

Nature(s):

Environments We Live By
in Literary
and
Cultural Discourses



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**Nature(s):
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in Literary and Cultural Discourses**



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Nature(s): Environments We Live By in Literary and Cultural Discourses

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Introduction

Academia does not find it easy to use the word “nature” nowadays, although in common parlance we could not do without it. Even postmodern scholars of notable esteem, such as Lawrence Buell or Kate Rigby, who focus specifically on the study of Nature in the cultural context, often find the term problematic. If they decide to use it, they follow it with an explanation of what they actually have in mind to prevent misunderstanding or quarrel. Many theoreticians would go so far as to posit nature as a social construct, but it is not possible to deny that “nature” often disguises itself as the opposite of “society” or “culture.” There is a palpable anxiety among academics; the human sciences in particular may be pervaded by the fear of environments prowled by unknown beasts, ones in which fine-looking flowerbeds are a cover for quagmires of abuse, violence, and oppression.

Romanticism saw Nature as sublime. Turbulent Nature encouraged in the romantics a reflection on the human condition. Marxism, on the other hand, has made us believe that labour alters Nature, which becomes the “inorganic body” of Man.¹ The converging paths of literature, critical theory, and ecological issues have found their expression in eco-criticism, which has studied the environment both as “natural” and “man-made,” and brought to attention the ultimate precedence of Nature over culture. Some thinkers, however, have moved beyond constructing Nature and have focused on the reasons behind that process. Postcolonial theory as well as gender and minority studies have shown that beneath the ostensibly innocuous “natural order(s)” of sexuality or race may lurk coercion, authoritarianism, and subjugation. Construing certain aspects of culture

¹ Karl Marx, “Estranged Labour,” in: *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>>.

or human identity as natural and others as unnatural has authorised the mistreatment of those who apparently did not fit the prescribed order.

In this volume, scholars with different academic interests are making excursions into Nature as represented in texts and cultural phenomena. While some of them reopen old or familiar issues, such as environmental concerns, others walk less frequented paths. The reader may expect shifts of perspective and a variety of interpretive methods. Some of the articles address Nature as a literary, perhaps even textual, entity, appearing for instance in the form of landscapes. Others are studies of para-literary and non-literary activities and phenomena which are infused by the idea of Nature and the natural (as well as their opposites). The source materials that our contributors have chosen for analysis are representative of the scope of the penetration of literature and culture by Nature: science fiction books, Victorian novellas, poetry, art, cinematography, and social movements.

A Nature-focused interpretation, be it literary or otherwise, may adhere to a given physical, biological or geographical sense of the word, but its meaning may be less tangible. The title of the book and especially the way in which it suggests a plurality of meanings expresses this condition of Nature's semantic elusiveness. Some of the more general questions addressed in this volume are: Is Nature a monolith and a generalization of the idea of the environment? Is it perhaps a sum of processes that take place outside culture? But if we assume that the *idea* of Nature is a cultural construct, then what are the processes responsible for its formation? What meanings, insights, interests, and archetypes is this idea made of? A collection of this kind cannot avoid being eclectic; indeed, perhaps it should not attempt to be otherwise. Moreover, some of the texts published here show that choosing Nature as an object of analysis means addressing a range of other themes, some of them conventionally associated with Nature (e.g. gardening, hunting, sexuality), others not necessarily so (narrative art).

The book is divided into two sections. The first section is devoted to environments and ecosystems as they are represented in literary works. Karolina Błęszyńska invites us to visit a South African farm visualised as a garden. Analysing the works of J. M. Coetzee, the author looks at two characters who seem to bridge the gap between nature and culture, between the colonizer and the colony. As a result of their endeavours, the land itself becomes a garden which offers autonomy and anonymity. Ewa Borkowska analyses the changing image of Nature on the basis of Ted Hughes's poetry. Borkowska pays particular attention to the shift away from sublimity and the mystery of the natural environment, characteristic of Romanticism, and towards the (post)romantic perception of Nature as

