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## Nature and Ecological Consciousness in Transcendentalist and Romantic Writers

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### **Abstract:**

Ecological consciousness – a prominent theme in literature is demarcated as alertness towards an encompassing relation of living beings and environment, as civilizations grapple with pressing ecological challenges. This research paper aims to examine depiction and progression of ecological consciousness in Transcendentalist and Romantic writers, spanning from the 19th century to the present day.

Through a critical analysis of American and British literature, this study seeks to scrutinize the works of writers from these two genres engaged in ecological dimensions, discovering mortality's connection with natural domain, thus responding to environmental crises. By tracing the development of ecological consciousness in literary works across different historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, this research aims to shed light on the diverse approaches and perspectives within the realm of literature.

**Keywords:** Ecological consciousness, Nature, Transcendentalist Writers, Romantic Writers.

### **Introduction**

The splendor of nature never seems to quench the thirst for tenacity of individual's survival. *Nature* embodies universally strong essence to lead an enduring way of human existence. Nature as a force is retrospective; it stands on psychological and naturalistic parameters, these patterns offer an insightful exploration of human psyche and man's liaison in the natural sphere. Within the intricate tapestry of psychiatric layers, individuals wrestle with their past traumas, experiences and judgments, traversing the complex maze of retention and

realization, and nature here serves as a mirror and a catalyst for introspection. The dimensions of Nature evoke epiphany moments, facilitate stream of consciousness within characters, raising a potential for evolving and revolutionizing the trajectory of the impending events, thus fostering ecological consciousness.

Ecological consciousness is understood by many researchers as “a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man’s relationship with nature, which mediates its behavior in the “natural world”, and expresses axiological position of the subject of consciousness in relation to the natural world, and studies show that environmental education is complex mental education, which includes cognitive, regulatory, emotional, ethical and other aspects”.<sup>1</sup>

The stimulation of ecological consciousness is palpable in the transient establishments of Transcendental and Romantic authors, whose works simultaneously bear the mantle of popular culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson, well-regarded as the promulgator of Transcendentalism, illustrated the beauty and connotation of nature in his groundbreaking literary works.

The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, - he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident from the excerpt that Ralph Waldo Emerson a enthusiast of nature has his inner and external consciousness perfectly aligned with nature, (with childlike curiosity alive in him). The ecological and theological cognizance of ‘nature’ was defined by the disciple of Transcendentalist prodigy, Henry David Thoreau in his works, like *Walking* and *Walden*. Theology is an all-inclusive approach for discovering the transcendent relationship between civilization and the natural world, observing nature as a vivacious expression of heavenly purpose and as a medium for encountering the divine.

### **Ecological Consciousness in Transcendental Writings**

Thoreau’s book *Walden* made the term ‘ecological consciousness’ more acceptable for Americans, who were oblivious with this phenomenon, when he wrote about wilderness and untamed aspect of nature in his magnum opus. His elevated mindfulness of ecological issues

is apparent in themes where he captures the wildness of the natural creation, from ‘the melancholy cry of the loon at the lake to the uttering of the wind through the trees’. ‘I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil.’ He rejoices the undomesticated beauty of the landscape, finding in its rugged terrain and vistas a source of spiritual nourishment and intellectual stimulation. This reality can also be perceived in the following paragraph from another book *Walking*.

“Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as that into which the sun goes down.... We dream all night of those mountain-ridges in the horizon... Who has not seen in imagination, when looking into the sunset sky, the gardens of the Hesperides, and the foundation of all those fables?”<sup>3</sup>

The American academician, H.D. Thoreau stresses the importance of evaluating mortals not merely as members of society but as part of divine and his soul, emphasizing a profound connection to nature. He suggests that embracing this bond with nature is fundamental to experiencing genuine freedom and fulfillment. Thoreau's stance reflects his conviction in the significance of living authentically and harmoniously with the natural environment, rather than conforming to societal norms and illusions. By underscoring an insightful connection to nature and the divine, H.D. Thoreau advocates for a paradigm that highlights unpretentious autonomy and contentment through harmony with the environment. This perception aligns meticulously with ecological consciousness, as it acknowledges the unabashed and unconscious relationship between souls and the natural world.

Thoreau's plea to cradle this bond with nature suggests that fostering a deep appreciation for the environment is essential for unleashing one's full potential, and to reach pinnacle of life. His literary work shed light on the connection of natural entities and mortal souls, even subtle deviations, movements, or discourses in nature emulate shifts in the human experience. This insightful scrutiny functions as a catalyst for beings to nurture a deeper ecological consciousness, by accepting the positioning of natural consciousness in their lives. Across history, myriad examples validate nature's capacity to offer impediments or omens about forthcoming events, which are habitually shunned by humans, leading to overwhelming natural calamities. Thus, ecological consciousness, if mastered and nurtured sagaciously, can benefit homo sapiens.

