

## Nature in English Poetry

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### Abstract

A true poet possesses the capacity to see and feel the truth, through his comparatively keener sensibilities. A poet is a seer and his method is insight, intuition, and a vision, that capacitates him to see deeper into the truths of nature and life than average run of people. From the old age to the present age there is an unbroken tradition of nature poetry in English literature. Poets like Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Rossetti and Arnold have enriched English poetry with their nature poems.

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All phases of human thought are aspects of man's varying relationship to the outer world. A poet is no exception. Green hills, running brooks, fields and flowers, melodies of larks and nightingales- such things may be sentimental, but when treated as objects, the poets cannot stand aloof. He may be drawn to these objects and regard the world about consciously. He may live unconsciously without being aware of the division between self and the environment under a Southern Sun, he will be inclined to think of the world as a pleasant and friendly place. On the other hand, in the fearful storms of the North, nature will appear to the poet as a hostile force, to be fought and subdued. The reactions may be individual and isolated, but they seriously affect the poet's sensibility and temperament.

Eversince its earliest days, English poetry illustrates the presence of nature as commanding and pervasive. The earliest motivations and inspirations came from the day to day life of The Anglo-Saxons. The life of the Germanic forefathers were exposed and bare. They knew the icy cold wind, frozen sea-water and furious storm. Hence, the earliest lyrics are impregnated with the gloomy antagonism towards Nature common to all forms of original Northern sensibility. In the words of George Sampson, "Our earliest literature has much to do with life and journey that were a constant struggle against a grim and pitiless element." They faced the ocean which was grey and tumultuous beating the dismal shores. The land was as much cruel as the sea. The mood of loneliness of the wandering poets was deepened by the scream of the sea-birds and moaning of the winds. They scattered the rude, unyielding surface of the earth.

By the time English poetry became fully formed and recognizable, man's attitudes to nature had become concise and organised. Chaucer in his famous opening of 'The Canterbury Tales' puts

it, "When that April with his showers sote/The draught of March pierced to the root." Chaucer's month of April is a symbolic Spring. During the Renaissance period, the movement of ideas gathers such force that by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was little of primitive harshness left in English thought and sensibility. It can be said that by this time nature has been tempt and the sensibilities had been educated. A new era of enlightenment brought along a vast change in the way nature was treated by the poets like Spencer and Shakespeare.

With the growth of human sensibility, the human mind was sufficiently protected for the growth of an artificial culture. That culture is the culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The peculiar virtues of the 18<sup>th</sup> century from the points of view of art and literature were due not so much to man's triumph over nature as to the skilful way in which he ignored them. The 17<sup>th</sup> century had closed with Dryden, on what we may call a note of perfect accord between man and nature. There was a vast spectacle of great beauty as a background. For the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century poets tending towards Romanticism, nature was adopted as a refuge from the corrupt influences of town. In Dryden, Pope, nature is never understood imaginatively, but with wit. Dryden's comment is worth mentioning: "It is a terrible business for poetry when it is not wholly employed on nature."

A reaction naturally arose in the poets against the artificial and conventional poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A host of young poets turned way to the woods and pastures lands. It was James Thomson who first struck the note of this spontaneous attachment. He conceived nature as a vast canvas and God as a landscape painter. Cowper was more significant in this subjective contemplation of nature. Wordsworth must have been deeply influenced by Cowper's philosophical bent of mind, to see a soul in all things and the soul is God. Burns lived close to the earth and like Crabbe and Clare brought his own lived experience of the natural world to bear on their own writing. They were peasant poets of the land and careful realist in the rendering of nature. They were less passionate in the celebrating of nature.

The Romantic poets with the exception of Blake have always been celebrants of nature. For all of them there was a joy to be found in the natural world which was not present in manmade institutions or practices. Byron gave it the simplest expression in 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage':

"I live not in myself, but I become  
Portion of that around me; and to me  
High mountains are a feeling."

Romantics were characterized by accurate, abundant and loving attention to the external world. Its opulent variety in flowers, trees, mountain and springs had a deep impress on the mind of the poets in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. When they treated nature they bore no superficial appreciation for it, but endowed in with true feeling and sensibility. The essential unity between man and nature began to occupy the foreground of their poetry.

