

Americas changing view of nature through the eyes of literature essay sample

[Environment](#), [Nature](#)



Literature reflects the values and issues of the culture that produced it. Reading stories and poetry from different generations helps one to gain a better understanding of the period it was written, and offers a glimpse into history. Throughout American history literature has been used as an outlet for analyzing or commentating on societal issues and promoting change. Reviewing the literature produced at different times during America's history can offer an enlightening perspective of the changes that occurred in American culture as well as which values and societal topics were important at different times. For example, American literature offers a creative documentation of the cultural views of nature, and how they have changed over time. Using several pieces of American literature as a tool one can examine the country's cultural perspective of nature, and how it has evolved over time.

"The Open Boat" was written in 1897 when life and freedom were not certainties, modern science and technology were not available, and nature's power was much more ominous (Crane 336). Stephen Crane's short story, "The Open Boat," tells a story of four shipwrecked men trying to make it to land in a dinghy (336). This is a grisly story of survival, life and death, and shows the progression of hope and hopelessness as the four men spend days rowing on open water. The story discusses how powerful and unforgiving nature is, and 1897 was a time when people's lives were often at the mercy of the forces of nature. All four men remark on the irony of nature and fate throughout the story with the words, "if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods, who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?" (Crane 346). Judging the culture's

view of nature through this story, one can see how determination and resilience were often not enough to defeat the more powerful forces of nature.

The importance of nature, and belief in its unchanging power, is clear in Jack London's "The Law of Life" which was published in 1901 (390). This story further demonstrates how American culture valued the traditional ways of life and did not believe nature could be thwarted in its power over them. People played their part until they could no longer contribute to society. During a time when the question of survival was the most important factor in life, nature is viewed as having the power to help people survive and help them die when their purpose is over. This story of an old man contemplating his life and its inevitable end show how contributing to society and the joys found in times of survival were valued, and how the land has the ultimate say over life. This man did not question his choices or complain about his fate, but rejoiced in his triumphs and reflected that "it was the way of life, and it was just" (London 391).

In 1915, T. S. Eliot wrote "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" which personified nature in a creative and descriptive way (672). This poem is not about nature itself; however, the way nature is described in the poem offers an indirect view of how nature was perceived at the time. An entire stanza in the poem describes fog that engulfs a house. This fog is personified and makes its way around the building before it "curled once about the house, and fell asleep" (line 22, 673). This implies that nature is adapting to the unnatural additions that humans have made with their presence, and although the man is contemplating his own presence in this world he notices

how nature goes on regardless of humankind. This poem shows that literature does not have to have a theme about nature in order to interpret a cultural viewpoint from it. The way nature is described in this poem alludes to the way nature was viewed when it was written.

The change in how American culture viewed nature can be seen in Ernest Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River" which was written in 1925 (1925). Rather than a powerful force that determined life and death, nature is seen as a method for renewal in this story. This was written after World War I when politics and the economy were reigning issues. This story chronicles a war veteran, Nick, who was wounded in the war and is trying to bond with nature in order to recover from his wartime traumas. During this time America is wounded and nature can be used as a symbol because it intuitively recovers from destruction and begins anew each year. This story shows how nature is no longer seen as an unfeeling force that should be cursed at, but a renewal of life and hope that can remind one why they have suffered, what life can offer, and the opportunities of life still to come. Nick's final thought when leaving the river is that "there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp;" a reminder of his life still to come now that the world is at peace (Hemingway 992).

Moving forward to the 1950s one can see how American culture's view of nature changed to curiosity and observation, and how they saw similarities between nature and their own lives at the time. In 1953, Theodore Roethke wrote the poem "The Waking" about inevitability in life (1953). Roethke compares the steps of life to a "lowly worm [as it] climbs up a winding stair" (line 11, 1953). He discusses how life dictates our actions by its own

requirements, and how this is similar to nature and its inevitable progression regardless of what people may want or need. This poem illustrates how American culture thought of nature during that time as a never-ending force and observed its solid continuity as a comparison to human life. In 1957, Elizabeth Bishop wrote the poem "The Armadillo" which implies in its title the observation of nature, and also compares the plights of nature to those of humans (1092). In comparison to Roethke, Bishop writes about the uncertainties of life, but still compares this to the creatures in nature. "The Armadillo" ends with Bishop attributing actions to a baby rabbit that she sees while burning balloons are falling from the sky; and she sees the rabbit with "fist clenched ignorant against the sky!" (line 40, 1093). Bishop discusses the uncertainty of where the balloons will land and if any damage will be caused, and claims the rabbit is a "dreamlike mimicry" (line 37, 1093). This poetry observing and relating to nature reflects the changing attitude American culture was having toward nature, and hints at the eventual importance American culture will place on nature in the future. Literature can help one understand the past through the views and implications it presents of the time it was written. Studying the literature America produced over a period of time can offer an interesting look at what life was like, and how it has changed. The cultural views of nature are only one possible topic, but it shows how a very specific view has changed over time. This evolution of thought can help one to better understand the current views of nature, or any topic, and gain perspective of a cultures values. Writers can interpret their cultures values in their own way, and through

their own lens, but analyzing their writing choices can offer insight into the past.

Works Cited

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