

Nature in American Realism and Romanticism and the Problem with Genre

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Early literature in the United States, written during a time when the vast North American landscape remained largely unexplored by European settlers, reflects a profound connection to nature and the centrality of the wilderness to the young nation's culture and consciousness. But as the romantic and transcendentalist movements began to fade in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century, the portrayal of nature began to change as well, shifting away from the sublime and overtly spiritual and towards a so-called realist style.

Ecocritics have long given attention to romantic representations of nature given the prominence of this aesthetic in both eighteenth and nineteenth century US and British literature. Though earlier scholarship tended to view nature predominantly as a spiritual metaphor for romantics, recent ecocritics "tend to place a new emphasis on the romantics' engagement with the materiality of nature and their acute sense of the deterioration of wild and rural landscapes during processes of enclosure and industrialization."¹ Despite such shifts in critical emphasis, contemporary ecocriticism nonetheless frequently continues to rely on canonical assumptions. For instance, Ashton Nichols's recent *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (2011), even in its rethinking of certain traditional canonical models, reinforces the category of romanticism as a basis for analyses of historical ecologies. Confining ecocritical studies to the

¹U. K. Heise, "Environment and Poetry," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene, et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 437.

borders of genres and movements such as “romanticism” and “realism,” however, presents certain risks. While such an approach may be useful for providing a general understanding of literary and cultural shifts, it jeopardizes the diversity and continually developing dynamics that characterize individual works and authors.²

Beginning with an analysis of Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron,” a prominent local-color realist story, this essay will test assumptions of generic homogeneity within movements such as American realism. The use of corpus linguistics and algorithmic search applications to analyze a prominent anthology of “local-color” literature, in which Jewett’s work can be found, will give insight into the portrayal of “nature themes” within this genre and the “realist” portrayal of nature. This analysis suggests that, while trends in environmental representation do exist within this genre, sufficient departures from any assumed notion of homogeneity challenge the value of broad categorization and periodization. Moving beyond a reliance on categorization and recognizing the significance of these departures allows for a more thorough understanding of nature in literature. It also exposes shared approaches to the environment that, in defying genre conventions, suggest new critical possibilities within the field of ecocriticism.

The Genres of Romanticism and Realism

Early American romantic works are often understood as having been influenced by the presence of vast wilderness in North America, places mysterious and new in the eyes of the European settlers. Early American romance, such as the local-color style works of Washington Irving, portray a certain mysticism in the American forests, easily observed in Rip Van Winkle’s

²This essay builds on the work of critics such as Robert D. Hume, whose “Construction and Legitimation in Literary History” highlights the problems of simple chronological literary categorization and historicization.

(1819) time-traveling nap in the Hudson Valley forest. Early American novels, such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), draw connections between Native Americans and the deep forests they inhabit, with a certain sense of reverence paid to their indigenous culture and landscape. Later romantics, particularly within transcendentalism, highlighted a personal connection to nature as a means of exploring the self, as is evident in texts such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, central to the transcendentalist movement, was particularly fascinated with the natural world and its relation to the soul. This connection was highly romanticized in his writings, where he expressed that "perfect" understanding and a deeper connection to a "universal soul" could be experienced through nature. In "Nature" (1836) Emerson explains:

...that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound, it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power.³

According to Emerson, the spirit of God could be found in the natural environment and used as a resource for limitless strength and inspiration, a belief that seems to parallel the attitudes of other prevalent American romantics such as Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

³Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature." (Boston: Thurston, Torrey and Company, 1849), 62.

Though these authors (and others typically part of the canon) may not ascribe to nature as direct a spiritual connection as Emerson, many portray the environment as mighty, mystical, and sublime—a conceptualization and representation of nature that comprises a stylistic thread visible in many canonical texts from this era.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, literature in the United States began to shift away from the romantic. Realist authors became more prominent, portraying life as realistically as possible and focusing on issues and topics of everyday culture. Many realists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gillman in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) or Madeline Yale Wynne in “The Little Room” (1895), also addressed social movements such as feminism, which were becoming increasingly visible in American culture. Naturalism, frequently classified as a sub-movement of realism that includes authors such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, underscored determinism as primary to realism, class differentiation, and social problems. Local-color fiction—another subset of realism—tended to devote more attention to “accurate” depiction of specific cultures and communities within the United States. This often entailed precise details about the environment and representations of dialect from local areas, as Mark Twain famously included throughout *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Jules Zanger’s essay “‘Young Goodman Brown’ and ‘A White Heron’: Correspondences and Illuminations” (1990) highlights some of the parallels and contrasts within two specific texts that are typically considered part of the aforementioned movements. For Zanger, “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) is representative of the romantic era, while “A White Heron” (1886) reflects the local-color tradition. Part of Zanger’s essay focuses specifically on nature and the

portrayal of wilderness in these two texts—an analysis that highlights some of the characteristics usually associated with their respective movements.