H.D. Thoreau exposed a form of presence detached from social trepidations, demonstrating a survival that transcends the needs and desires of the world. His self-contained

life amidst the untouched wilderness of 'Walden Pond', surrounded by ancient trees, pristine waters, and wildlife, presents a primitive tableau. In *Walden* Thoreau unveils three key facets: (a) the interconnectedness of all natural marvels, (b) the eminence of repaying to plainness and (c) embracing nature in contemporary existence. He articulates his longing for a lifespan unrestricted from communal limitations, pursuing to apprehend the exact meaning of survival by immersing himself in the underdone realities of life.

Thoreau's sentiments, as expressed in *Walden* and *Walking*, reflects a profound yearning to live authentically and fully engage with the essence of life. He emphasizes the importance of embracing the vitality of existence, ensuring that when his time comes, he will not look back with regret at a life unlived. Thoreau's writings cannot be compared with Wordsworth and Muir. He didn't transfigure the natural environment into romantic moral allegory, neither deify its pristine purity. He shows us

“a ‘perfectly symbolical of the path.... which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world” “There is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright”.<sup>4</sup>

Ecological Consciousness as a demeanor and a force is presented distinctively by R.W. Emerson and H.D. Thoreau in their transcendental writings. R.W. Emerson believed in the intrinsic value of the ecological consciousness, seeing it as a foundation of spiritual stimulation and replenishment. Emerson cheered folks to pursue empathy with environment to treasure truth and transcendental astuteness. His essays, such as *Nature* and *Self-Reliance*," accentuated the idea that characters could accomplish a profound understanding of themselves and the cosmos by submerging themselves in the natural surroundings. Emerson often referred nature as 'Universal Being' believing that a spiritual sense is felt in a natural world - close to God's soul and learning from nature is sublime and equivalent to worship. In essence, Emerson's take on nature can be comprehended as a prompt form of ecological consciousness, as it endorses honor for the environment and distinguishes the central worth of all human beings.

Critics like Gillian A. M Mitchell compare the views of these two transcendentalists on 'Nature' as, “the discrepancy between Emerson and Thoreau lies with their differing views on the purpose of ecological consciousness. Emerson's "Nature," in many ways a manifesto of his views, sees the natural world as existing only for and through mankind. In Emerson, the mind of the individual reigns supreme; it is its existence which lends a meaning and significance to natural phenomena. However, Thoreau's “Walden” demonstrates a love of the natural world in

and for itself, as an earthly source of wonder and mystery. His concern is not to provide an all-embracing explanation of nature in its entirety, but to demonstrate through personal experience that one may, in fact, learn lessons from nature which enhance daily life. In short, while Emerson's transcendentalist exploration of nature attempts to explain existence that of Thoreau is an attempt to explain life". Mitchell further explains and compare the ecological traditions of these writers by stating that "Emerson and Thoreau, in company with most New England writers and artists believed unequivocally that ecology as a tradition represented one of the most abundant and original sources of literary and creative inspiration. Yet, in voicing their precise views on this matter, they differ again. Emerson, once more, sees nature as a raw creative source which humans make perfect, while Thoreau takes more time to acknowledge the wonder of this world before humankind has touched it".<sup>5</sup>

Emerson believed that ecological mindfulness can be achieved by uplifting oneself by overpowering the shackles of mind and demeaning non-existing delusions. He is of the opinion that natural beauty exists for man only through art and ingenuity to reach a more divine creative end. A man is oblivious to his own abilities and ecological consciousness helps to achieve sane and sound mind. While Thoreau's diverse approach show that ecological awareness is not arbitrary, he emphasizes that individuals long to board on an odyssey, to create an ideal world, thus conveying a metaphysical relationship between nature and human beings.

### **Ecological Consciousness in Romantic writings**

Romantics taught humanity, to abundantly engage and understand the ways and conduct of ecological consciousness. Their works emphasize on individuals submersing themselves in an experiential order, akin to a notion explored by Roland Barthes in "Death of the Author." Barthes propositions that the writer's nonexistence allows readers to actively transform or interpret meaning. Correspondingly, when individuals yield themselves to ecological embrace, they shed preconceived notions and allow for a deeper, more personal connection. By metaphorically "killing" themselves in the manifestation of ecological conscience, these writers expose themselves to the lushness of experience and the infinite elucidations that nature deals with. Such act of submission allows a thoughtful engagement with the natural world, where meaning is not dictated but discovered through personal interaction and interpretation.

