

'The Mighty World of the Eye and the Ear': Nature in Gothic and Romantic Literature

Paper Submission: 12/10/2020, Date of Acceptance: 26/10/2020, Date of Publication: 27/10/2020



Rajiv Kumar
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
C.R.A. College
Sonipat, Haryana, India

Abstract

In the 19th century, nature became a central motif in literature. The complex aspects of nature fascinated and attracted the writers of this age and they tried to depict them in their works. They rejected conventional archetype and conceived nature in their own way, unique way. The power of nature offered an unpredictable yet beautiful chaos which inspired new forms of description in literature. It also provided them with many resources to create stories and convey feelings in a different way from their predecessors i.e. the writers of the Augustan age. Every writer within the period decided how to use the creative elements that nature provided. In *Songs of Innocence*, William Blake links children and nature. Wordsworth elevates nature to the supreme knowledge, like a deity, which can give infinite wisdom to anyone who looks for it. Coleridge prefers to rely on the power of dreams to approach to natural settings. Concerning the Gothic novel, nature provided novelists with the elements that they needed to create landscapes in which they set their stories. These settings in Gothic fiction contribute to evoke the characteristic feeling of horror by presenting gloomy, remote landscapes such as ruins of an old castle or something terrifying and obscure. Mary Shelley, in her Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, shows that nature is at once benevolent and diabolic, striking in its beauty and shattering in its brutality.

Keywords: Romantic, nature, motif, conventional, gothic, benevolent, diabolic.

Introduction

The close connection between man and nature found authentic expression not only in literature, but also in all types of artistic representations: painting, music etc. Actually, nature inspires intellectual activity and emotions and feelings get a symbolic significance through nature's objects. Nature is present around us in varied aspects and shapes. All human thinkers, philosophers and writers have struggled over centuries, either to explain these aspects or depict them. Nature has appeared in literary works from very different periods. In the 19th century, nature became a central motif in literature. The complex aspects of nature fascinated and attracted these writers, who tried to depict them in their works. They rejected conventional archetype and conceived nature in their own way, unique way. In other words, the Romantic artists saw a compelling mystery in nature which challenged the established conventions of the 18th-century literature. The power of nature offered an unpredictable yet beautiful chaos which inspired new forms of description in literature and also provided them with many resources to create stories and convey feelings in a unique way that had not been done before the arrival of romantics. Every writer within the period decided how to use the creative elements that nature provided.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to show that nature has always attracted the literary writers and they have tried to depict it in different ways. This paper is also an attempt to highlight that nature is life-giving and nurturing to humans, but she is under threat in the modern world of scientific progress. When men like Victor Frankenstein try to violate the laws of nature and seize its power for themselves, nature becomes an instrument of swift and pitiless revenge. Marry Shelly offers an innovative view of what happens when someone dares to defy nature and its laws. Nature is both creator

and destroyer and these two aspects have made the literary writers to present a holistic view of nature.

Relevant Literature

Nature has always been an essential matter of discussion for literary writers. It has been a source of inspiration for the poets, dramatists and the novelists. A critical survey of literature will help us to understand the importance of Nature in English Literature. In a 14th century work *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer presents an ideal picture of nature when he shows that 'April' is the month of revival and regeneration. However, the same month is termed as the "cruellest" month by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. (1922) These two works of literature indicate a significant change in society and the way of looking at nature. Moving on to William Shakespeare, we notice that his treatment of nature is superb as he transports us on the wings of imagination to the forests of Arden where one finds everything congenial and beautiful. But he also presents the cruel aspect of nature in *King Lear* (1606) when Lear is seen facing a storm and rough weather. Then Milton's description of the Garden of Eden in *Paradise Lost* (1667) remains one of the most beautiful dreams of men who have been in love with nature.

Many writers depicted nature in their works before the 19th century, but it found a central place with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. In Wordsworth, we find an original and full-fledged philosophy of nature in the way he puts stress on the moral influence of nature. W. Hale who was deeply immersed in Wordsworth proclaimed: "When I first read Wordsworth I saw God in nature." (1915:94) Wordsworth found beauty in nature but the violent aspects of nature like thundering clouds, the torrential rain, and the powerful storms are some of the elements of nature which made Tennyson to term nature as "red in tooth and claw" (15) in section LVI of the poem *In Memoriam*. In fact, nature is powerful enough to create or destroy human life and the scholars have highlighted both the aspects of nature in their works. In *The Romantic Imagination* (2000), C.M. Bowra also notices that nature becomes violent if we defy the natural laws as Mariner does by killing an innocent bird in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. When we try to analyze novels, we notice that Hardy, Jane Austen, Meredith, Brontes and many other writers continue to display remarkable skill in the description of nature. In Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for instance, Cathy's love of nature, especially of nature in motion must have been intense. However, Hardy finds nature sinister and vile and instead of remaining a kind goddess, she is conceived as blind and unconscious. Mary Shelley also presented nature as something dangerous if human beings defy the laws of nature.

