

## METHOD IN THE WILDERNESS: NATURE AS MOTIF IN BRITISH POETRY THROUGH THE AGES

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### ABSTRACT:

Nature poetry could be defined as any poetry that considers nature as subject matter and inspiration. Over the years, we have seen nature poetry coming up as a genre at regular intervals. A closer look will tell us that this tendency is closely linked to the socio-political happenings of that milieu and that very often poets take recourse to nature in moments of crisis. The fact that nature has a healing effect on the soul was a well-known fact, even though modern medical terms like eco-therapy were unheard of. This paper tries to relate certain traumatic events from British history to the nature poetry that evolved in association with these events.

**Keywords:** Nature, healing, nature mysticism.

### INTRODUCTION:

Any poetry that "considers nature as subject matter and inspiration" could be termed 'nature poetry'. Nature poetry engages with and describes the natural world (Hirsch). If we look deeply into the English poetic tradition, we would notice that nature was always written about by poets. From the fifteenth century BCE "Poem of Aqhat" and Hesoid's "Works and Days" (eighth century BCE) to eco-feminist poems by writers like Susan Griffin, whose collection of poems *Black Nature* (2010), nature is a dominant theme.

Nature poetry has used nature in different ways- as a backdrop to human actions, as a means to enhance human drama by way of

suggestive imagery, to add 'meaning' to the poet's vision etc. Images of nature definitely bring peace and tranquility to our minds and it would be worthwhile to study the periods in English history that produced schools of nature poetry. One of the features common to all these periods is that these were periods of major political upheavals or wars. Added to this misery, most of the poets who treated nature as one of the major themes in their poetry had gone through some kind of spiritual crisis as well. Was nature resorted to as a means to alleviate traumatic situations? A study of nature poetry from such an angle proves that over the ages, consciously or unconsciously, writers especially poets have taken recourse to nature in moments of crisis.

Nature was treated as a significant theme in mid seventeenth century British poetry. The seventeenth century was, indeed, one of the most turbulent periods in British history and what followed in the latter half of the century affected the entire kingdom.

In 1642, King Charles left London fearing for his own safety and the civil war ensued. For the next four years, the conflict between the Roundheads and Cavaliers continued and around 1, 00,000 soldiers perished in the battlefields. In 1649, The King was executed and what followed was the Puritan regime and restrictions were imposed on the citizens. To the ordinary citizens who were so used to playhouses and entertainments, the puritanical impositions were traumatic. Games, colourful dresses, working on Sundays, Christmas celebrations were all banned (Trueman). In the poetry produced during this period, especially

the period after 1642, we can perceive an attempt by writers to circumvent the traumatic political events of the period. There is a return to rural landscape, to gardens and also flora and fauna of the countryside. This might be seen as an unconscious attempt by the writers to seek solace in the lap of nature.

Henry Vaughan, who was a well-known poet associated with the metaphysical school of poetry, had been through a period of crisis. As a staunch supporter of King Charles, he watched with dismay the fall of the Royalist forces and his brother was also thrown out of his church for his Royalist leanings. The influence of fellow Metaphysical poet, George Herbert, is discernible in Vaughan's attempts to re-define himself. Vaughan became a mystical poet and his version of nature worship is identified as Christian Nature mysticism. This does not imply a lesser love for the Infinite One, rather, God is perceived significantly in nature and natural objects.

One of his collections, *Silex Scintillan* was entered in the Stationer's Register on March 28, 1650 and in many of the poems we find the poet reconstructing the moment of spiritual illumination. In 'Regeneration', he writes,

Yet it was frost within  
And surly winds  
Blasted my infant buds, and sinne  
Like clouds eclips'd my mind" (5-8)

The illumination of his spiritual self is explained in terms of Nature and its images.

