

# Primary and secondary nature in Wordsworth's "The Thorn"



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It is not often that one would consider gossip, rumor, fear, and slander to be a part of nature, and yet it is; at least, of human nature. And as William Wordsworth is a poet of nature, one might ask of which form of nature? That of humans or of birds and trees, and so forth? Regardless, Wordsworth crafted a poem named "The Thorn" which is exemplary in demonstrating both the primary nature (nature unmediated by society) and the secondary nature (the nature which is imprinted by society) of humankind. The secondary nature is the easiest to pick out in the poem, for the poem is rampant with rumor and gossip (among other things), which are at the heart of a societal reaction to uncertainty. The primary nature is the more subtle aspect of the poem, however, and deals with the reaction to the uncertainty which is wholly innate, that being the reaction to the unknown. The second nature in "The Thorn" is the essential of the two natures, as the poem is a tale of superstition. Martha Ray's story is thus: she was betrayed by her lover when he married another woman, and left her with child. She was understandably distressed. But this is all that is revealed as fact in the seaman's account of the woman, and the child that may or may not have even been born, much less murdered. The nature of society to gossip-mongers, however, adds a macabre color to the events: "I cannot tell, but some will say She hanged her baby on the tree; Some say she drowned it in the pond Which is a little step beyond; But all and each agree The little babe was buried there, Beneath that hill of moss so fair. (ll. 214 - 220) As Edmund Burke stated about second nature, it is something that can even include prejudices created by society, and the stigma attached to unwed mothers was no small discrimination. Far from being looked upon with sympathy, they were looked on, rather, as harlots or sexual-deviants (as evidenced by <https://assignbuster.com/primary-and-secondary-nature-in-wordsworths-the-thorn/>

Wordsworth's choice of a scarlet cloak worn by Martha Ray, related biblically to sin). What Wordsworth, therefore, has given the reader in "The Thorn" is an uncompromising look at the secondary nature of society in form of rumors and prejudice. Though less pronounced than the illustration of second nature in "The Thorn", man's primary nature is still quite apparent in the poem in the form of the mariner, and the supposed town and country folks' natural reaction to Martha Ray and what they knew of her story. Firstly, and quite simply, several times the mariner describes the "heap of earth o'ergrown with moss" (ll. 49) as being "like an infant's grave in size" (ll. 52). A mound of earth the size of an infant's grave would also be the size of a great many things; a great many more probable things. Yet, the mariner is inclined to describe it thus, for it is a primary nature in men to ascribe to natural things the characteristics of the unnatural, as murder surely would be. And following that point, murderers are generally viewed with fear, or at best an anxious interest. But especially to England of pre-twentieth century values, the prospect of a murderous woman was of an intense fright, for women throughout history have been viewed as pure, and innocent, but also nave and easily swayed by the devil's whims (as the more Christian England believed in foregone times). Therefore, the possibility of Martha Ray having murdered her own newborn child, though based somewhat on a societal prescribed notion, would spark a wholly natural fear in those who knew of her: the fear of the unknown; is there anything more natural to humanity outside of society than that?" "The Thorn" is far from William Wordsworth's masterpiece, and yet it does two things that very few of his poems do both of: show humans both in their primary nature, and in their secondary nature.

As it is human nature in society to trade secrets and rumors about people  
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such as Martha Ray, though little is even known for certain about them, so it is human nature in it's most elemental form to fear what it is that is not known. This is why children need night-lights, and eventually strangle their imagination as they grow to adulthood.