story, and an environmental novel may therefore attribute radically different meanings to the natural world.

The literary depiction of nature also shows changes of human society relation to nature. In some cultures, nature is thought to represent an ordered cosmos, where human beings have a purposeful role. To others it is an open field to be conquered, cultivated, owned and exploited economically. The Romantic writers are unlikely to embrace the instrumental view of nature and instead emphasize the potential of nature to inspire imagination, spiritual renewal, and moral instruction. For the American Transcendentalists, the bond with nature is the means by which a true self is discovered – a self that has been denied by society. Naturalist writers, however, do not play favourites with idealised images, but manage to show a casual nature that exposes the vulnerability of human beings. More contemporary environmental literature, however, challenges the distinction between people and nature and alerts to issues of pollution, species loss, climate change and environmental injustice.

In this article, a comparative study of these great literary orientations is presented. It asks questions about nature as environment, symbol, emotion, adversary, culture and ecology. It does not read literary history as a modernist path of fear to environmental awareness, but as a history that is more often a history of reverence, domination, fear, aesthetic appreciation, and ethical concern. These tensions are present in the human-nature intertwining, documented in the literature, and can be explored in an imaginative space.

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Nature as Setting, Symbol, and Narrative Agent

Perhaps the first obvious role that nature plays in literature is as the background setting for a story. Fiction is set in a place where the characters live, travel, work, struggle and form relationships. But a literary world is seldom apolitical. Weather, vegetation, topography, light and seasonal changes create mood and set expectations. A tranquil meadow can evoke calmness, while a shadowy forest can spark uncertainty or dread. The direction of a plot can change with a drought, flood, snow or storm and force characters to do things they wouldn't do in normal times.

Characterisation is also achieved through natural settings. This interplay with the environment can show us attributes such as courage, humility, greed, alienation, adaptability, or spiritual awareness. The ethical outlook of a character who regards land solely as private property and a source of profit differs from that of one who understands it as a habitat shared with other forms of life. Likewise, if a character doesn't know about seasonal changes, animal activity or geography, it can suggest the limits of human knowledge. Nature is not just the setting of action; it is also a medium of expression which makes the moral and psychological aspects of action apparent.

Nature's symbolic use is also of paramount significance. Spring is often linked to renewal, autumn to maturity or decline, winter to death or emotional isolation and dawn with hope in literary works. These links are not always present and do not exist at any fixed time, but the repetition of such links enables writers to tie their individual experience to the greater natural cycles. Rivers can be a symbol of time as they are always in motion and have an identifiable shape. Forests can symbolize liberation, temptation, risk, and even an unconscious wish, or a fight against state authority. Mountains can represent transcendence, difficulty, solitude or majestic strength.

The interpretation of symbols, however, should never deny that the signs that make up the natural world have their own meaning, one shared with humanity. If every bird, tree, and river is interpreted solely as a metaphor for human emotion, every river, as a metaphor for human emotion, the material life of nonhuman beings is erased. In this case, ecocritical reading poses the question of whether or not nature has agency in the text or if it is simply an extension of human concerns. Cheryll Glotfelty offers a foundational definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). This strategy presents a different perspective than focussing on nature as a decorative part of literature, instead reflecting the interplay between the representation of text and the conditions of its material environment.

Nature can then, as a result, be interpreted as a story-teller. It affects action, restricts human freedom, affords choices and has consequences. Floods alter settlements, forests conceal or redirect human movement, failed monsoons produce scarcity, animals resist human control, and deserts exhaust the bodies that attempt to cross them. Although literary nature does not necessarily possess intention, it frequently possesses force. To recognise this force is to call into question

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anthropocentric assumptions, namely that only humans are acting in a meaningful way within a narrative.

Romanticism and the Restorative Power of Nature

The Romantic Movement is one of the most important developments in the ways literatures treat nature. Romantic writing is partly a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, to industrialization, urbanization, and social change, and focuses on imagination, emotion, individuality, memory, and the sublime. Romantic poets are not only describing natural landscapes, they are examining what happens when they meet the natural landscape and what changes or transformations take place in consciousness. In fact, nature itself as an emotional, imaginative, and morally shaping force is best exemplified by William Wordsworth. In his poetry natural experience is often presented as a cure for the psychological exhaustion and the strain of social life. In “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” the speaker initially appears isolated and directionless. The comparison with a solitary cloud initially associates the speaker’s movement with isolation and detachment from human society. His unexpected encounter with daffodils, however, turns loneliness into delight. The flowers are described as “A host, of golden daffodils” beside the lake, moving energetically in the breeze (Wordsworth, “I Wandered”). Through personification, they become a joyful community rather than passive objects. The poem’s reference to the Milky Way enlarges the scene beyond the immediate landscape. The flowers appear to stretch continuously like stars, suggesting abundance and the seemingly infinite vitality of the natural world. Words such as “fluttering,” “dancing,” “sprightly,” and “jocund” produce an atmosphere of animation. Nature does not simply mirror an emotion already possessed by the speaker; it creates a new emotional condition.