In *Olor Iscanus*, themes of humility and stoicism pervade. The poet's attempts to escape the chaos of contemporary life is well established in the poems of this collection. In "To my Worthy Friend, Master T. Lowes", he asks his 'worthy friend' to turn to nature for comfort and peace,

Let us meet then! And while this world  
In wild Excentrick snow is hurld,  
Keep wee like nature, the same

Key, and walk in our forefathers way.(6-9)

The mysticism in Vaughan's poetry is fully expressed in the lines from 'Rules and Lessons',

Walk with thy fellow creatures: note the hush

And whispers amongst them. There's not a spring

Or Leafe but hath his Morning-Hymn,  
And oak doth know I AM; canst thou not sing? (13-16)

Many of Vaughan's poems express a sense of loss experienced in reaching adulthood. To him, the civil war and its outcome was a major setback, something that altered the political and religious landscape of Britain. Many poems written during this period were ones that supported the Anglican Church in a covert way. At the height of Puritanism, Anglican worship was forbidden and *The Book of Common Prayer* was declared illegal. During these difficult times, it is certain that Vaughan turned towards nature as one who pursues his God.

Robert Herrick was considered to be a metaphysical poet who was largely neglected or underestimated by critics. Like Vaughan, Herrick too was a Royalist and he was a traditional Anglican in faith. For holding on to his Anglican convictions, along with 142 Devonshire clergymen, Herrick too was expelled from his parish. Herrick expressed his frustration at being expelled in the poem titled, "To Dean-bourn, A Rude River in Devon, by Which Sometimes he Lived":

Dean-bourn, farewell. I never look to see  
Deanne, or thy warty incivility,  
Thy rockie bottome, that doth teare thy streams,

And make them frantick, ev'n to all extremes.(1-4)

And speaking of his opponents, he does not reduce the bitterness in his voice,

A people currish; churlish as the seas;  
And rude (almost) as rudest salvages.  
(11-12)

That Herrick tried to give vent to his piled-up emotions through his poetry is amply evident. His interest in nature too need not be seen as evidence of his naivety. In ‘The Argument of his Book’, Herrick shows in microcosmic progression the themes that were of interest to him:

I sing of brooks, of blossomes, birds and  
Bowers:

Of April, May, of June, and July-flowers.  
(1-2)

Many of Herrick’s poems bear testimony to man’s close kinship with nature.

Sick is Anthea, sickly is the Spring,  
The Primrose sick, and sickly everything  
The while my dear Anthea do’s but droop,  
The Tulips, Lillies, Daffodils do stoop;  
But when again she has got her healthfull houre,  
Each bending then, will rise a proper flower (1-6)

Peter V. Marinelli accuses Herrick and some of his contemporaries of neglecting “great issues” by giving in to pastoral instincts:

Drayton and Herrick, with their free range of fancy and their general ignoring of the great issues to which pastoral gives rise in its most ambitious moments, are saved from prettiness by their irony and wit, and yet we sense that an entire world of human concerns is missing from their poems, for which the substitution of great lyric beauty is only a moderate recompense. (51-52)

But this might not be the case. It could be that the “great issues” perplexed his mind so much that he sought a deeper solace in the contemplation of nature. In the Wordsworthian sense, this might have helped him to reconcile to the political and religious issues of his time.

The Crisis in Andrew Marvell’s life was of more complex kind. Initially a supporter of the King, he shifted his sympathies to the

Parliamentarians and upon the Restoration of monarchy, he escaped harsh punishments only because of the intervention of none other than the great poet, John Milton.

The Puritan restrictions imposed on the citizens were definitely not received well by Anglicans like Marvell. His poem ‘The Garden’ is believed to contain the poet’s covert attack on many institutions he dared not criticize. The poem begins with a reflection upon the uselessness and inferiority of one’s preoccupation with politics and war and a foil is offered through the picturisation of a private garden. Marvell presents the garden as a place to retreat to from the chaotic world. The materialism of his time is criticized in very harsh terms in the lines,

How vainly men themselves amaze  
To win the palm, the oak, or bays,  
And their incessant labours see  
Crowned from single herb or tree (1-4)

The garden to most puritans was unethical as the activity of gardening was seen as an attempt to interfere with God’s designs. “The Mower against Gardens” is a complaint of a mower against the idea of gardening; to the gardener it is a perverted and unnecessary tampering. He disapproves of the luxuriant garden by stating,

‘tis all enforced: the fountain and the grot  
While the sweet fields do lye forgot (31-2)

The puritan suspicion of everything that man tampers with is clear in these lines and Marvell proves to be rebellious through his portrayal of almost mundane gardens. The profusion of nature images in his poetry could possess subversive potential. The note of sadness and disillusionment with the state of affairs is evident in the poems of all the three writers from the mid seventeenth century discussed above.

