

## **THE PROFOUND INFLUENCE OF NATURE ON LITERATURE**

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### **Abstract**

Nature plays a significant role in literature over the centuries in shaping human thoughts, emotions, cultural narratives, characters, and themes in profound ways. The relationship humans share with nature depicted through novels, poetry, prose and plays encompass the themes of beauty, love, harmony, conflict, environmental degradation, and destruction. This research article explores the deep-rooted influence of nature on literature across different genres and time periods. Through a comprehensive analysis of key literary texts and critical perspectives, this article aims to highlight the multifaceted relationship between nature and literature, offering insights into the enduring significance of nature's presence in fostering a deeper understanding of human world. The study dwells on the impact of nature in literature emphasising how it continues to inspire, challenge and transform literary expressions across time.

**Key Words:** Nature, Literature, Relationship, Literary Texts, Critical Perspectives, Literary Expressions, Human world

### **Introduction**

Nature has long been a central theme in literature, captivating writers and readers alike with its beauty, power, and mystery. From ancient myths and epic poems to contemporary novels and poetry, the natural world has served as a rich source of inspiration and metaphorical depth for writers across cultures and eras. Scholars and critics have explored the multifaceted relationship between nature and literature, highlighting how nature not only serves as a backdrop or setting but also influences narrative structures, character development, and thematic exploration. Critics such as Lawrence Buell (1995) have argued that nature in literature is not merely a passive background, but an active force that shapes human experiences and worldviews. Buell's work on ecocriticism emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature, suggesting that literary representations of nature reflect broader cultural attitudes towards the environment.

Nature has consistently held a captivating allure for writers and poets, serving as a rich source of inspiration and symbolism in literature. From ancient epics to modern novels and poems, the depiction of nature has evolved, yet its profound impact on literary expression remains constant. Critics such as John Burroughs (1904) have emphasized nature's role not just as a physical environment but as a powerful metaphor reflecting human emotions, conflicts, and spiritual connections. Similarly, Susan Stewart (2004) explores the ecological dimensions of literature, highlighting how writers engage with environmental themes to comment on societal issues and human relationships.

One of the earliest examples of nature's impact on literature can be traced back to ancient civilizations. In Greek mythology, nature is personified in deities like Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and Pan, the wild god of the forests. These mythological figures not only represent natural elements but also embody human emotions and desires, reflecting the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world in early literary traditions (Griffith, 2010).

Moving forward in time, the Romantic era marked a pivotal period in which nature took center stage in literary discourse. Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and John Keats celebrated the sublime beauty of nature, finding in it solace, inspiration, and a mirror to human emotions. Wordsworth's famous poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798) epitomizes this romantic engagement with nature, as the speaker reflects on the restorative power of natural landscapes and their ability to evoke memories and spiritual insights (Abrams, 1999).

One prominent aspect of nature's influence on literature is its role as a symbolic space for exploring human emotions and experiences. For instance, in William Wordsworth's poetry, the natural landscape serves as a mirror for the poet's inner thoughts and feelings, creating a sense of harmony and introspection. Critics such as Harold Bloom (1988) have emphasized the transcendental power of nature in shaping literary imagination, highlighting its ability to evoke profound insights into the human condition. Jonathan Bate (2000) discusses the concept of "ecological imagination," positing that literature offers unique insights into our relationship with the natural world. Bate's examination of ecological themes in Shakespeare's works underscores the enduring relevance of nature in literary discourse.

As literary movements evolved, so did the ways in which nature was portrayed and interpreted in literature. The rise of environmental consciousness in the 20th century brought about new perspectives on nature, emphasizing its vulnerability and the human impact on ecosystems. Writers like Rachel Carson, through works such as "Silent Spring" (1962), raised awareness about environmental degradation and the need for conservation, infusing literature with a sense of urgency and advocacy for the natural world (Carson, 1962).

In contemporary literature, nature continues to serve as a rich reservoir of themes and metaphors, albeit in evolving forms. Writers explore not only the beauty of nature but also its darker aspects, confronting issues of climate change, urbanization, and ecological crises. Barbara Kingsolver's novel "Flight Behavior" (2012), for instance, intertwines the migration patterns of monarch butterflies with human dilemmas, offering a nuanced portrayal of the intricate relationship between nature and society (Kingsolver, 2012). Furthermore, contemporary perspectives from critics like Timothy Morton (2007) shed light on the ecological consciousness embedded in literary texts, revealing how nature's portrayal in literature reflects evolving attitudes towards the environment.

