Nature in Literary Texts

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In this article, the authors aim to read several literary texts through the lens of Nature, Culture and Humanity. These literary texts are including a short story by Anthony Doerr’s *The Shell Collector*, two plays by William Shakespeare—*King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale*, and four novels—namely, Orhan Pamuk’s *The Red-haired Woman*, Emily Brontë’s *Weathering Height*, Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* and, the last but not the least, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Through reading these texts, the authors try to observe the relation between Nature and human, in a way which human beings can find freedom through the inspiration of Nature, as humanity can be expressed by artistic forms.

*Keywords*: nature, culture, art, humanity, freedom

**Introduction**

The way in which we see Nature does have a great importance, because it involves how we define the relation between Nature and human, especially when it comes to the reading and the interpretation of literary texts. How shall we address this relation? Is Nature our enemy? Is it possible to understand Nature as an entity, in a way which Nature can have a real dialectic fusion with human beings? Or, can we say that Nature and human are actually reflecting each other, as the readers can see when it comes to define Nature and human nature? This research aims to respond these questions through three parts of analysis, as follows.

**Two Kinds of Order**

In Anthony Doerr’s *The Hunter’s Wife*, there is an observation which described by the hunter, about the delicate balance between Nature and human. As the hunter told his wife that

> [t]here is no order in that world, […] But here there is. Here I can see things I’d never see down there, things most folks are blind to. With no great reach of imagination she could see him. Fifty years hence, still lacing his boots, still gathering his rifle, all the world to see and him dying happy having seen only this Valley (Doerr, 2016, p. 55).

From the hunter’s words, the readers can understand that there are two very different worlds (at least for him)—“that world” the cities and “here” the hills. Both of them come to represent two separate but not irrelevant sense of order. The order of Nature is seen, is heard, and is felt by the hunter, as “huge saucers of ice” comes to
The "sound of water running" feels like an urge in the hunter’s “soul” (Doerr, 2016, p. 53).

Through the hunter’s words, the readers can see that Nature has an order that cannot cheat, and will not be cheated. In Nature, what we see is what we get. It is exactly like the hunter himself has experienced. When he saw that “trout were rising through the chill brown water to take the first insects” (Doerr, 2016, p. 53), he knew that it is the season of Spring.

According to the hunter, the cities, on the other hand, when comparing to the hills, have “no order” (Doerr, 2016, p. 55). This world of “no order” is the world of human, where the rhythm of Nature can be used and be disturbed by human, with all kinds of purposes. As the “client” (Doerr, 2016, p. 54) of the hunter comes to show, the cities are a combination of various human desires, as the clients “wanted to see grizzlies, track a wolverine, even shoot sandhill cranes” (p. 54). Those from the cities want to conquer Nature and to keep it indoor, as “they wanted the heads of seven-by-seven royal bulls for their dens” (p. 54), just for the sake of a style of decoration. In some ways, the phrase “no order” (p. 55) can refer to a situation of being “stupid” (p. 54), when “[a] bloodthirsty New Yorker claimed only to want to photograph black bears, then pulled a pistol from his boot and fired wildly at two cubs and their mother” (Doerr, 2016, p. 54). The cities have no order—just like human beings who are irrational.

In another case, Nature does not only help us to see things in a comparative way—as the two orders would show. For example, when a person is confused, he or she may turn to Nature for help through a form of interaction between human labour and the earth. In Orhan Pamuk’s novel *The Red-haired Woman*, the readers can see that when the narrator comes to learn and to practice the technique of well-digging, he realises that if one can speak the language of the soil, one may have a better chance to survive. The best way to explain this is to read through the narrator Cem’s revelation,

> [f]or earth was made up of many layers, just like the celestial Sphere, which had seven. [...]. Two meters of rich black earth Might conceal a loamy, impermeable, bone-dry layer of Wretched soil or sand underneath. To work out where to dig for Water as they paced the ground, the old masters had to decipher The language of the soil, of the grass, insects, and birds, and Detect the signs of rock or clay underfoot (Pamuk, 2017, p. 17).

