

# Example of term paper on a rhetorical analysis of save the hetch hetchy valley by...

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



## **The Aesthetics of Nature and of Language**

Greenpeace? Friends of the Earth? Eco-warriors? What can they possibly have in common with an eccentric Californian fruit farmer of Scottish extraction? Or, to put it another way, when you turn the faucet, do you ever wonder where your water comes from? If you live in the San Francisco Bay area, then your water probably comes from Hetch Hetchy, which is located in the Yosemite National Park. Its strikingly unusual name comes from the indigenous people of the area and was used to describe the edible grass that grows there. The valley runs parallel to the Yosemite River Valley and both valleys are glacial valleys, resulting in an exquisitely beautiful landscape of waterfalls, smooth granite outcrops and a profusion of wild flora and fauna on the fertile valley floor. At least, Hetch-Hetchy did until it was flooded in 1923 to provide cheap water for San Francisco.

Populous cities need reliable water supplies for their inhabitants and San Francisco was growing at an alarming rate. After the earthquake of 1906, the city of San Francisco applied to acquire the water rights to the Hetch-Hetchy River. The city had first raised the possibility of acquiring these rights much earlier. Because the river and its valley were in a national park, the Yosemite National Park, permission had to be granted at a federal level and John Muir mounted a vigorous campaign to save Hetch-Hetchy from being flooded which would happen if the city built its proposed dam to facilitate the storing and utilization of the river's water. There was no doubt that San Francisco needed water to supply its rapidly growing population, but Muir and his fellow campaigners were meticulous in pointing out all the other rivers in California which might be used as a water supply for the city: the Stanislaus

River, the Eel River, the Sacramento River, Lake Tahoe, the Yuba River, the Feather River, the American River, the Mokelumne River, the Cosumnes River, Clear Lake and the Bay Shore Gravels. In other words, there was no shortage of alternative supplies. However, Muir lost the battle to save Hetch-Hetchy, and in 1913 Congress passed the Raker Act which allowed the city authorities to flood the valley. The dam was finally constructed in 1923 and remains in place to this day.

The Hetch-Hetchy controversy is still important today. It was one of the first battles over the preservation of the environment of the twentieth century; the pamphlet that Muir wrote in defense of Hetch-Hetchy is now considered a masterpiece of persuasive, polemical writing. Collins pays tribute to him by calling him “ the world’s first eco-warrior,” who was “ filled with a reverence for the natural world” (115). Collins goes further by claiming that Muir can be seen as a forerunner of modern groups like Greenpeace with their aggressive environmental activism (116). At the time of writing there are plans to reclaim Hetch Hetchy and restore it to its original state – so the controversy rumbles on.

Muir’s life and achievements are interesting. Born in Scotland in 1836, he emigrated to Wisconsin, moved to California after the Civil War, and became a highly successful fruit farmer. However, his real passion was for nature, especially mountains. He became relatively wealthy because of the fruit trade and had influential friends such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Roosevelt. It seems natural that he should have such an affinity with Emerson who had introduced the ideas of English Romanticism, with its love of wild nature and the outdoors, into American culture. Muir was single-

handedly responsible for the creation of America's national parks and conserved areas of wilderness - which explains his willingness to fight to preserve Hetch Hetchy. There is some speculation that his love of nature stemmed from his childhood in Scotland, because there is evidence that his father abused him, forcing the young Muir to seek out peace and harmony in the wildness of the Scottish hills and valleys. Even as a youth he excelled at mountaineering, becoming the youngest person to summit Ben Nevis walking on his hands, a feat that was marked by a special audience with Queen Victoria, who famously admired physical accomplishments, at Balmoral Palace. Despite his success as a farmer in California, he headed for the hills and mountains whenever he had free time. Not only was he famous in conservation circles: a small peak (Muir's Ridge) near Aconcagua is named after Muir in recognition of his valiant but fruitless attempts to conquer the highest mountain in the Americas. Recognizing his achievements in both mountaineering and conservation, the Argentinian government issued a stamp honoring Muir in September, 1964. Muir was not only a successful fruit grower, but also a loving father and devoted husband. Finding the time and energy to pursue his interest in nature took prodigious amounts of energy. Collins writes that he slept "at most three hours every night" (234) and that, whenever work and family commitments allowed, he would head for Hetch Hetchy. It is no wonder that the Yosemite National Park was his particular passion (Collins *passim*).