The term "Romantic ecology" was caught in late 19<sup>th</sup> cent. by British and American ecocritics. American environmental historian Donald Worchester in "Natural Nature." *The book Economic Systems: A History of Ecological Thought* (1977) , explained this term of "Romantic Ecology" in his book by performing an earlier research on British and American romanticist,

which became so influential that the book got published three times in 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. “The term “romantic ecology” used by the author in this book mainly refers to the ecological thought of American transcendentalist writer Thoreau, as well as the ecological thought of British and German romantic writers. The most direct connection between Romanticism and ecology, according to Worcester, is in the Romantic’s way of looking at nature, which is “essentially ecological, that is, he considers relationships, dependencies, and holistic qualities.” In addition, both share common subversive/critical goals: “established concepts formed by science,” “values and structures of ever-expanding capitalism,” and “traditional prejudices of Western religions against nature”<sup>6</sup>

The roots for ecological alertness form a phenomenon of personal interpretation, often believed to be facilitated by intuition, described as insights or downloads that appear to arise from the cosmos itself. This concept is evident in the works of numerous Romantic Writers, such as John Keats, S T Coleridge and Wordsworth who explore the depths of human consciousness and the untaught connections between individuals and the cosmos. The literature curated and popularized by Romantics, is a testimony to the altruism and universality of the nature.

The personal interpretation of humans with ecological consciousness can be witnessed in the poems of S T Coleridge. A reflective and raw portrayal of ecology was the hallmark of Romantic Movement in England and S.T Coleridge is no exception to this respect. Of all the myriad facets of nature, he possessed a keen eye on the portrayal of moon. As an artist the specialization of S.T Coleridge poetry is complete with picturesque descriptions that evoke vivid imagery and sensory experience to the readers. For example, in the *Ode to Dejection*, we get the following portrayal of moon shining in an unblemished blue sky:

And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars  
That gives away their motion to the stars;  
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,  
Now starkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:  
Yon crescent moon, as fixed as if it grew  
In its own cloudless, tarless lake of blue.<sup>7</sup>

The entire passage reveals the pen of the poet as a brush of the painter behind. Such fresh, sensuous pictures bring nature close to a word-painting and S.T. Coleridge masterfully illustrates the entities and marvels of ecological doctrines in his lyrics, suffusing them with

vivacious metaphor and thoughtful connotation. Unlike sheer icy similes, his landscapes come to life, imbued with an anthropological trace that adds resonance to the natural world.

Nature plays an important role in Romantic literature. The development of transcendental ecological culture cannot be separated from the new romantic ecology. “The appearance of the beauty of art has always been the proof of people’s yearning for a harmonious ecological “Utopia.” The emphasis on natural beauty in literature itself has also laid a foundation for the expansion of human ecological consciousness”.<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth another Romantic poet of the same era considered ‘nature’ as a living personality by showing an earthly essence in all the entities of ecological ability which act as a healing power. The philosophy of “romantic ecology” has been well expressed in his famous poems like *Tintern Abbey* and in Book II of *The Prelude*. This connotation of nature as an ethical feature in every "instinct from the vernal timber" to every "cruellest flower that knockbacks," show William Wordsworth’s one of the robust scholarly composers of his times. His passion for nature is well documented as, Thomas Dequincy put it, “Wordsworth has his passion for Nature fixed in his blood”. It was necessity of his being, like that of mulberry leaf to a silk worm, and through his commerce nature does he live and breathe. “It was Wordsworth’s aim as a poet to seek beauty in meadow, woodland and the mountain top, and to interpret this beauty in spiritual terms.”<sup>8</sup>

In pioneering literature like *Prelude* and *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth realizes veneration for nature and its ecological doctrines. Every line, every verse solidifies his belief in ecological consciousness along with his absorbing and vigilant readers. The initial strings of Wordsworth reflect his reverence for nature and its ways in his works, where his pen is consuming and illustrating his own perplexities and illusions, which are devoured by his writings.

The ancient Greek Writer, ‘Aristotle’, defined “*Catharsis*” as purging of emotions of pity and fear that are aroused in the viewer of the tragedy. Catharsis as a normal process also facilitates the chain of unacknowledged and suppressed emotions with all their mystifications. The process of catharsis parallels the cyclic and self-evaluating process of ecological consciousness, when, an individual by acknowledging his psychic and transient abilities under the umbrella of nature is able to redefine his personality and spiritual oneness with divine, through the inner awakening of his dormant and unacknowledged traits.

The utilization of this phenomena of catharsis can be seen in following lines by *Tintern Abbey*.

