

Relationship between humans and the natural world

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



In its traditional sense, the natural world can serve to act as the utter antithesis of the man-made human world. It is possible to consider them to both be their own microcosms, circulating in their own introspective cycles, however, it may be conceded that one has a profound effect on the other and thus causes a simultaneously fluctuating correlation; as one falls, so does the other. Perhaps the natural world is placed as humanity's antithesis as to highlight man's impurities and faults, when contrasted with the perfect functions of nature's own microcosmic cycle. When considering this idea in Shakespeare's works, it is seemingly equitable to bolster this somewhat pagan ideology in an Elizabethan setting, in that nature was believed to be a divine being; thus aligning it to the roles of kings and even gods. When aligning this to Ficino's claim that 'the human race is born naked...empty', it may be conceded that it is the responsibility of the natural world and divine beings to appropriately guide humanity in its quest for purity and goodness; which in turn places heavy emphasis on the Christian idea that it is in human nature to sin and without intervention there is a descent into chaos. This belief is seen to be illustrated in both the Shakespearian tragedies Hamlet and more prominently King Lear, with Edmund overtly labelling nature as a his 'goddess' (Lear 1. 2 1). This in itself seems to indicate that the natural world does hold some significant power over humanity, which in turn intensifies its role as a type of omnipotent over-lord or god. In this sense, it is possible to align nature's role as the perfect equivalent to the human world with this idea of the natural world as a divine being opposite an imperfect and flawed humanity.

When considering the natural world as a 'goddess' (Lear 1. 2 1) it is important to further explore its power and authority over its human counterparts. For instance, Shakespeare's presentation of Lear's interaction with the storm in Act 3 Scene 2, in which his cathartic outburst of 'blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!' (3. 2 1) opens the scene, does overtly exemplify the physical tenacity and ability for destruction that nature can hold against man. The violent imagery evoked in this instance, also poses a somewhat unsettling and threatening tone to nature's power in its strife to 'singe [Lear's] white head' (3. 2 6), which further embellishes the literal relationship between the natural world and humanity. Alternatively it may be equitable to argue that while this exchange between Lear and the natural world does highlight the storm's power, Lear's tone does seem more imperative as opposed to submissive. Lear commands the elements to 'smite flat' and 'crack nature's moulds...that make ingrateful man!' (3. 2 6-9), thus possibly unconsciously utilizing his divine kingship that he seemingly wants rid of. This, therefore perhaps indicates a flushed capacity of sovereignty between the natural world and Lear as equal commanders; Lear thus appeals to the natural world as a means to condemn the sordid facets of humanity, specifically the absence of gratitude, in this instance. This can also be seen in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* in Vindice's assertion 'when thunder claps, heaven likes the tragedy' (5. 3. 47), which is a literal link to the storm in *King Lear* in terms of the natural world's authoritative stance as a 'goddess' (Lear 1. 2. 1). Vindice's claim arguably certifies the natural world as a divine power to judge humanity and when linking this back to humanity's 'emptiness' (Ficino) and contrasting it with the natural

world's divinity, there is yet again a lucid conclusion that nature is autonomous over humanity, and its actions largely affect human action.

The theme of humanity's impurity is rife throughout Shakespeare's Hamlet, and when linking this with the role of the natural world it is equitable to consider the famous utterance of Marcellus - 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (Hamlet 1. 4. 90). This allusion to natural and social order yet again delves into Shakespeare's representation of the relationship between man and the natural world; more specifically, Hamlet's inability to act. Grinnell argues that when 'we talk about the rottenness in Hamlet, we rarely consider it in environmental terms', but in fact, it seems a more logical step to consider it in 'environmental terms' first and foremost. In Hamlet, Shakespeare largely utilizes facets of the natural world as a means to reveal the soiled reflection of humanity's own microcosm; using the motif of the incestuous relationship between Gertrude and Claudius to emphasize sin in humanity. Hamlet himself names their relationship an 'unweeded garden' (1. 2. 135) which ultimately serves to emphasize the Pagan belief that there is an intrinsic link between human sin and their environment, with the sin of incest acting as an infesting weed, further weaving through the state of Denmark and infecting all inhabitants below the sinful sovereign.

However, it is of paramount importance to consider the view that 'the nature of all other beings is constrained within the laws we have prescribed for them' (Pico della Mirandola 117), which perhaps signifies that, while the natural world holds a weighted sense of authority and omnipotence in its physical strength and capacity for destruction, this power is ultimately

conjured by humanity's need to prescribe the depth of meaning to their surrounding environment. When considering this, in light of Shakespeare's portrayal of the relationship between man and nature, it seems equitable to establish that man's own microcosm that he has created for himself largely serves to define every other microcosm in existence, as these are also the product of the mind of man. Nature as a its own facet, derives its power from the power of man's imagination, thus continuing a cycle of authority between the two, with man as its sole creator.

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