From Thomson, Wordsworth derived the tradition of looking upon nature as the handy work of God, the revelation of his power or benevolence on earth. As the Lake District was to

Wordsworth, the general scenery of Buckinghamshire was to Cowper. Wordsworth was in the habit of directly mentioning the place names or the names of mountains and lakes. To all the romantics, nature was no longer the external world or a source of pleasure; it was a moral force, a source of inspiration, a support in times of trouble. Therefore the actual landscapes in Wordsworth's poetry had always interacted or had a give and take relationship with the poet's mind.

In romantic poetry on nature poets keen pleasure add scene, hearing and feeling its freshness are quite palpable. The contrast between the open country life and the life in cities and towns recur in many of the poems. In the smoky towns and cities life began to wear out and get exhausted. All of them-Blake, Coleridge or Byron hungered for open air, sky, shining stars, ancient mountains, clouds. Wordsworth and Blake shared the same belief that the nature can afford a more beneficial education than traditional academic courses. In a famous small poem 'The Tables Turned' Wordsworth invited the readers to lay aside books and get exposed in vast outer nature- to run into it, to roll into it, to touch, to play with it or to dance upon it. Hence he uttered: "Let nature be your teacher". When Shelley was filled with radical thoughts for a massive change in society and its institutions, he found a symbolic agent in the 'West Wind'. He surrendered his own weakness before the mighty storm and invoked it with sincere passion to carry the prophetic hope for the diseased and suffering humanity. Coleridge always tried to achieve a fruitful harmony between the creative process of human mind and the natural world.

Wordsworth was a nature mystic; in contact with nature Wordsworth felt sublimation. It transported to him into mood of worship. Nature possesses a power and a radiance which is quite beyond normal encounters of mind with the external world. In the moments of heightened poetic inspiration, the poet found in nature a faith which was a spiritual alternative for divine belief. It is this power which is not only mysterious and wonderful, but also inspires the poetic creation.

The Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti, Morris and others paint nature with its picturesque beauty, minute details and grandeur. Swinburne shows the same love for dawn and sunset, chattering of birds, though sometimes a touch of morbidity creeps in as in "The Garden of Proserpine". Tennyson, in 'In Memoriam' has given us the detailed picture of winter snow and later, the spring and other changes. Wordsworth's pantheism we find there in such lines as:

"Thy voice is on the rolling air;  
I hear thee where the waters run;  
Thou standest in the rising sun;  
And in the setting thou art fair."

In his "Lotos-eaters" the atmosphere is drowsy, the slow moon climbs and the deep moans in many voices in "Ulysses", the long fields of barley and rye whitening willows, quivering aspens, lilies and colourful flowers all around the grey castle of the Lady of Shalott show the poet's power of observation and skill of presenting the details. In Arnold's "Scholar Gypsy", the main purpose is to

criticise the present time (Victorian Age) but the poet takes the opportunity to show his love for the natural scenery of Oxford in various seasons.

In Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush", the bird thrush sings joyously in the midst of wintery landscape which looks like the country's corpse outleant. His such poems as "Afterwards" show the same love for nature, the love for the leaves like new-spun silk, the dew -fall hawk, in the innocent creatures that the Romantic poets have ever loved. The love for the English countryside has inspired the music of poetry of Edward Thomas. The brightness of sun, wind and rain, trees and flowers of England are all reflected in his poems. Even the mystic obscurity does not hide Yeats's love for nature. Wattle cottage, bean roads, beehives, glimmering midnight and linnet wings play on his heart strings a strange and seductive music. We find him running away from far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife to Lady Gregory's house. In "Coole Poems" he becomes entranced by the thundering sound of the wings of a mounting swan

The twentieth century, the age of Interrogation, has its unfulfilled hankerings, pessimism, a sense of wasteland; poet still find poppies blooming, yellow pollen grains of buttercup stick to the unwilling boots of soldiers joining the Spring Offensive, the May breeze blows through the long swirling grass and the soldiers are soothed by the murmur of wasp and midget in Wilfred Owen's poems. Even in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" "nature peeps here and there though rather hesitatingly. It cannot however be denied that love of beauty and nature is today out of fashion. It is supposed to be incongruous with stern reality. If the world lives through the artificiality, nature will again get back her own inspiration for mankind.

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