Recent evidence also suggests that dark commercial forces were at work behind the decision to build the dam. From an engineering point of view, the city's water might easily have been drawn from one or more of the rivers

that Muir had enumerated. However, none of these supplies of water would have necessitated building a dam. Only the Hetch-Hetchy River required a dam to fully utilize its water. Collins (121) claims that the San Francisco City Council favored flooding Hetch Hetchy as an alternative to the other potential sources of water, partly because of its cheapness, but also because they were being bribed by the heads of construction companies who wanted the benefits of being awarded the contract to build the dam that would result in the valley being flooded. This knowledge makes the decision to destroy Hetch-Hetchy even more reprehensible. Muir was unaware of this fact when he wrote his article, but he does accuse the would-be dam builders of avarice - how ironic that he should be correct! Muir's essay, " Save the Hetch Hetchy Valley" (1909), written to defend the place on earth he considered the most beautiful, is a masterpiece of rhetoric which uses language in an enticing and persuasive way (through analogy, poetic techniques, counter-argument and a clear communication of his values and attitudes) to encourage his readers to visit the valley and to help save it.

Muir's article gives the reader a strong sense of his values and attitudes, and establishes his credentials as a reliable authority. He makes use of no statistics; he cites no factual evidence or the testimony of other expert witnesses and he cites no authoritative opinions other than his own. The article contains many examples of the flora and fauna that Hetch Hetchy is so famous for, but the power of these examples, as I shall argue later, derives from the words he uses to describe them, thus appealing to the readers' psychology, love of nature and aesthetic sense. The topographical

features of Hetch-Hetchy are detailed as well as its wildlife, but once again it is the poetry of his language that makes the essay so powerful. I suppose it is possible to argue that he does cite one authority in a rather unusual way: his language is full of references to the divine and, although these references are seldom narrowly Christian, one could argue that by seeing nature's beauty as a part of God's creation, Muir is using the divine creator as the ultimate authority. If God has created this beautiful valley, then who are we, as mere mortals, to interfere with God's creation? There are explicit references to the God: "Tueeulala whispers that the Almighty dwells in peace; Wapama is the thunder of his chariot wheels in power" (Muir 15). In the Hetch Hetchy you are closer to God: that is the implication of much of what he writes. Throughout the essay he uses an analogy with the Garden of Eden which functions in at least three ways: firstly, it appeals strongly to those who would experience unspoilt, virgin nature; secondly, it implies a religious reverence and awe for the splendors of nature; and, thirdly, by implication it positions San Francisco City Council as Satan - the figure who will destroy the Garden of Eden in Christian myth. For those citizens of the city who are unfamiliar with the valley, Muir's article is designed to encourage them to visit to see these natural wonders for themselves. His credentials are established in every paragraph. It is clear that he visits the valley in every season and the facts he recites makes his credentials obvious: "The floor of Yosemite is about 4, 000 feet above the sea, and that of Hetch-Hetchy about 3, 700" (Muir 14); "Hetch-Hetchy lies in a north-westerly direction from Yosemite at a distance of about eighteen miles" (Muir 14); "Imagine yourself in Hetch-Hetchy on a sunny day in June,

standing waist-deep in grass and flowers (as I have oftentimes stood) (Muir 14); “ The floor of the valley is about three and a half miles long, half a mile wide” (Muir 15); “ Hetch-Hetchy weather is delightful and invigorating all the year” (Muir 16). This steady accumulation of facts and personal observations based on experience and knowledge give Muir authority and prove his credentials - which means that we are more likely to believe him when he moves on to other areas of the essay, more likely to visit the valley ourselves, and more likely to want to save it from flooding.

Muir deals in the essay with the arguments put forward by those who argued that the flooding of Hetch Hetchy was essential for the city’s water supply. Attacking would build the dam and flood Hetch Hetchy, Muir uses the language of religion and his argument is, essentially, anti-capitalist. Their arguments are dismissed as “ curiously like those of the devil devised for the destruction of the first garden” (Muir 16-17); he calls them “ money-mad monopolizing San Francisco capitalists” who are using their “ sinful ingenuity” in the pursuit of “ private gain” and at the expense “ of universal public loss” (Muir 17). The essay concludes that quite apart from making profits from the scheme, they are motivated simply by greed and the “ comparative cheapness of the dam required” (Muir 17).

His values and attitudes are also very clear in the essay. I have already commented on his view of those who would build the dam: they are reviled as sinners and condemned in moral terms for daring to violate the beauty of the natural world as created by God. We can say, then, that Muir has a profound, almost religious reverence for unspoiled nature, and that he sees in it the hand of God - what today we might call “ intelligent design.” He also

believes that such areas should not only be preserved in their natural state, but also that they should be accessible to all citizens: there is a strong egalitarian strain in his writing – he believes that the crowning glory of America’s National Parks is that they are available to all – rich and poor. Another assumption underlying Muir’s essay which is part of his system of values and attitudes is that unspoiled nature and our ability to enjoy it freely is an experience that does us good: it relaxes and purifies, he implies, because, by being surrounded by the beauty of God’s world, we are transported to a state of wonder and delight and awe, analogous the Garden of Eden. Nature’s restorative power which “ may heal and give strength to body and soul” must be preserved for the good of the community (17). Another attitude which I have already mentioned above is his anti-commercial stance; he berates the would-be developers for their interest in profits above all else – which he calls “ sinful” - clearly stressing their immorality.