Moving into the modern and postmodern periods, authors like Annie Dillard and Cormac McCarthy continue to explore nature's significance in their works, albeit with a more critical and introspective lens. Dillard's "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" (1974) immerses readers in the intricacies of the natural world, questioning human perception and understanding of wilderness. McCarthy's "The Road" (2006) portrays a dystopian landscape where nature is both a source of devastation and resilience, reflecting broader themes of survival and human nature. Critics such as Susan Sontag (1977) have discussed the role of nature in sensory perception and artistic representation, highlighting its influence on narrative styles and imagery.

## **Literature Review**

### **Nature's influence on ancient epics and mythology**

Ancient literature, particularly epics and mythological texts, often personifies nature as deities or forces embodying cosmic elements. In Homer's "The Odyssey," for instance, the sea is

depicted as both a literal and metaphorical realm of adventure and transformation. The critic Albert Cook (1973) notes that the sea symbolizes the unknown and the journey into self-discovery, with metaphors like "stormy seas" representing life's challenges and trials. Critics like Friedrich Solmsen (1967) have analyzed how Homer uses natural elements such as storms, seas, and mountains to depict the tumultuous and unpredictable aspects of life.

In Mesopotamian mythology, the primordial waters symbolize chaos and creation. The *Enuma Elish*, a Babylonian creation myth, describes the emergence of the world from the chaotic waters of Tiamat, representing the eternal struggle between order and chaos. Scholars such as Thorkild Jacobsen (1981) have explored the symbolic significance of water and other natural elements in Mesopotamian myths. Similarly, in Norse mythology, the World Tree Yggdrasil symbolizes the interconnectedness of all life, with its roots delving into the underworld and branches reaching towards the heavens. Joseph Campbell (1949) elucidates how this mythological motif reflects the cyclical nature of existence and the eternal renewal of life.

In addition to symbolizing cosmic forces, nature also plays a crucial role in shaping mythological narratives. For instance, in Greek mythology, the tale of Demeter and Persephone is intertwined with the changing seasons. Critics like Karl Kerényi (1960) have interpreted this myth as a reflection of the agricultural cycles and the ancient Greeks' understanding of the natural world's rhythms. Moreover, ancient Egyptian myths often feature animals and plants as divine symbols. The sun god Ra, depicted as a falcon or a sun disk, represents the life-giving force of the sun, essential for agriculture and sustenance. Scholars such as Jan Assmann (2001) have explored the intricate connections between Egyptian mythology, nature worship, and cosmology.

Ancient epics and myths frequently use nature as a metaphor to express human emotions, virtues, and vices. In the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the character of Draupadi is compared to a lotus flower, symbolizing her purity and resilience amid adversity. Critics like Wendy Doniger (2010) have delved into the complex symbolism of nature in Indian epics, highlighting how flora and fauna serve as allegories for moral values and psychological states. In Norse mythology, natural elements such as the World Tree and the Well of Urd are metaphors for the interconnectedness of life, fate, and destiny. Scholars like Rudolf Simek (1993) have examined the poetic imagery of nature in Old Norse literature, revealing layers of symbolic meanings related to human existence and cosmic order.

Any ancient myths and legends feature nature as a transformative and regenerative force. In Greek mythology, the story of Narcissus, who becomes a flower by the water's edge, symbolizes the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Critics such as Walter Burkert (1985) have explored the psychological and symbolic dimensions of this myth, emphasizing nature's role in the process of transformation. Native American myths often center around natural phenomena such as the changing seasons, animal spirits, and sacred landscapes. The Navajo creation myth, for example, describes the emergence of the world from different layers of the earth, each representing a stage of creation and renewal. Scholars like Wendy Griffin (1992) have analyzed the ecological wisdom embedded in Native American myths, highlighting the reverence for nature and its transformative powers.

Ancient epics and mythologies abound with metaphorical representations of nature, showcasing its symbolic, narrative, and transformative significance. Critics and scholars across disciplines have explored these intricate connections, shedding light on how ancient cultures

perceived and interpreted the natural world through mythological narratives. By examining nature's influence on ancient epics and mythology, we gain deeper insights into human imagination, cultural values, and the enduring relationship between humanity and the environment.