When we enter the Romantic period, we realize that we would be dealing with more

complexities. It was during this period that nature became almost synonymous with poetry. The late eighteenth century was an extremely difficult period for Britain. The American war of Independence polarized Britain into two groups- there was a group that demanded a pacifist approach and the other group that believed that any rebellion against a monarch was sinful. Most of the Britons believed that the country was in a state of "irreversible decline" (britannica.com). Conflicts with France also continued unabated. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 was welcomed by many British citizens as they believed this would weaken France. Following debates on universal manhood suffrage, many Englishmen affirmed their faith in the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

According to Albert Hancock, in his book *The French Revolution and the English Poets: A Study in historical Criticism*

The French revolution came, bringing with it the promise of a brighter day, the promise of regenerated man and regenerated earth. It was hailed with joy and acclamation of the oppressed, by the ardent lovers of humanity, by the poets, whose task is to voice the human spirit. (49)

The enthusiasm of the Romantic poets is discernible in some of the famous lines of the period,

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven...

('Bliss' 4-5)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's response was no less enthusiastic:

Liberty the soul of life, shall reign  
Shall throb in every pulse, shall flow

through every vein ('Bastile' 29-30)

Stopford A. Brook comments thus on Coleridge's poetic abilities,

Almost all his best poetic work is coincident with the revolution; afterwards everything is incomplete. The weakness of will

was doubled by disease, and trebled by opium, and his poetic life, even his philosophic work, was a splendid failure. (6)

Coleridge's approach to nature was quite different from that of Wordsworth's. To the latter, Nature was all- nurse, guide, guardian and friend. And as he expresses it in 'Tintern Abbey', nature was something he would turn to in order to escape the fever and fret of the world. Z.L Wang speaks thus about Wordsworth's connection with nature,

For the poet himself, the contact with nature not only makes him recover from the wounds of the world, it keeps him pure and quiet, guides him to see the inner side of life, and makes him a kinder and more compassionate person. (79).

In poems like 'The Tables Turned', the poet's total disdain for urbanization and industrialization is clear. The words associated with culture are not positive, "toil and trouble" (4), "endless strife" (9) and "murder" (28). In 'Tintern Abbey', he writes,

...the fretful stir

Unprofitable, and the fever of the world  
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart

(54-6)

In Wordsworth's opinion, the only medicine and food for souls in this mad world would be a pure communion with nature. 'Tintern Abbey' exudes the philosophy for which Wordsworth lived, Pantheism. In his traumatic moments, images of Wye would bring solace to his soul,

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart

(25-28)

He even writes about entering "into my purer mind/ with tranquil restoration (29-30).

Wordsworth, the ultimate Pantheist takes one step further and suggests that the

ennobling effects of nature on man is proven without doubt:

Such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered acts  
Of kindness and of love (31-5)

To Wordsworth, nature was not an alien force, rather an entity that was complementary to man. When his poetic faculties failed him, it was to nature that Wordsworth turned for inspiration. In his 'Ode to Immortality', the poet bemoans his loss of poetic faculties  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?

Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (21-2)

The poem is about the 'coming back of the poet' - about the loss of poetic vision and the gradual recovery he makes. Here, too, nature functions as a guardian and friend, restoring the poet to his poetic faculties.

P.B.Shelley, like Wordsworth believed in the dynamic quality of nature and as J.A. Symonds remarks, "Shelley is one with the romantic temper of his age in ascribing to nature a spiritual quality and significance and in regarding man's life as dynamic and progressive" (89).

Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' is perhaps one of the most revolutionary poems to be published during the Romantic Age. The uncontrollable west wind is everything the poet aspires to be, and he fervently hopes that the west wind would be able to usher in an entirely new world order, something which he as a weak human being could never do. It is believed that Shelley wrote the poem in response to the loss of his son William. By treating the west wind as his alter ego, Shelley is going through a self-renewal to rid himself of the personal trauma.