Nature in the Works of Romantic Poets

The critics observed that Romanticism mainly focuses on the power of imagination to create their works. It is well known that Romantic artists had a keen interest in faraway or exotic places. C.M. Bowra says, "If we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it

is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it." (2000:1) The power of imagination was the real force that helped the writers of the Romantic period to create stories and settings that surpassed reality. Furthermore, there are many themes or issues that the Romantics included in their works, for instance, in the *Songs of Innocence* Blake deals with the innocence of children, Wordsworth puts emphasis on the rustic and simple life, and the world of supernaturalism in Coleridge's poems is of central importance. However, nature is one central theme common to all these poets of the Romantic era. In actual sense, nature is "the muse of their creations". In simple words, the man was seen as a part of the greater whole - which was nature. His existence was taken as the part of natural world, and that is the reason why Romantics give primary importance to nature's beauty and power.

Wordsworth's the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* is the reliable source to understand why the Romantics gave so much importance to Nature. The Preface is taken as a manifesto which is very much in the spirit of the age. The Romantics adopted the ways of writing which tried to capture the ebb and flow of individual experience in the form and language of a common man. An extract from the revised version of the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1802 makes the point clear:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from everyday life, and to relate and describe them, throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature." (qtd. by Carter: 201)

Here, Wordsworth makes his objective clear that this collection of poems is a selection of the real language of men. Everyday speech was accompanied by a description of incidents and situations from ordinary life. However, the most notable point that Wordsworth made in this Preface was about nature and its primary importance in changing the mind of an individual. He proposed that a corrupted person who wanted to modify themselves had to go back to nature. He found a close connection between man and nature. Hence, the Romantic writers moved towards nature to find the subjects for their works. William Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge are the prominent poets of the period who presented nature in their poems in a new and authentic way.

William Blake, being a Romantic poet, presents the concept of 'Nature' in many of his works. In the collection of his poems *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience*, Blake focuses on the innocence of childhood and the life of mature age that corrupts and destroys it. This approach towards life is presented with the help of the world of nature. For instance, in *Echoing Green*, from *Songs of Innocence*, he

E: ISSN No. 2349-9443

Asian Resonance

compares human life with the course of a day. The old folk sit on rustic seats while the happy children are busy in playing different games. The structure of the poem shows that the dawn represents the beginning of life, and the sunset represents the end of life :

“The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies;
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring” (1-4)
“The Sun does descend,
And our sports have an end.” (22-23)

Blake uses a conventional symbol of Spring to present the joys of early childhood. The ringing bells, the sunny sky and the song of the skylark together welcome the arrival of Spring. The poem offers a contrast between youth and old age. The happiness of children makes the old folk to recall their childhood days when they used to enjoy in the same way:

“Such, such were the joys
When we all, girls and boys,
In our youth-time were seen
On the Echoing Green.” (17-20)

The rising of the sun represents the warmth of life, whereas the evening or dark stands for the end of life. At the time of sunset, the children stop playing on the “On the darkening green”(30) and proceed back to their home. The change from “echoing” to “darkening” in the refrain is noteworthy. This shift in words naturally depicts the journey of life by using the symbols and images from nature. Nurse’s Song from Songs of Experience also shows the contrast between the innocence of children and painful feelings of the older generation. The pathetic condition of the nurse is evident in the following lines:

“When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisperings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.”(1-4)

The nurse looks back to her youth and is reminded of the hopes and desires of those days. She feels envious and jealous of the young children who have a bright future while her time of aspirations and hopefulness is gone. As night approaches, their nurse asks the children to leave off play and go home. So, both the poems have been structured in a similar fashion to present the two aspects of human life by establishing a close contact between human life and the world of nature. William Blake portrays children as part of nature, together with other animals such as birds, trees, rivers and sheep. He makes the use of doubles both in presenting nature and writing his poems. Nature in Songs of Innocence, is something joyful, idyllic, and innocent, while in Songs of Experience it appears to be something mysterious and even dangerous.