### **Nature as a source of inspiration and reflection in romantic poetry and prose**

The Romantic era saw a profound reverence for nature, often portraying it as a source of sublime beauty and spiritual inspiration. Critics like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge emphasized the transcendent power of nature in their poetry, using metaphors to convey its ineffable qualities. For example, Wordsworth's poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798) employs nature as a metaphor for emotional and spiritual growth. The river, woods, and meadows become symbolic of the poet's evolving consciousness and connection to the natural world. As Harold Bloom (1973) argues, Wordsworth's use of natural imagery serves as a metaphorical mirror reflecting the inner landscapes of human experience.

Here, nature becomes a source of solace and joy, prompting introspection and contemplation. Critics such as Harold Bloom have praised Wordsworth's ability to infuse nature with emotional depth, noting how his poetry captures the sublime in natural landscapes, inviting readers to reflect on their own experiences and emotions (**Bloom, 1970**).

Romantic literature often depicted nature as a symbol of transcendence, representing a realm beyond the mundane and material. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) exemplifies this theme, where nature is portrayed as both awe-inspiring and mysterious. The Mariner's encounter with supernatural forces amidst a vast ocean symbolizes humanity's quest for spiritual enlightenment beyond the confines of rationality (**Mays, 2006**).

Coleridge's contemporary, Percy Bysshe Shelley, also explored the theme of nature's transcendence in his work. In "Mont Blanc" (1817), Shelley contemplates the sublime power of the natural world, depicting the mountain as a symbol of eternity and sublime beauty. Critics such as M.H. Abrams have noted Shelley's use of nature to evoke a sense of awe and wonder, transcending human limitations and pointing towards higher truths (**Abrams, 1971**).

The Romantic poets often engaged with the concept of the sublime, viewing nature as a manifestation of the sublime's awe-inspiring and overwhelming aspects. John Keats, in his poem "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), grapples with the fleeting nature of beauty and the contrast between human mortality and the eternal beauty of nature. Keats' exploration of the nightingale's song and its timeless appeal reflects the Romantic fascination with nature's ability to transcend human limitations and mortality. Critics such as Cleanth Brooks have analyzed Keats' use of nature imagery to convey a sense of the sublime, where the natural world becomes a symbol of eternal beauty and truth (**Brooks, 1947**).

The Romantic period's literature, whether in poetry or prose, underscores nature's multifaceted role as a muse, a reflection of human emotions, and a symbol of spiritual and moral truths.

### **Naturalistic views of nature as a deterministic force in literature**

The 19th century witnessed a shift towards realism and naturalism, where nature was often depicted in a more objective and deterministic light. Writers like Émile Zola and Thomas Hardy explored the harsh realities of natural forces shaping human lives, using metaphorical language to underscore themes of fate and survival. In Zola's novel "Germinal" (1885), the coal mines symbolize both the vitality and exploitation of the working class. Critics such as Henri

Mitterand (1981) argue that Zola's use of naturalistic metaphors highlights the brutal yet elemental forces at play in society, reflecting the Darwinian struggle for existence.

Similarly, Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" (1891) employs nature as a metaphor for Tess's tragic fate, with the natural landscape mirroring her internal turmoil and societal constraints. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) interpret Hardy's use of nature as a symbol of indifferent fate, echoing the deterministic worldview of naturalist literature.

Critics have offered diverse perspectives on naturalistic views of nature as a deterministic force in literature. For instance, literary critic Leslie Fiedler (1960) argues that naturalistic literature reveals the struggle of individuals against overwhelming natural and social forces, highlighting the deterministic nature of human existence. Conversely, other critics, like Raymond Williams (1973), have critiqued naturalism for its deterministic outlook, arguing that it overlooks human agency and the potential for social change. Williams suggests that naturalistic literature can be overly pessimistic in its portrayal of nature's deterministic influence.

### **Modernism and symbolism**

The modernist period ushered in a fragmented and subjective approach to literature, where nature served as a multifaceted symbol reflecting the complexities of the human condition. Writers like T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf employed symbolic imagery to evoke themes of alienation, disillusionment, and existential angst. In Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" (1922), the barren landscape and withered trees symbolize the spiritual drought and cultural decay of post-World War I society. Critics such as F.R. Leavis (1943) analyze Eliot's use of natural metaphors as a reflection of modernity's fragmentation and loss of traditional values.