a vicious element that needs to be subjugated. Sonia Front in her article focuses on the dissimilarity between natural time and mechanical time in Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Lost Steps*. As she points out, time is a construct and the boundary between natural and social time is not fixed. Jakub Gajda examines Faulkner's short story "The Bear." The story is related to the actual events of deforestation and restoration of the Mississippi forest, but it is also haunted by a sense of unease and longing, as well as troubled by harbingers of transitions in Southern identity, presaging the future Americanization of the region. Justyna Jajszczok's article changes the perspective, and instead of a large-scale issue is concerned with the minute and apparently banal, to which, however, a discourse may attach a major role. Jajszczok's analysis focuses on the motif of the beetle in Victorian science and fiction. According to the author, such a seemingly insignificant insect may be interpreted as both a symbol of our illusory power over Nature and an instrument of Nature's revenge, namely in Her desire to punish our hubristic desire for control. Exploring Graham Swift's early novels, Sławomir Konkol observes that the author frequently falls back on Romantic notions of the unity of nature and the individual. In the end, however, these notions are questioned, which parallels Lacan's three orders, denying us the perception of nature as a consistent, comprehensive system. Ewa Mazur-Wyganowska explores the romantic features of Patrick Kavanagh's poetry. She comments upon his dissatisfaction with reason, logic, and science, which caused the poet to turn to imagination, spirituality, and mysticism in order to fill life with meaning. The essay aims to describe this mental quest and identify its sources. Jacek Mydla focuses on two subjects in his essay. The first one is a "natural" tendency of narrativity to take an anthropocentric and anthropomorphic bearing, and second – the inversion of that predisposition in works belonging to the genre of the weird tale.

The second section of the book contains articles which address the subject of Nature in relation to chosen – sometimes baffling and controversial – phenomena, uses, and conceptualisations of Nature that the researchers have been faced with in culture and theory. Examining the chosen works of Charlotte Brontë, one of the quintessential Victorian authors, Nina Augustynowicz focuses on the aspect of Nature closest to us – the human body. Augustynowicz investigates the body as a cultural phenomenon, whose signs and signals may denote not only a biological phenomenon, but also reflect ethical or aesthetic issues. The initiative known by its wonderfully succinct alliterative name, Fuck For Forest (an environmental group whose fundraising schemes include selling self-made pornography), is under investigation in a text by Anna Malinowska.

The issues that, according to Malinowska, the phenomenon raises go beyond the immediate shock value and include the formation of cultural identities as well as a culturally-conditioned understanding of the natural. In his exploration of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*, Sławomir Masłoń emphasizes the dichotomy that exists on the planes of the alleged natural state of womanhood and the actual image of the woman (particularly the trope of the self-sacrificing woman). Investigating the reactions of the audience and the critics towards the visceral visual layer of the movie, the author emphasises what he considers the unquestionable achievement of the film – the trauma caused by the questioning and violating of the patriarchal ideal. In a response to Masłoń's interpretation of *Antichrist*, Andreas Wansbrough argues that the film, in rejecting rationalisation, is an attack on the ideas fundamental to the Enlightenment, those of reason, Nature, femininity, and humanity. Visual representations of Nature, albeit treated from a very different set of assumptions, are under scrutiny in another article: Marta Oracz focuses on the possibility of a marriage between art and Nature. Investigating the idea of William Gilpin, an 18th-century writer, painter, and art theoretician, Oracz looks specifically at the notion of the picturesque and the idea of picturesque travel; she relates them to Gilpin's efforts to establish an aesthetic theory that would link art to Nature. Tomasz Porwit examines the notions of purity and idealism as promising a return to a pre-industrial state of existence; these notions evidently play a key role in the discourses of eco-poetics and ecopolitics. Reading Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Porwit observes that the thus-defined trend has similarities to fictitious apocalyptic scenarios that are fuelled by the binary Nature/culture opposition. Finally, the approach changes once more and now the subject is examined from the perspective of metadiscourse. Bartosz Stopel invites us to a meeting with Literary Darwinists – a school of literary criticism that seems to have gathered as great a number of detractors as Darwin did in his time. The author asserts that the program of the Literary Darwinists has certain merits, but claims the problems within their discourse are difficult – perhaps impossible – to overcome.

The range of issues raised by the contribution to this volume may indeed seem overwhelming, yet when we stand before Nature, we cannot but feel astonished by its conceptual dimensions and capacity. From bugs and bears, through human identities, to time and space, the different shapes, sizes, and manifestations of Nature supply our mental view with an enthralling image. Without a sense of this breadth and depth, we would feel robbed of the richness that Nature-related discourses generate. Like the natural resources of the planet Earth, the resourcefulness of the human imagination as far as things natural are concerned seems

inexhaustible. The efforts of the contributors are recommended to the attention of the reader, and yet both the authors and the readers – after their labours – must be left with a keen realisation of how much has been left unexplored. As editors, we do not call this publication a comprehensive guide to Nature, but rather a collection of tales told by mental travellers, each offering a glimpse of the wonders and terrors they have seen, and inviting their readers to embark on their own journey of adventure.

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