

Albert Bierstadt's storm in the rocky mountains english literature essay

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



The predominant body of cultural and artistic scholarship on Albert Bierstadt, including that of Laura Rigal and Laura Basini, has determined that his panoramic natural vistas assimilate a ' geography of hope' with prevalent national discourses.[1]By analysing the representation of nature in Bierstadt's Storm in the Rocky Mountains (1886),[2]this essay will demonstrate that the artist's formal techniques and grand manner aesthetics gradually construct nature to possess an American majesty of ' primordial geological drama' which is imbued with the cultural semiotics of Manifest Destiny.[3]Firstly considering the uniformity of colour in the foreground's diminutive scale, it will be demonstrated that Bierstadt does not perpetuate a preservationist attitude towards this minute natural environment, but depicts a suggestion of its gradual decline in the face of Manifest Destiny. Moving to an analysis of the painting's second plane, I shall consider the allegorical significance of the eagle as a providential and nationalistic emblem through which the viewer is then intended to perceive the golden hues of the mountain slope as indicative of its attractive economic potential. Finally, an examination of the tumultuous clouds of the painting's third plane, containing the obscured lake and light of Mount Rosalie's peak, will reveal that Bierstadt uses the technique of chiaroscuro in his painting of nature to illustrate the transcendental sublimity of Western expansionism. Ultimately, these three components of analysis will demonstrate that Storm in the Rocky Mountains affirms Bierstadt's representation of nature as one figured to encapsulate the attractiveness of the national agenda of expansionism as it progressed from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific. Beginning with an analysis of the formal aspects and cultural semiotics in the

painting's foreground, nineteenth-century critic Frank Leslie interpreted this empirical part of the composition as upholding a preservationist attitude towards nature and the Shoshoni Indians; citing Bierstadt's meticulous and reportorial detail in the left side of the composition as evidence.[4] However, Bierstadt's formal techniques in fact facilitate a different cultural interpretation that bolsters suggestions of the consequences of what Woodrow Wilson referred to as Manifest Destiny's undeviating 'rul[ing] course'. [5] Bierstadt selects a uniform palette of earthy colour, with little variance in hue, across the majority of the central and right of the foreground. In doing so, he eliminates any clear ability for the viewer to crisply distinguish between the separate constituents of the natural scene, including the native inhabitants, cervine animals, flora and fauna, and instead renders them almost synonymous with one another. Furthermore, when this choice of obscuring dark colouration is noted in conjunction with Bierstadt's selection of a diminutive scale to represent this diurnal natural scene, the viewer is evidently encouraged not to view this representation of nature as elegiacally preservationist, but as suggestive of its inevitable decline within what was typically termed the 'overspread[ing]' of Manifest Destiny. [6] The obscure minutiae of the foreground therefore represent, as Gregory Nobles confirms, that this Western nature was 'a meeting point between [what would soon be] the nation's past' and its future 'as it should be', since the viewer is entreated to look to the grandeur that lies beyond in the second plane. [7] Moving now to an examination of the majesty within the composition's second plane, it is here that the viewer first experiences what one contemporary critic referred to as the work's 'grandeur of expression'.

[8]Moving in a sight line down the mountain slope, the viewer's eye is firstly drawn to Bierstadt's deliberate use of aerial perspective and allegorical technique within the bald eagle. By silhouetting the solid dark colour of this allegorical creature against the illuminated backdrop of the clouds, as what Taylor confirms is Bierstadt's rendering of the heavens's 'atmospheric forces', the eagle and its flight become imbued with a semiotic purpose as America's providential nationalistic emblem: a function that implies the Edenic expansionism of Manifest Destiny in which the Western pioneers followed this symbol of Providence by 'go[ing] [in]to the wilderness like [their] first parents'.[9]Thus, following the eye's intended descent from noting this avian emblem's cultural significance to applying its ideology to what Taylor terms the 'primordial geological drama' of the mountain slope, Bierstadt's use of radiant golden colour and alternating textures, created by a rendering of shade that exposes individual topographic features, constructs an explicit reference to Western nature's rugged economic potential.[10]This evocation of the West's raw dynamism through Bierstadt's potent nationalistic allegory therefore imbues this second plane with the illuminated fascination of uncivilized territory that is depicted, as in the literature of Manifest Destiny, with 'boundless [economic] possibilities' for Americans to subdue.[11]Moving now into the final section of the essay and an analysis of the furthestmost plane, Bierstadt's use of chiaroscuro in the clouds's vertical gradation from dark to light, and their effect upon the obscured lake and Mount Rosalie's peak, causes them to function as an allegory which Bierstadt appropriates to expose the transcendental sublimity contained within the West's nature. Using the gathering storm clouds to

function as a symbol for the Western frontier, that casts the sublime Burkean qualities of obscure 'dark and gloom' upon what lies beneath them, Bierstadt depicts a fleeting glimpse of a second, seemingly uncharted, lake.[12]If the viewer recalls the radiance of the lake in the second plane, Bierstadt's inclusion of this obscured body of water that lies beyond the symbolic frontier of the clouds becomes imbued with the suggestion that, in accordance with Manifest Destiny's 'visions of triumph', this dark, and currently untamed, wilderness may also contain the same natural vitality. [13]Continuing this plane's vertical progression through Bierstadt's use of chiaroscuro within the cumulonimbus clouds, the viewer's eye finally moves to gazing on the golden pinnacle of Mount Rosalie; therein completing the plane's progression from the Burkean sublime's 'utmost darkness' to 'greatest light'. [14]Thus, this transition from the lake's shadow to the peak's illumination serves to represent the motivation surrounding Manifest Destiny as it projects the transcendence of entering into the adventure of moving past this dark frontier towards what Frederick Merk terms 'a Pacific Eden' that is, like this vertical plane, 'full of unexplored wonders and beauties'. [15]In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated that the representation of nature in Storm in the Rocky Mountains unequivocally exposes, through its formal techniques and what Lyons terms its 'graceful arrangement' of planes, a majestic conception of the natural world that is imbued with the cultural semiotics of nineteenth-century expansionism. [16]By firstly analysing the foreground's uniformity of colour and diminutive scale, it was demonstrated that Bierstadt nuances the gradual decline of this preceding conception of the West's natural environment, and encourages his viewer to

look beyond to the subsequent planes's majestic illustrations of Manifest Destiny. Hence, the examination of the second plane revealed how both the cultural significance of the allegorical bald eagle and the mountain slope's golden colour and topographic texture exposed the economic potential of the West's providential natural environment. Finally, an analysis of the third plane's use of chiaroscuro within the clouds, and the effect of this upon the viewer's interpretation of the obscured lake and Mount Rosalie's peak, revealed a depiction of the transcendental sublimity offered by Western nature, which illustrates what Woodrow Wilson referred to as the exciting 'full freedom of a virgin world'.^[17] Ultimately, by constructing a majestic and Edenic representation of nature within his painting, Bierstadt's 'medium of [empirical] Western storytelling' allows him to artistically project the compelling tenets of Manifest Destiny that 'symbolize the expansive aspirations' of his nineteenth-century American public.^[18]