Woolf's novel "To the Lighthouse" (1927) juxtaposes the temporal passage of nature with the characters' inner lives, using metaphors like the lighthouse and the sea to symbolize yearning, mortality, and the quest for meaning. Elaine Showalter (1977) interprets Woolf's use of nature as a metaphorical exploration of human consciousness and the fluidity of time.

### **Postmodernism and ecocriticism**

In the postmodern era, ecological concerns and the interconnectedness of humans and nature became prominent themes in literature. Ecocriticism emerged as a critical approach, examining how nature is portrayed and conceptualized in literary texts. Contemporary writers like Barbara Kingsolver and Cormac McCarthy employ nature as a metaphor for environmental degradation, societal upheaval, and humanity's precarious relationship with the natural world. Kingsolver's novel "Prodigal Summer" (2000) interweaves human and ecological narratives, using metaphors of wildlife and ecosystems to explore themes of regeneration and interconnectedness.

Lawrence Buell (1995) discusses how Kingsolver's ecological metaphors challenge anthropocentric views and advocate for environmental stewardship. McCarthy's "The Road" (2006), while set in a post-apocalyptic landscape, uses natural imagery such as ash-covered landscapes and dying forests as metaphors for a world teetering on the brink of collapse. Ursula K. Heise (2008) examines how McCarthy's novel raises questions about human responsibility towards nature and the consequences of ecological devastation.

### **Impact and Challenges**

The impact of nature on literature presents several challenges, ranging from the complexity of ecological metaphors to the evolving perceptions of nature over time. One of the primary challenges in studying nature's impact on literature is deciphering ecological metaphors and

symbolism. Nature often serves as a rich source of imagery, with elements such as forests, rivers, and mountains symbolizing various aspects of the human experience. For example, in Henry David Thoreau's "Walden," the pond represents a space for self-reflection and spiritual growth, while the surrounding woods symbolize the untamed aspects of human nature (Thoreau, 1854).

However, interpreting these symbols requires a nuanced understanding of both the literary context and the ecological knowledge of the period. Critics must consider how authors perceive and utilize natural elements to convey deeper meanings. This task becomes more complex when dealing with texts from different cultural backgrounds, where the symbolism of nature may vary significantly. According to Garrard (2004), understanding ecological metaphors necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with ecological science to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in natural imagery.

Nature's impact on literature is not confined to Western traditions; it is a universal theme that resonates across cultures. In Japanese literature, for example, the natural world is a central element in both classical and modern works. Haiku, a traditional form of Japanese poetry, often captures fleeting moments in nature, reflecting the Buddhist appreciation for impermanence and the beauty of the present moment. Matsuo Bashō, one of the greatest haiku masters, frequently used natural imagery to convey deep emotional and philosophical insights (Bashō, 1686/1985).

In African literature, nature often plays a crucial role in storytelling, symbolizing both the richness of the land and the cultural heritage of its people. Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" uses natural elements to underscore the connection between the Igbo people and their environment, illustrating how colonialism disrupts this harmony (Achebe, 1958). The depiction of seasonal changes and agricultural practices in the novel highlights the deep relationship between the community and the natural world.

The rise of ecocriticism has further underscored the importance of nature in literature. This critical framework examines the representation of nature and the environment in literary works, emphasizing the ecological and ethical implications of these representations. Lawrence Buell (1995), a pioneer in ecocriticism, argues that literature has the power to shape readers' perceptions of the environment and inspire a sense of ecological responsibility. His work "The Environmental Imagination" highlights how literary texts can promote environmental awareness and advocacy.

Nature is dynamic and multifaceted, and literary representations can sometimes oversimplify or romanticize it, failing to convey its true intricacies. For example, while pastoral literature often idealizes rural life and nature, it can ignore the harsh realities and ecological complexities of rural environments. Despite the profound impact of nature on literature, representing nature accurately and effectively in literary works poses several challenges. One significant challenge is the anthropocentric bias inherent in much of literature. Authors often interpret nature through a human-centric lens, which can lead to a limited or distorted portrayal of the natural world (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). This bias can obscure the intrinsic value of nature, reducing it to merely a backdrop for human activity rather than recognizing it as an independent entity with its own rights and significance.