The most significant transformation occurs after the physical experience has ended. When the speaker lies “in vacant or in pensive mood,” the daffodils return through memory as an “inward eye,” and his heart “dances with the daffodils” (Wordsworth, “I Wandered”). The natural scene becomes inwardly preserved and imaginatively renewable. Its value does not depend upon constant physical presence. Memory converts perception into emotional and spiritual nourishment. This process illustrates Wordsworth’s claim in the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” that poetry originates in “emotion recollected in tranquillity.” The poet first experiences an intense emotional response, later contemplates it in calmness, and recreates it through language. Nature participates in both stages: it produces the initial emotion and supplies the remembered image through which that emotion can be renewed. The relationship between literature and nature is therefore mediated by memory and imagination. Nevertheless, Wordsworth’s representation of nature is not exclusively celebratory. “The World Is Too Much with Us” condemns a society whose material preoccupations have weakened its capacity to perceive the natural world. The speaker declares, “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,” linking economic activity with spiritual exhaustion (Wordsworth, “The World”). The phrase “we have given our hearts away” suggests that alienation

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from nature involves the surrender of an essential human capacity. The sea, moon, and winds continue to possess beauty and energy, but modern humanity is “out of tune” with them. The poem is significant to tie with the perception of the environment and criticism of consumerism. Nature is a safe haven from commercial society; it is also a measure of the commercial society. A lack of response to the natural world is proof of emotional and cultural deprivation. Wordsworth thus anticipates the future environmental claims that environmental destruction and human alienation go hand in hand as products of the same instrumental mentality. Romantic nature, however, should never be considered uncritically as a universal and accessible haven. This enjoyment of moving around pleasant places, thinking about lovely scenery or escaping from time to time from urban environments can be related to class, leisure, property, and social mobility. Processes that shape landscapes include agricultural, labour, enclosure, ownership and displacement. The social tensions, even in a poem that appears to transcend social tensions, can then be part of a literary appreciation of nature. A critical reading must recognize the creative power of the Romantic imagination and the conditions of materiality of the represented landscape.

Transcendentalism: Nature, Self, and Spiritual Knowledge

American Transcendentalism develops several Romantic ideas but gives them a distinctive philosophical and cultural form. Ralph Waldo Emerson interprets nature as a medium through which the individual perceives spiritual unity. In his essay *Nature*, the natural world is not simply an external collection of objects; it is a field of correspondence connecting matter, consciousness, language, and spirit. His famous image of the “transparent eye-ball” dramatises a moment in which the boundaries between the perceiving self and the surrounding environment become temporarily dissolved. In nature, Emerson writes, “I am nothing; I see all” (Emerson). In the statement, the individual identity is not lost. Rather, the social construct of ‘ego’ associated with status, possession and profession, and convention is undone. Perception is not possessive, it is receptive. The perceiving subject no longer stands outside nature as its master but experiences itself as participating in a larger spiritual order. In this understanding of nature, nature is also endowed with a linguistic significance. Spiritual truths are apprehended through natural forms which are signs. Literary imagination is the ability to interpret the world as a text. But such a role may result in the potentiality of human self-discovery by means of material nature. Emerson’s trees, stars and landscapes might seem to be of value mostly because of their ability to raise human consciousness. Ecocriticism, therefore, celebrates and challenges the materialism of Transcendentalism: it is happy that the material is denied, but is it conferring value on the material as a nonhuman entity?

Henry David Thoreau combines Transcendentalist philosophy with close environmental observation, personal experiment, and social criticism. He has the opportunity to learn about the relationship between material simplicity and intellectual freedom in *Walden* in the vicinity of Walden pond. The pond, woods, animals, weather and seasons are not just a backdrop for philosophical ponderings, but rather shape the day-to-day life and thought of the narrator. The

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combination of observation and experience with the symbolic in Thoreau's observations of ice, water depths, animal behaviour, plant growth and seasonal change is enhanced. Thoreau's nature is not moribund. Walden Pond freezes and thaws, reflects light, changes colour and goes through cycles of renewal. Spring is a real occurrence and an imaginative rebirth. He has a very keen sense of the abstraction of land that becomes property and scenery. For Thoreau, a place becomes knowable through time, embodied experience, repeated observation, and sustained encounter. Thoreau doesn't, however, go into the woods to be sentimental. In *Walden* he confesses that there is "an instinctive birthright in every man that he ought to have the right to be wild. Elsewhere, in "Walking," he declares, "In Wildness is the preservation of the World" (Thoreau). Wildness here is not simply a remote geographical region untouched by humanity. It represents energies, freedoms, and forms of life that exceed social regulation and economic calculation. Human civilisation depends upon what it cannot completely domesticate.

Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau thus share a belief in the transformative value of nature, but their emphases differ. Wordsworth foregrounds emotion and memory; Emerson emphasises spiritual unity and perception; Thoreau combines philosophical reflection with sustained observation and resistance to material excess. Together, they establish a powerful literary tradition in which contact with the nonhuman world becomes essential to human self-understanding.

Nature as an Indifferent and Adversarial Force

There is just one literary way to express the harmony between man and nature. In many cases, nature is seen as a direct adversary of man's effort in many works. The human body is revealed as being vulnerable in harsh landscapes, extreme temperatures, disease, hunger, and animal predation. These depictions gain special significance in literature categorized as Naturalism. The nineteenth-century scientific ideas, particularly the ideas of heredity, environment, and biological struggle, have a strong impact on naturalism. Naturalist characters are often ordinary people who don't have extraordinary control over events. The economic, physical, social and bodily environment in which they live is not fully under their control and they are shaped by it. Nature is not a friendly teacher, it is not a friend of the soul, and indifference to human aspirations can be shown in nature.

The survival stories of Jack London serve as a good example of influence. Yukon is harsh, unfeeling and dominated by physical forces in "To Build a Fire." The protagonist's faith in human reason and technological skill is inadequate due to his lack of understanding the extremity of the cold. Although the man's arrogance and misjudgment contribute to his death, the environment does not punish him intentionally; the cold remains indifferent to human expectation and moral categories. The cold just works as conditions of its own, that aren't connected to human expectations.

Anthropocentric confidence is thus undermined in the story. The man believes that he can control nature by planning, fire and his own will. The dog, on the other hand, has an innate sense

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of danger. Its bodily knowledge is more suitable to the environment than the man's abstract calculations. Whereas intelligence is not just technological, it has to be ecological, too, if London's natural world is to be a field in which it can operate. This is a piece of writing quite apart from Wordsworth's account of restorative nature. Wordsworth's natural experience expands his emotional life, while London's natural world highlights the limitations of human power. The two traditions, however, have an important message to say to one another: Nature can change human consciousness. The difference is that the transformation is not the same. Romantic nature may evoke delight, modesty, and originality—Naturalist nature may evoke fear, awareness of the body and awareness of human fragility. The expression 'nature as antagonist' should not be interpreted as meaning that the environment is ethically hostile. Storms are "angry" and wilderness is "cruel" – and that's a human projection. Ecologically, there is no such thing as an evil avalanche, drought or freeze. It turns out to be devastating in regard to specific bodies, settlements, technologies and decisions. It is a common effect in literary works to personify the forces of nature, but critical reading should be able to differentiate between literary antagonism and moral direction.

From Aesthetic Nature to Ecological Community

The contemporary literature on the environment shifts the focus of the debate: from nature to man to man to nature. Industrialisation, chemical pollution, deforestation, extractive economies, mechanised warfare, and mass consumption have shown the human societies' enormous potential for ecosystem changes. It is not possible to imagine nature any longer as an infinite space beyond history.

A Sand County Almanac is a significant leap from the appreciation of landscape to the moral framework of ecology for Aldo Leopold. Leopold believes that responsibilities go beyond interpersonal relationships. His "land ethic" enlarges the moral community to include "soils, waters, plants, and animals" (204). Land is not a product or an inert surface on which history is made. It is a community that is dependent and whose members have ecological functions and value. This view is a rejection of the conqueror model of being human. If man can only consider land as property, he can only judge forests, rivers, the animals and the soils in terms of their present economic value. The land ethic, however, calls on human beings to view themselves as part and parcel of an ecological community. One such membership is a membership of participation and of restraint. Natural resources can be utilized by human beings as long as they do not compromise the integrity and continuity of the larger system.

In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson illustrates the power of science to become a powerful environmental story. Carson's description of the harmful impact of pesticides is both explanatory of the ecology and storytelling, metaphorical and moral. Emotional force comes from the imagined silence of a spring without birds that brings about the experience for the reader through chemical contamination. Nature is no longer at risk only from dramatic conquests; it is at risk from materials that are dispersed unnoticed in everyday activities.