The language of soil is symbolic enough to come to the rescue, if human beings have sufficient “skills” (Pamuk, 2017, p. 17) to decode the signs which were existed in Nature. This process of decoding the message of Nature requires, apart from other “skills” of well-digging, a sort of listening skill with full concentration, which is just like the “doctor putting his ear to ‘a sick baby’s chest’” (Pamuk, 2017, p. 17). Nature, in this case, does come to help desperate human conditions, in a way which human beings look for the order of Nature and try to learn it.

**Interaction of the Two**

Also, the readers can see more other examples too, when Nature comes to reveal human emotions—it would be so vividly as if we can almost feel that Nature does understand what is going on in a character’s mind. For instance, in William Shakespeare’s play *King Lear*, the old King, in M. C. Bradbrook’s reading among the scholars, comes to arouse the readers’ attentions and most significantly—“sympathies”, when he “kneels to pray
for the ‘poor naked wretches’ who are out in the storm” (Bradbrook, 1951, p. 92). The term Nature, as Marilyn French points out, “means natura and also human nature; at times it refers to physical, at times to psychological dimensions of a human” (French, 1992, p. 244).

And yet, the relation between Nature and human society is indeed, the key point for the readers to notice, as this relation is not necessarily always smooth and often easy to understand, as we assumed. For example, as Terry Eagleton’s book chapter “Wuthering Heights” shows,

Nature, in any case, is no true ‘outside’ to society, since its
Conflicts are transposed into the social arena. In one sense the
Novel [Wuthering Heights] sharply contrasts Nature and society;
In another sense it grasps civilised life as a higher distillation of
Ferocious natural appetite. Nature, then, is a thoroughly
Ambiguous category, inside and outside society simultaneously (Eagleton, 1998, p. 58)

For Eagleton, Nature in Emily Brontë’s novel Wuthering Height cannot be simply read as a background. Rather, Nature comes to play a significant role, in a way which human nature can be seen through the characters and their society. The society in this novel, according to Eagleton, reveals critical issues which can be read in several ‘symptomatic’ (Eagleton, 1998, p. 59) ways, as the characters Heathcliff, and his lover Catherine were situated.

According to Margaret Homans, indeed, “Nature, or the literal as it is represented by nature, appears to provoke” a sort of “attitude” and a “strategy of writing” (Homans, 1978, pp. 18-19) in Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Height. Homans’s claim comes to show the readers, once again, the ambiguity of the relation between Nature and human society, as Cathy’s repression of ‘the Heathcliff-nature complex’ (Homan, 1978, p. 18) and Cathy’s “madness” (p. 19) come to suggest and to indicate.

Both Homans and Eagleton suggest that this “symptomatic” (Eagleton, 1998, p. 59) way of reading can show the contrast between “the wild energy of the Heights” (McKibben, 1960, p. 162) and the “true natures” (p.169) of the couple Catherine and Hareton (who are into books, reading, culture and education). Nature seems to be mild and welcoming, as human nature comes to bring out its best. It is not rough and untamed. Nature can be symbolically referred to some human conditions, especially the profound human natures.

The textual world of Emily Brontë does narrate culture as a sort of ‘refuge from or reflex of material conditions’ (Eagleton, 1998, p. 59). For example, Cathy’s five weeks away from home totally make a difference. After coming back from Thrushcross Grange, the “reform” shows that Cathy’s “self-respect” was raised

With fine clothes and flattery, […], so that, instead of a wild,
Hatless little savage jumping into the house, […], there lighted
From a handsome black pony a very dignified person, with
Brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and
A long cloth habit, which she was obliged to hold up with both
Hands that she might sail in (Brontë, 1994, p. 57).

Although we do not find a true dialectical moment between Nature and Culture, still, it does not mean that we cannot read Nature in a way, which it comes to represent a character symbolically. Cultivated, losing her wild energy, and taking the manner of language (such as “flattery”), Cathy was changed, at least through the
appearance and the behaviour as the readers can see, to have a contrast to her friend Heathcliff—a “dirty boy” with “his thick, uncombed hair” (Brontë, 1994, p. 57).

