

Nature's role in american literature



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The role of nature in American literature operates on three levels. Firstly, nature in American literature provides a refuge for characters from the austere conformity required by American society, allowing them to be themselves without fear of retribution. Secondly, in its most basic form, it becomes a symbolic representation of good and evil, of which the characters must confront. Finally, it progresses the plot of each selection it is a part of, as well as guides the development of the protagonists' moral compass. Each of these assertions can be evidenced in the works of Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", Ann Chopin's "The Awakening", and Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat".

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* provides a comical but accurate critique of the inanity of American Society. The two main characters, Huck and Jim, constantly find themselves in danger and distress anytime they come in contact with man's realm. However, when they are alone in nature, they are free to be themselves and they feel content and peaceful. This can be evidenced in Huck's words to Jim as he states "We said there warn't no home like a raft. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft." (Twain, 119). Being immersed in nature with Jim develops Huck's moral compass as he begins to see Jim as not only a fellow human being, but also as a friend. However, every time he returns to society he regresses and only ends up in the same miserable positions he had been at the onset of the novel. The last lines of the novel Huck states "Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before." (Twain, 302).

Ann Chopin's primarily feminist work *The Awakening* explores the effects of America's patriarchal society on the protagonist Edna. Throughout the novel Edna experiences several "awakenings" which are often symbolized by natural elements such as the ocean or birds. Edna's interactions with nature drive the plot of the novel as well as transform her character. For example, Edna's transformation begins when she goes for her first successful swim in the ocean and upon entering: "a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." (Chopin, 570). For Edna, the ocean is the great unknown, its depths contain the woman she desires to be and in it she feels a taste of freedom from her ordinary life. When she states that she wants to swim where no woman has swum before, she is wanting to challenge the patriarchal values of American society at that time which have kept her from being her true self. From this point on, Edna will begin to question the order of her life, and begins to rebel against it, all while discovering her latent self. Interestingly, her character development, as well as her life, begins and ends with a swim in the ocean. Although Edna struggles hard against the oppression she faces, the loss of her battle is foreshadowed by Mademoiselle Reisz's comparison of her to a bird. She tells Edna "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth." "Whither would you soar?" (Chopin, 613). Edna's progression as a character abruptly coincides with the conclusion of the novel, as the broken-winged Edna gives up her fight for herself. Her descent is represented symbolically by a "bird

with a broken wing” who was “ beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.” (Chopin, 638). Edna then goes to the only place that she can be free to be herself, the endless abyss of the ocean.

Finally, Zora Neale Hurston's *Sweat* concerns protagonist Delia's struggle against her abusive, unfaithful, good for nothing husband. For Delia, nature symbolically manifests itself in the forms of good and evil. Evil takes the form of the snake her husband introduces in an attempt to drive her from her home. Good takes the form of refreshing water, water that has religious connotations in the healing it brings to Delia. The healing power of water can be evidenced in the gospel song Delia sings:” Jurden water, black an' col' Chills de body, not de soul An' Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time.” (Hurston, 523). The evil symbolically represented by the snake can be evidenced when Delia thinks to herself “ Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back (the snake), is got to come under his belly.” (Hurston, 519). For Delia, the snake and Sykes is the devil that must be defeated in order for her torment and suffering to come to an end. Delia is ultimately saved by nature at the conclusion of the novel, as the snake bits Sykes, and the healing water of the river “ was creeping up and up to extinguish the eye which must know by now that she knew.” (Hurston, 525).

In conclusion, nature has a profound effect upon both the characters and the storylines of these great American literary works. The peace that each character is able to discover in nature, whether it be the ocean or the river, provides excellent commentary on the paradox of chaos and rigor of human society. Does the peace and tranquility of nature offer more happiness and

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contentment than human civilization? The argument of nature versus civilization begs the question, what is natural for mankind when society no longer fulfills its basic needs.

Work's Cited:

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