I cannot paint  
What then I was. The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,



The mountain and the deep and the gloomy wood,  
Their colors and their forms, were then to me  
An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied, nor any interest  
Unborrowed from the eye.<sup>9</sup>

All these enraptured highs and tumultuous upheavals of life eventually give way to the inevitable suffering that accompanies human existence. Wordsworth comes to a profound realization that amidst the backdrop of a revolutionary era which is marked by chaos and change an inherent consciousness is awakened. What once may have been a solitary love affair with nature, later evolves into a deeper love and appreciation for one's fellow human beings, thus being closer to ecological consciousness. Through the trials and tribulations of life, a newfound empathy and compassion emerges, illuminating a relationship of all living things and shared human experiences through a journey towards ecological consciousness.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, an American writer helped in further encapsulating the effect of ecological consciousness, in one of his famous works, *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel explaining “hereditary memory” for American community with uncanny resemblance of daily hassles. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's archetypal novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, nature as a force plays a decisive and symbolic role where Hawthorne intricately weaves fundamentals of natural realm to deliver disposition, designate characters, and draw parallels natural settings in anthropological nature. He refers to “a subtle influence of intellectual accompaniment of Emerson and Thoreau reminiscing pine trees, wild free days of Assabeth and discussions on Indian relics”.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the text, nature is not merely a framework but a vigorous contributor to a plot, supporting an expansion of characters and themes.

Hawthorne engages environment to replicate the unattended emotions and tussles of characters. For example, the ominous and gloomy aura of the forest, mirrors the guilt and discreetness surrounding Hester Prynne's sin. This very fact was bought into awareness by H.D. Thoreau in his books. The disparity between the dark, tyrannical town and the untamed wilderness denotes the tension between collective norms and individual freedom. Similarly, the climatological phenomena, such as storms and sunshine, often coincide with key events in the characters' lives, emphasizing the interconnectedness between human fate and the ecological world.

Moreover, Nathaniel Hawthorne utilizes nature and its cognizance to deepen the reader's understanding of characters' personalities and motivations. The scarlet letter itself, embroidered with gold thread and worn upon Hester's breast, becomes a symbol not only of her dishonor but also of her courage and elasticity in the face of adversity. The juxtaposition of the vibrant red letter against the drab backdrop of the Puritan town, highlights a conflict between individual passion and societal repression.

The entire novel *The Scarlet Letter* is the blueprint of “ecological consciousness”, which inspired philosophers all over the world to contemplate and ponder over the discrete dimensions of nature. Nathaniel Hawthorne employs “ecological fabric”, to underscore the novel's overarching themes, such as sin, redemption, and the complexities of human morality. The rosebush that grows beside the prison door serves as a symbol of hope and beauty amidst the harshness of society, suggesting the possibility of spiritual renewal and transformation. Similarly, the recurring motif of sunlight and shadows reflects the moral ambiguity of the characters' actions and the duality of human nature. The literature weaved by Transcendental and Romantic writers are testimony to the divine trait of nature, which can be manifested by humanity in the form of ecological consciousness.

## Conclusion

The variance between the depiction of “ecological consciousness” by Transcendentalist and Romantics lies in their perceptions and emphasis. Romantics, who were dynamic in the mid early 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, regarded awareness as a crib of emotional stimulation and aesthetic splendor. They often depicted nature in an uplifting and picturesque manner, focusing on its grandeur and evocative qualities. Romantics saw nature as a place of solace, where individuals could find spiritual renewal of their consciousness. On the other hand, Transcendentalists, who emerged in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, had a more philosophical approach towards ecological science. They believed that divinity permeated all aspects of nature and humanity, emphasizing the interconnectedness between the self, God, and the natural world. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson saw nature as a exhibition of divine and a medium through which individuals could achieve spiritual enlightenment and self-realization. They viewed nature not only as a source of beauty but also as a reflection of universal truths and the interconnectedness of all existence.

Ecology as manifestation of nature, as a deific force, uncongenially aids the process of catharsis and helps in restoring human mind. Nature can be termed by romantic writers as spiritual and ecological source to soothe mind and body, just by observing the natural beauty

while transcendental writers delve deep in order to connect it with spiritual being, to transcend our soul and to relate subconscious bond with universe. A vigilance for ecological parameters, often by its innate capacity invokes a spiritual psychoanalysis to the authors and readers, akin to the process of catharsis for transcendental and romantic writers. In essence, while Romantics focused on the emotional and aesthetic aspects of ecological consciousness, portraying it as a source of inspiration and beauty, Transcendentalists delved deeper into the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of ecological consciousness, seeing it as an indicator of divine and a pathway to self-discovery and transcendent.

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