Keats is closer to Wordsworth than Shelley in that like most of the Romantics, they believed that nature was the anti- thesis of

institutionalized thought and culture. Both the poets seek escape from reality, but when Wordsworth seeks a deeper communion with nature, Keats is attracted to the superficial sights and sounds of nature. His love for the natural is evident in all his famous poems, but it is in 'I Stood Tiptoe upon a Little Hill' that he writes about the healing power of nature,

The breezes were ethereal, and pure,  
And crept through half-closed lattices to  
cure

The languid sick; it cool'd their fever'd  
sleep,

And soothed them into slumbers full and  
deep

Soon they awoke cleared eyed: not burnt  
with thirsting,

Nor with hot fingers, nor with temples  
bursting (221-6)

The Victorian Age that followed being the Age of Science and Industrialization, the sounds of nature were lost in the cacophony of the sounds from factories. The first few years of the twentieth century were extremely traumatic for most of the countries in the western world. The new century had begun with Great Britain's involvement in the Boer war and it seemed to some that the British Empire was as doomed to destruction, both from within and without, as had been the Roman Empire (britannica.com). The race for weapons had started and though the world war broke out only in 1914, the tensions between nation states had increased.

The Georgian poets who lived and wrote during this period wrote about nature, common experience and the normal things they saw around them. Their poems did not at any point, reflect the economic hardships or social issues of the time. Georgian poetry was portrayed as being weak and escapist. It was also criticized for lacking in intellectual content. This tendency is generally lacking in most of the poetry of the early twentieth century. As Ronald Bottrall observes,

Nightingale, sunset or the meanest flower

Were formerly the potentialities of poetry,

But now what have they to do with one another,

With Dionysus or with me? (135)

Yet, nature was not completely set aside in the twentieth century. As A.C. Ward observes, "In the face of modern industrialization, they [modern poets] solace their souls by retiring to the country and celebrating the beauties of unspoiled nature" (9).

Writers like John Masefield, Robert Bridges, W.E. Davies, Edmund Blunden and Walter de la Mara have all written about their associations with nature. The harsh realities of the events of the century had removed the vestiges of nature mysticism, but nature continued to remain a source of comfort and happiness to these poets.

"I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and sky" (1), writes Masefield in 'Sea Fever'. In order to escape the frailties of the material world, he repeats this line again and again,

And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,

And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea gulls crying (7-8)

The turn of the century was definitely not the apt time for nature contemplation or escapism, but living under an aura of war psychosis was so traumatic, that poets like him opted for a saner route. Edmund Blunden in his 'Thiepval Wood' writes about the destructive power of wars. He presents nature as being vulnerable like him in the face of war. The identification between the poet and nature is carried till the last line of the poem. Through the presentation of the effects of war on nature, Blunden gives voice to his own fears.

This same strain of nature-love is visible in the poetry of the neo-romantics too. In one of

the bloodiest periods of western history, a period that witnessed the ravages of two world wars, an economic depression, the rise of Nazism and fascism, we see the pattern of poets returning to the theme of nature. Dylan Thomas celebrates nature in his poems. In poems like 'Fern Hill' and 'Poem in October', he associates nature with harmony and innocence. In yet another nature poem 'Here is the Spring', he suggests that nature has the power to uplift us in moments of crisis.

In more recent times, nature became a major trope in the works of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. The trauma of terror and violence in Northern Ireland is captured very graphically by Heaney. By seeking solace in nature, Heaney deals with his own sense of exile and displacement.

Most of the poets discussed in this paper had grappled with cultural and personal trauma before turning towards nature. The present century has seen an upsurge in ecology-related studies and today we realize that much of the wisdom we sensed in the poets of the by-gone ages are priceless.

Michael McCarthy in his book *The Moth Snowstorm* writes,

Over a number of years, there was no doubt that the people [patients] who had the view of the trees [from the hospital ward], recovered more quickly, needed fewer drugs and had fewer post-operative complications than the people with the view of the brick wall.

One of the upcoming disciplines related to ecology studies- Eco psychology- explores the relationship between human beings and nature, about how a kinship with nature could reduce stress and improve our general outlook towards life. The healing power of nature, in medical parlance today, called 'Eco therapy' or 'nature therapy' is said to possess powers of relieving both physical as well as psychological stress. It is quite pertinent to believe that the poets discussed in this paper, though quite oblivious

to the medical terms we use today, were finding their way out of their personal traumas.

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