What really makes Muir’s essay outstanding as a piece of writing is his style, his use of analogies, and his choice of imagery and words. His writing is very poetic and this poetic language appeals directly to the psychology of the readers. This is much more than the sterile exercise of poetic techniques: the beauty of Muir’s language reflects the beauty of Hecht Hetchy and, therefore, through language the beauty of the valley is reproduced for the reader in Muir’s writing. In other words, the aesthetic beauty of Muir’s prose is itself an analogy for the beauty and harmony of the valley – the aesthetic of nature. Throughout the essay he uses poetic techniques to foreground language and to make it sound appealing to our senses. This is a recognised



rhetorical technique. He uses an extended metaphor throughout the essay which compares natural things to human fabrics:

Now observe the fineness and marvellous distinctness of the various sun-illuminated fabrics into which the water is woven: they sift and float from form to form down the face of that grand gray rock in so leisurely and unconfused a manner that you can examine their texture, and patterns, and tones of color as you would a piece of embroidery held in the hand (Muir 14-15).

I have underlined the words that extend the metaphor, the analogy, to human handicraft, and italicized certain letters. Here the preponderance of the soft letters *f*, *l*, *w* and *v*, and the use of the second person pronoun to address to the reader bring the writing even more vividly alive. Here even the rhythm of the sentence mirrors the movement of the water, and in the midst of the water and Muir's liquid consonants is the " grand gray rock" - which stands out because of its sound, which is so different from most of the words in the rest of the sentence. Muir often uses man-made objects to describe the natural wonders of Hetch-Hetchy: the waterfall is " like combed silk interlacing (15); the valley floor is " sumptuous carpet" (15); the mountains are " mansions" (16); the sound of the waterfall is " music" (16). These metaphors imply that the same care that goes into the construction of mansions and music is apparent in the valley. He also uses these familiar analogies to communicate more directly with the reader, but something else is going on: since the valley was clearly not created by man, despite the analogy to fabrics, what is clearly implied is that the wonders of the valley are the work of God - and this is another reason why the valley should be preserved. He uses alliteration throughout the essay and striking

onomatopoeia at times: “ booming,” “ booms,” “ thunders,” “ roaring,” “ thundering,” “ crisp-clashing spray” – all these on page 15 alone. Nature is often personified too: the waterfalls “ come dancing down the sides of the valley” (15); the mountains are “ leaning back in repose or standing erect in thoughtful attitudes” (16) and in the same paragraph Nature has her “ lovers” (the bees and rocks and flowers) which she draws into “ close confiding communion with her.” The effect of all these techniques is to create an essay which is richly textured and conveys a completely positive attitude to the natural world which is alive and beautiful and which Muir describes in rich and beautiful words – which, as I have written above, helps to convey the beauty and richness of the valley itself.

Now in the early twenty-first century the future is starting to look promising again for the Hetch-Hetchy Valley. The valley and Muir’s campaign to save it by preventing the construction of the dam have never been forgotten and various civic groups in the San Francisco exist to preserve, as far as they can, the natural integrity of what remains. Their plans go even further. It is hoped to drain the water from the Valley forever. This is now possible due to advances in technology: the water will still be stored for the city’s use, but in a different place, thus allowing the restoration and rehabilitation of the original flora and fauna of the valley. Some of this will, of course, take many years to return to the state it was in before the dam was constructed, but if the plan goes ahead pedestrian access to ordinary citizens would be almost immediate. At the moment the plan is still being discussed. The Sierra Club, whose members venerate Muir’s memory, is taking the lead in campaigning for the valley’s restoration and has set up a new campaigning group called

Restore Hetch-Hetchy. Because of recent advances in water technology the dam is no longer needed. San Francisco needs the water, but it could easily be stored further upstream in underground reservoirs whose environmental impact would be negligible. All it takes is the political will, although given the current financial crisis and the lack of funds, the restoration of Hetch-Hetchy, no matter how feasible and how environmentally valuable, may be some years away. What is most important, however, is that Muir's campaigning spirit lives on in The Sierra Club and in Restore Hetch-Hetchy, and, with increased public awareness of the importance of the environment and humanity's need to care for the planet, it is possible to say that one day Hetch Hetchy will be drained and restored to its former glory. It is simply a matter of when.

## **Works Cited**

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