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Ecoconsciousness in the Works of Select American Writers

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Abstract

American authors have shown a special interest in ecology right from the times of Transcendentalism. The transcendentalists especially are of the opinion that Divinity is revealed through Nature and when people communicate with Nature it's a means of connecting with God. This idea was advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Frost, Kate Chopin and Sarah Orne Jewett. These authors are sensitive to their environment and demonstrate ecoconsciousness through their works, which paved way for a distinct class of writing.

Keywords: American, Transcendentalism, Nature, Environment, Ecoconsciousness, Ecocriticism, New England

Ecocriticism studies the association between literature and the environment. According to Cheryl Glotfelty, Ecocritics study how Nature is represented in poetry or the role of physical setting in the plot of a novel. They explore whether the values expressed in a literary work possess eco-consciousness. American authors have shown a special interest in ecology right from the times of Transcendentalism. The transcendentalists especially are of the opinion that Divinity is revealed through Nature and when people communicate with Nature it's means of connecting with God. This idea was advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson. He believed in freedom from worldliness. Emerson strongly believes that Nature is pure and serene that through observing the nuances of its functioning will bring human beings closer to the divine.

Emerson felt Nature helps find God. He does not view Nature as a means to lead a life far from worldliness. He rather believed that being a part of the world helps him to realize the flaws in his character. Emerson observes, "Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help it. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-suffice, and therefore self-relying soul" (30).

Thoreau's *Walden* is an account of the two years, two months, and two days which he spent living in his cabin at Walden Pond. After reading Emerson's *Self Reliance* he wanted to lead an independent life. He was inspired by Emerson's words "It is only as a man puts off from himself all external support and stands alone that I see him to be strong and to prevail" (32). *Walden* is the picture of the beautiful natural scenery of Concord. A large portion of his life is spent in observing and studying the birds, the animals, the flowers, the trees, and the progress of the seasons. Although there had been writers about nature before him, such as Gilbert White, it was Thoreau who created the Nature essay. Earlier Nature writers produced letters, episodes and journals reporting their discoveries but he was concerned with craftsmanship. He writes:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan like as to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion (48).

This was his experiment in solitude. Material unincumbrance gave him leisure, peace of mind and freedom.

In general, American writers employ Nature as a symbol to relate with the disposition of the characters in their works. Beautiful Nature seems to reveal the happy moments in a character's life. On the other hand, revolting Nature mimics tragic incidents happening in a person's life. When we walk down the memory lane of transcendentalists up to the times of postmodern literature, it is common to see the authors employing Nature as a chief motif of

their work. Nathaniel Hawthorne similar to Emerson shared some of the principles of the transcendentalists. In *The Scarlet Letter*, he recurrently compares Nature with the protagonists. In his works misery is associated with vile Nature and fortune with alluring Nature. He employs differentiation like light and dark, forest and village, moon and sun and repeatedly refers to roses and weeds. Rose is used as a symbol to refer to Pearl and this symbols is very effectively employed throughout the novel. Hawthorne writes:

...that little creature, whose innocent life had sprung, by the inscrutable decree of providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion... The beauty that became everyday more brilliant and the intelligence that threw its quivering sunshine over the tiny feature of this child! (*The Scarlet Letter* 62).

The character of Pearl is ideal in Hawthorne's view because she and Nature have become inseparable. Roger Chillingsworth stands for dried flowers and weeds all through the story. Hawthorne presents Chillingsworth as an evil character. It is in the darkness of the night in the forest that Hester and Dimmesdale meet. The witchcraft gatherings take place late at night and there's darkness when Chillingsworth is around. Pearl usually appears when it is cheerful and sunny. Confessions are made by the characters and forgiveness is asked for when the sun shines bright. Hawthorne's comparisons between light and dark correspond to the good and bad in Nature.

Among the noteworthy women writers of American Literature Kate Chopin is the foremost. When Freedom was a matter of concern, Chopin's symbols had a close relation to freedom. In line with *Self-Reliance* and *The Scarlet Letter*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* employs Nature to symbolize freedom. One of the major symbols in the story is the ocean. The ocean symbolizes self-awareness, escape and freedom. The ocean is where Edna relaxes and also feels the peace in her inner-self. Edna finds comfort and companionship in Nature. Kate Chopin delicately observes:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, and inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace (*The Awakening* 13).

The sea has a role to play in Edna's life and helps her to be content. Finally Edna attains liberation by walking into the sea and drowning herself. Kate Chopin's work reveals that women have characteristically, a greater understanding of Nature and its working, Women writers due to their allotted role of housekeeping, have a clearer perception of the relationship between Nature and human culture than men, who are basically hunters and farmers.

Frost gives importance to Nature in all of his works. He spent lots of time in New England where he witnessed lots of rural and pastoral scenes that he described in his works like 'Stopping by the Woods'. He highlights vividly the conflicts that occur within the natural world, like the struggles and the change of seasons, in the case of 'After Apple – picking' and the destructive side of Nature, as in 'Once by the Pacific'. Frost embodies the natural world stirring deep philosophical contemplation, religious commitment and social justice as in the case of Emerson. Nature is the 'subject' of her works and the foundation of her creative instincts. There is a strong and unavoidable sense of belonging in the works of Sarah Orne

Jewett with her birth place; Berwick, Maine. There is a sense of close association to the things which were part and parcel of her belongings. Her attitude towards all those things is worth observing in her works. There is a deep-rooted sense of illustration which goes simultaneously. She has presented a self-realizing attitude towards those things which desired to gain and loss. After going through one feels the zeal which she has presented through her literary works. There is a sense of awareness to things and sensibilities.

Jewett had an innate love of Nature. *A Country Doctor* is a testimony of her experiences with the flora and fauna of New England. "First cousin to the caterpillar if they called me to come in," she describes herself, and "own sister to a giddy-minded bobolink when I ran across the fields as I used to do very often" (20). There is, for example, a paragraph in "A Dunnet Shepherdess" in which she shows herself a good fisherman. A girl much out of doors had a better chance than one confined at home to make democratic acquaintances. Jewett's works are always set against backgrounds of woods and ocean and eternal struggle. It is in these scenes that Jewett shows her gift of presenting characters in mild action. The situations are simple, not at all striking in opportunities or dramatic interest.

These American writers exhibit love and concern for their environment. The works analysed reveal that Nature is an inevitable component of human life with moral and social implications. The ecoconsciousness expressed by the American Romantics and Transcendentalists created a ripple effect and still continues to inspire writers to delve deep into the realm of Nature writing.

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