The next celebrated poet of the Romantic period is William Wordsworth. He is a poet of nature and Wordsworth stands supreme among the poets of his age. He is ‘a worshipper of Nature’, nature’s devotee or high priest. There are various aspects of Wordsworth’s treatment of nature, and it is vital to understand them. But, before that, it would be interesting to know how his attitude towards nature

changed. When he was a boy, Wordsworth felt an animal pleasure in nature. In this stage of life, he found nothing spiritual in the objects of nature. At this stage, he enjoyed nature just as a healthy boy who would enjoy the sight of beautiful fields. Like a deer he bounded over the mountains. He cared for the sensuous beauty of nature. In the second stage, nature became a life-giving force for the poet. The sounding cataract (waterfall) attracted his body and soul and haunted him like a passion. Nature was his beloved at this stage and Wordsworth had not attached any philosophy to nature in the second stage. He enjoyed and cared only for the external beauty of nature, which he saw with his eyes. In the third stage, the poet’s vision moved from outward beauty to the internal or the hidden meaning of nature as is evident in Tintern Abbey:

“For I have learnt
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity.”(90-93)

Now nature reminded him of the problems of common man. In the flowing water of the brook, he could locate and hear the sad music of humanity. He still appreciated the external beauty but now he had learnt to see it in a new way. He believed that there is a spiritual connection between man and nature. In Tintern Abbey, he says that nature is:

“The Anchor of my thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all moral being.”(110-113)

The last stage indicates his complete faith in nature. He realised that there is a divine spirit persuading all objects of nature. This was pantheism, the identification of God with nature. In Wordsworth’s conception, man is not to be seen as a different entity but as a part of the very life of nature. Wordsworth believed in nature’s healing power and also took it as a source and storehouse of joy.

Coleridge’s treatment of nature is different from Wordsworth in the sense that Wordsworth’s poetry deals with natural, while Coleridge’s deals with the supernatural. The treatment of supernatural elements makes him a distinguished figure among Romantic poets. The Ancient Mariner and Kubla Khan are the poems of pure supernaturalism. He takes us from known to the unknown, from the familiar to the impossible. The supernatural elements do not appear abruptly in the poem. It is challenging to locate where the natural ends and the supernatural begins. In The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, he uses the lines which seem to be friendly, but they take us to an enchanted spellbound world:

“The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever come burst
Into that silent sea.”(103-106)

There is perhaps nothing strange in the silence of the sea, but suddenly we are taken to the world of magical surprise. The wind stops blowing, and the sky becomes hot like copper. The ship remains stuck at one place for a long time. It remains as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean. Thus the two worlds become one. In the above lines,

Coleridge gives a vivid description of the favourable gentle wind, but the lines that follow them give a horrible picture, and we accept this description without query. In this connection, C.M. Bowra says, "Once we have entered this imaginary world, we do not feel that it is beyond our comprehension, but respond to it as we would to actual life." (2000:59) Towards the end of the poem, natural, supernatural, and human beings become inseparable. The Mariner gives a piece of advice to the wedding guest:

"He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all." (614-17)

Here, we find the importance of nature because all creatures around us deserve to live and to be loved. The killing the Albatross cursed the Mariner and blessing the sea creatures absolved him of his crime against nature. Thus human mind and nature become one by love and compassion.

Coleridge's description of the physical aspect of nature has its own beauty and a tremendous sensuous appeal.

Nature in the Gothic Novel Frankenstein

The Gothic writers gave importance to nature in the settings of their novels. These settings in Gothic fiction contribute to evoke the characteristic feeling of horror by presenting gloomy, remote landscapes such as ruins of old castles or mansions. These ruined settings offer a vision of Nature as something terrifying and obscure. As Burke argues, "dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate" (1999:68). In other words, by presenting the mysterious aspects of Nature in their settings, together with other elements, Gothic novelists were able to create stories which inspired a sense of fear to the unknown. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an example of a gothic novel in which the treatment nature finds a new dimension. In *Frankenstein*, we find that Victor wants to conquer death with the use of science, defying the natural laws of life. This constitutes a sin against nature that leads to the creation of the Frankenstein's creature, a figure that reminds the reader that the laws of nature should not be violated. In other words, this creature is a reminder of what happens when men try to surpass the boundaries between their humanity and the superiority of nature. However, he realises that no matter how much he researches, nature will never be fully understood by men:

"The untaught peasant beheld the elements around him and was acquainted with their practical uses. The most learned philosopher knew little more. He had partially unveiled the face of Nature, but her immortal lineaments were still a wonder and a mystery. He might dissect, anatomize, and give names; but, not to speak of a final cause, causes in their secondary and tertiary grades were utterly unknown to him." (Shelley: 30)

Frankenstein's creature feels alone in the absence of a companion and turns to nature for peace and comfort. Since the beauty of nature is like a traitor

that does not improve the creature's situation, he tries to look for the answer to his internal doubts in the devastated and dark parts of Nature: "The Desert Mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge" (88). There is, thus, a change in which nature is perceived: its beauty cannot ease the creature's pain, so he finds shelter in its obscure facet. The crucial moment when every trace of humanity is vanished from the creature is marked by his encounter with William, the little boy, who represents the innocence of childhood. He has no preconceived prejudices:

"Suddenly, as I gazed on him, an idea seized me that this little creature was unprejudiced and had lived too short a time to have imbibed horror of deformity" (129). He believes that he would be able to educate him as his friend so he will not be alone. However, as soon as the child sees his deformity, he screams: "Let me go ... monster! Ugly wretch!" (Ibid)

The creature realises that he will not be able to inspire love, so the only option left is to inspire fear as a monster: "I will reveal my injuries; if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear, and chiefly towards you my arch-enemy, because my creator, do I swear inextinguishable hatred. Have a care; I will work at your destruction, nor finish until I desolate your heart, so that you shall curse the hour of your birth." (133)

Therefore, it can be noted that when children's innocence and nature's beauty fail to console him, the creature turns into an evil monster. The role of nature as a guardian of souls that Wordsworth described is not seen in this novel, maybe due to the fact that this creature was born from the violations of natural laws. Yet still, the creature is able to find relief in the sublime aspects of nature. There is a clear evolution in his approach to nature that goes from the beauty to the sublime, the first one unable to give an answer to his existence, the second one offering a refuge for his disastrous condition.

Conclusion

Nature, thus, occupied a central position in the works of the 19th century writers who departed from the 18th century creative writers both in matter and manner of writing. The matter was taken from the common life or it emerged from the hearts of the poets of the Romantic poets. In contrast to the Neo-classical poets, they allowed their feelings and emotions to overflow and also relished the world of imagination. Whereas the classical temperament trusted intellect, reason and the head, the Romantic approach preferred intuition, feelings and the heart. In the case of manner the Romantics bade farewell to artificial style and moved towards the language of common man. William Blake celebrated the innocence of childhood in close connection with nature and beautifully presented a contrast between the joys of childhood and the painful experiences of the old age. His *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience* record the wonderful description of human life in relation to the world of nature. Wordsworth believed that there is a divine spirit persuading all objects of nature. This was pantheism, the identification of God with nature. He had caught the vision of life in nature and believed that everyone could attain this vision by establishing a deep

connection with natural objects. Wordsworth explored everyday subjects and gave them Romantic or supernatural colouring, on the other hand, Coleridge gave the supernatural a feeling of everyday reality but both found nature to be supreme and powerful. Mary Shelley, in her Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, vividly presents that nature is at once benevolent and diabolic, striking in its beauty and shattering in its brutality. The world of nature is life-giving and nurturing to humans, but she is under threat in the modern world of scientific progress. The human beings have the responsibility to preserve nature and follow its natural rule. Any effort to defy the power of nature may result in death and destruction as it happens in the case of Victor Frankenstein. The Romantic writers and the Gothic novelists looked at nature beyond the world of the eye and the ear.

References

1. *Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, New York: Pinguin Books, 1999. Print.*
2. *Bowra, C.M. The Romantic Imagination, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.*
3. *Blake, William. Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Ed. Andrew Lincoln. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. Print.*
4. *Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, New York: Dover Publications, 2015. Print.*
5. *Carter, Ronald and McRae, John. The Routledge History of Literature in English, India. Saurabh Printers Pvt. Limited, 2008. Print.*
6. *Marsh, Nicholas. Mary Shelly: Frankenstein, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Print.*
7. *Shelley, Mary. Frankenstein, Noida: Maple Press Private Limited, 2018. Print.*
8. *Wordsworth, William. Selected Poems. Ed. Stephen Gill, London: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.*
9. *White, Hale W. Last Pages From a Journal, London: Oxford University Press, 1915. Print.*

Asian Resonance