**Searching for Meanings**

What if there is a true dialectical moment between human and Nature? In what way can we see this moment? The answer somehow can be found in especially one of Virginia Woolf’s writings. Woolf depicts “a central element of the landscape and of the formal design”, which comes from her childhood memories of Summer holidays in Cornwall (Fleishman, 1981, p. 606). In her novel *To the Lighthouse*, there is a particular moment of “intimacy” (Woolf, 2000, p. 187), in which Lily and Mrs Ramsay were sitting together, “on the beach” (p. 186).

Sitting side by side, although in silence, these two women were communication with each other and with themselves through observing what they see in Nature. Their observations come to reveal significant meanings, at first, through looking at an art and asking:

‘Is it a boat? Is it a cork?’ [Mrs Ramsay] would say, Lily
Repeated, turning back, [...], to her canvas. Heaven be praised
For it, the problem of space remained, she thought, taking up her
Brush again. It glared at her. The whole mass of the picture was
Poised upon that weight. Beautiful and bright it should be on the
Surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into
Another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the
Fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron (Woolf, 2000, p. 186)

Giving shapes, lines, and colours, Lily’s canvas (which is a work-in-progress painting) comes to show the way in which she understands what she sees in Nature. This understanding shows the dialectical moment of the artist and Nature in her eyes, externalised in a form of fine arts.

In silence, as the canvas seems to gaze at Lily, Mrs Ramsay also seems to try to guess what she sees in Lily’s canvas (a boat, or a cork). On the surface, all seems to be “uncommunicative” (Woolf, 2000, p. 187), as no one says anything verbally, sitting “in silence” (p. 187). And yet, there is a delicate sensation of this moment, if not verbally but visually—something sacred was felt by the two characters, both women—one gives birth to her children, as another one gives birth to her art.

For Lily, at this very moment of “squeezing her tube of green paint” (Woolf, 2000, p. 187), language is not sufficient enough to express this sensation of hers, which comes from the moment with Mrs Ramsay in Nature. This feeling is, in a way, “extraordinarily fertile” (Woolf, 2000, p. 187), which makes her unconsciously do “a little hole in the sand and covered it up” (p. 187), knowing that a great idea for her artistic creation is born.

Our concern here, of course, is not to ask how real Lily’s canvas can come to represent Nature, as how realistic can her beach be. Again, it is also not our ultimate goal to identify the content of her painting—who, where, what—exactly. If we did that, eventually, we would be trapped into the comparison between art and Nature, meaning that we will always see art as a copy of Nature, which will never be good enough. Both art and Nature have meanings—if any—it is all because of a concern of humanity. As Polixenes in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* comes to remind us, “in defense of art”—

Yet Nature is made better by no mean
But Nature makes that mean; so over that art
Which you say adds to Nature, is an art
That Nature makes, […] (IV. iv. 89-92, Qtd. Shakespeare, 1566).

The point is, as Nature comes to inspire human beings, we do what the artists do, to try to find freedom in artistic creations. This outcome of freedom, which is an artistic form and which comes from Nature, would be a significant element of showing that it is possible to achieve a vision of our own. As the readers can see, Lily achieves in the end of To the Lighthouse, when her canvas externalises Nature in a form of fine arts.

Conclusion

Louis Aragon in his novel Paris Peasant points out, human beings cannot appreciate Nature (as “light is a vibration”) as it is, or cannot see the importance of Nature in our lives, because humanity comes to a point that its “stupid rationalism contains an unimaginably large element of materialism. This fear of error which everything recalls to me at every moment of the flight of my ideas, this mania for control, makes man prefer reason’s imagination to the imagination of the senses” (Aragon, 1994, p. 9). Considering literary texts as a form of fine arts in verbal representations, it is not impossible for the readers to understand that this art, if it can be any authentic at all, can show us the way in which it expresses this exploration of the senses. In terms of artistic creations, for an artist, it is important to have ‘the imagination of the senses’, as Aragon terms it, in order to see the profound human nature, so that the artist can have true fusions with Nature, in his or in her vision.

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