## **Discussion**

Literary critics have long examined the relationship between nature and literature, exploring how writers use natural imagery to convey broader themes. Eco-criticism, a relatively recent critical approach, focuses on the representation of nature in literature and its implications for environmental consciousness. Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneer in eco-criticism, argues that literature can shape our understanding of the environment and inspire ecological awareness (Glotfelty, 1996). Moreover, the portrayal of nature in literature often reflects cultural and historical contexts. For example, the industrial revolution and the subsequent environmental degradation influenced the works of many 19th-century writers, who lamented the loss of the natural world. John Muir, a naturalist and writer, captured this sentiment in his advocacy for wilderness preservation and his poetic descriptions of the American landscape (Muir, 1911). Nature's role in literature often extends beyond physical descriptions to reflect the human psyche. In many works, natural landscapes are depicted as extensions of characters' inner lives. From the Romantic era's reverence for the natural world to contemporary concerns about environmental degradation, nature has been a central theme in literary expression. It serves as a metaphorical mirror, reflecting human emotions, philosophical inquiries, and societal issues. As literature continues to evolve, the depiction of nature remains a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of the human experience. This is evident in the novels of Thomas Hardy, where the rural settings often mirror the emotional and psychological states of the characters. In "Tess of the d'Urbervilles," the changing seasons and landscapes parallel Tess's tragic journey, underscoring the interplay between human fate and the natural world (Hardy, 1891). Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats celebrated nature not just as a backdrop for human activity but as a source of spiritual and emotional sustenance. Wordsworth's poetry, for instance, often emphasizes the healing and transformative power of nature. In "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth reflects on the solace and inspiration he derives from nature, highlighting its role in his personal and creative life (Wordsworth, 1798). In the works of Emily Dickinson, for example, nature is often a vehicle for exploring themes of life, death, and immortality. Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for Death" personifies death and uses natural imagery to convey the journey from life to the afterlife, illustrating how nature's cycles mirror human existential cycles (Dickinson, 1890). Writers like Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot used nature to explore the fragmented and often chaotic nature of human consciousness. Woolf's novel "To the Lighthouse" uses the natural setting of the sea and the lighthouse as central symbols, reflecting the characters' inner lives and the passage of time. The shifting perspectives and stream-of-consciousness technique employed by Woolf echo the fluid and ever-changing nature of the environment she describes (Woolf, 1927). Authors like Annie Dillard, in her book "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," delve into the minutiae of natural life, blending scientific observation with philosophical reflection. Dillard's detailed descriptions of the natural world serve as a meditation on existence and the interconnectedness of all living things (Dillard, 1974). Nature's role as a setting in literature is multifaceted, providing not just a backdrop but also shaping the narrative and influencing characters' actions and experiences. In Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick," the vastness of the ocean serves as both a literal and symbolic setting. The sea represents the unknown, the sublime, and the existential struggles faced by Captain Ahab and his crew. Melville (1851) uses the ocean's unpredictability

to highlight themes of obsession, fate, and man's insignificance in the face of nature's immensity.

Moreover, nature settings often reflect the internal states of characters. In Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre," the moors surrounding Thornfield Hall are described in ways that mirror Jane's emotional landscape. The wild, untamed nature of the moors parallels Jane's struggle for freedom and self-expression. Brontë (1847) writes, "I could not help it; the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes" (Brontë, 1847). Here, the natural setting intensifies the protagonist's inner turmoil and quest for independence.

In some literary works, nature transcends its role as a mere setting or metaphor, becoming a character in its own right. This personification of nature often imbues it with agency and a sense of omnipresence. For example, in Jack London's "The Call of the Wild," the harsh Alaskan wilderness is not just a backdrop but an active force shaping the protagonist, Buck. The wilderness's brutality and beauty drive Buck's transformation from a domesticated dog to a creature of the wild. London (1903) portrays nature as a relentless teacher, stating, "He was beaten (he knew that); but he was not broken" (London, 1903). This characterization emphasizes nature's role in the evolution and survival of living beings.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout history, literature has served as a mirror reflecting humanity's relationship with nature, often employing metaphorical language to imbue natural elements with symbolic significance. From ancient epics to contemporary novels, nature has been depicted as a source of beauty, mystery, challenge, and ecological urgency. By engaging with critics across different eras, this research highlights the enduring relevance of nature as a metaphorical landscape through which writers navigate themes of identity, morality, and the human condition.

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