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Carson's writing also uncovers the transgression of boundaries in the damage to the environment. Chemicals are transported among the soil, water, insects, birds, animals, and humans exposed to the plants they are applied to. The boundaries of human society and the external nature dissolve. Damage to the systems that life relies on is returned as ecological damage. This broadened awareness is reflected in the development of ecocriticism. Ecocritics study the effects of literary genres on anthropocentrism, the relationship between land and gender and class, how colonial discourse portrays a supposedly empty landscape, and how environmental violence is unevenly distributed. They also learn about depictions of animals, plants, climate, pollution, extinction and environmental justice.

Literary depictions of nature cannot be said to be completely innocent from this point of view. The fertile valley, referred to as "unused", can wipe out indigenous people or traditional methods of farming. A narrative of the colonial environment can portray forests as empty resources ready for conquest. There is a poem about pastoral work that can be hidden behind the perfect image of a pastoral landscape. On the other hand, literature can reclaim forgotten ecological knowledge, depict a sense of place, and reveal the violence that lies beneath narratives of development.

Nature, Culture, and Environmental Responsibility

The concepts of nature and culture have been isolated and clearly differentiated in the Western thought. Nature is instinctive, wild, bodily, essential, non-human, culture is rational, civilised, linguistic, free, human. This opposition has been mentioned in the literature a number of times, but has been demonstrated to be unstable. Human societies are cultural and biological. Urban life itself depends upon water, soil, energy, climate, and food systems. Language is created with the metaphor of the body, landscape, animal and season. Agricultural, burning and grazing activity, settlement and ritual use could have affected natural landscapes for many centuries. There is no separation between nature and culture but nature and culture are interconnected processes. This knowledge has important ramifications for the interpretation of literature. Nature must not be made to reflect human feeling or be made to be a pure world, unmixed by human society. A river can be symbolic but at the same time it can be material. A forest can symbolically represent freedom, a forest can also be a place where human and nonhuman communities live and thrive. Beauty does not have to come at the cost of "controversy" in a landscape. Literature can contribute to environmental responsibility by making perceptible relationships that may not be adequately conveyed through scientific data alone. If there is data regarding extinction, pollution or climate change, then it is needed; if it does not exist, then a narrative would give the reader an idea of what things would look like in reality if it did. Literature can seem real or make things seem real, even if they are not. But literary empathy needs to go beyond sentimentality. Aesthetic appreciation alone does not necessarily produce ecological responsibility. The past history of environmental representation reveals that exploitation and beauty can go hand-in-hand. There are ways to show

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respect for the natural scenery and pollute rivers or to displace communities. The literature of the environment is best complemented by history, science, and ethics.

Conclusion

The relationship of literature and nature is not only multifaceted, but it has also developed in different ways in time and intellectually, and is deep. Nature is a place, a symbol, a feeling, a spirit, a rival, a political landscape and an ecosystem. It makes assumptions about what it means to be human, how humans are organized, how humans have developed economically and how humans are responsible for their actions in moral terms. Nature in romantic literature is a place of pleasure, recollection, imagination and regeneration of moral values, particularly in Wordsworth's poetry. Emerson and Thoreau continue this tradition and view nature as a means of transcendence and ways to obtain spiritual or philosophical revelations about the world. Literary Naturalism shows us environments that are untouched by human intention and can expose the fragility of bodies, and therefore challenge the idealized harmony. In modern environmental writing, the question is further complicated: now humans are monsters of nature, we are responsible to the communities from which we derive our pleasures. Moving from Romantic to ecological understanding does not eliminate previous understandings of nature. The spirit of wonder, feeling, memory and imagining continues to be vital to a sense of place today. It also requires the recognition of interdependence of materials, however. Nature is not just in the background to human experience – human experience is part of nature. In literature, the subject matter of nature study is not just a literary technique study. It shows the vision of the world of societies. While literature can replicate the cultural notions of domination, separation, and infinite exploitation, it can also subvert them with the depiction of the nonhuman world as active, valuable, and vulnerable. The representation of nature in literature grows more urgent in today's time of intensifying environmental crises. It reminds readers that there are not "non-space" landscapes, not "symbolic" animals, not "infinite" ecosystems. They are two actors in everyday circumstances of life. Lastly, the unflagging fascination of literature with nature calls on humanity to abandon the feeling of possession for responsibility, of mastery for attentiveness, and of indifference for a feeling of responsibility.

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