Zanger senses an overall parallel in Hawthorne's and Jewett's storylines, but suggests that Jewett's work presents this plot within a realist framework:

Certainly Hawthorne's tale, though localized by history and myth, shows little evidence of the local-color writer's concern with the particulars of regional landscape, dialect speech, or economy, all of which we find in "A White Heron..." Jewett's wilderness is "real," as Hawthorne's never attempts to be, its reality continuously confirmed by particularizing details... Jewett's wilderness, as has often been pointed out, is an essentially benevolent one, with no suggestion of that lurking evil which haunts Hawthorne's postlapsarian forest.⁴

Zanger's description of this difference in the styles of Hawthorne and Jewett suggest that the writing of the realist era has, in effect, moved away from the mysterious, sublime style that the romantics generally embraced.

Connecting this change in relationship to the environment with cultural and geographical shifts in New England between the eras in which these two authors wrote, Zanger explains, "In 1835 the New England wilderness was much closer to wildness than the settled, cutover, second growth woodlands of 1885: railroads and post roads had pretty well banished the last Indians and bears."⁵ According to Zanger, the sentiment that humans needed to

⁴Jules Zanger, "'Young Goodman Brown' and 'A White Heron': Correspondences and Illuminations," *Papers on Language & Literature* 26 (1990): 350-51, accessed Dec. 12, 2014, <http://ezproxy.lvc.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hft&AN=505506593&site=ehost-live>.

⁵*Ibid.*, 351.

conquer and change the wilderness had been replaced by a sense that nature needed to change humanity—a result of the philosophies of writers like Emerson, who had promoted nature as a spiritual realm.⁶

Yet, Jewett's story does not portray nature as a spiritual force according to a typical transcendentalist model. Her version of nature, which Zanger briefly identifies in his essay, "...dramatiz[es] that widely held perception which was publicly expressing itself in the Garden Cemetery and National Park movements."⁷ Zanger identifies here a trace of early environmentalism in "A White Heron," a sentiment that is in actuality a central element of the story and the main feature characterizing Jewett's portrayal of nature.

The young hunter who visits Sylvia and her grandmother in "A White Heron" greatly contrasts the peaceful setting into which the reader has just stepped. For Sylvia, the most disturbing feature of the hunter is that he carries a gun, which he uses to kill the very wildlife he is interested in studying: "Sylvia would have liked him vastly better without his gun; she could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much."⁸ Sylvia struggles to decide whether she should reveal where the white heron for which he is searching nests; she knows he wishes to kill it, yet she is intrigued by his connections to town and to the broader society. This causes great uncertainty within her as it becomes clear she must choose loyalty to either the natural or social realm.

When Sylvia discovers the heron's nest but decides not to betray its location, she meets with much resistance from the characters around her; they are aware of economic and social

⁶Ibid., 352.

⁷Ibid., 351.

⁸Sarah Orne Jewett, "A White Heron," in *The Portable American Realism Reader*, ed. James Nagel and Tom Quirk. (New York: Penguin, 1997), 76.

rewards that the capture of the heron would bring, and Sylvia clearly chooses loyalty to the preservation of this wild bird over those prizes:

But Sylvia does not speak after all, though the old grandmother fretfully rebukes her, and the young man's kid, appealing eyes are looking straight in her own. He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now. He is so well worth making happy, and he waits to hear the story she can tell. No, she must keep silence! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? Has she been nine years growing and now, when the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her, must she thrust it aside for a bird's sake?⁹

This inner conflict for Sylvia arguably parallels a general conflict with environmentalism: the choice between the preservation of an ecology and economic and social expansion. As Zanger indicates, the National Park movement would have been an issue when Jewett was writing in the late nineteenth century, and this early environmentalist movement would have been one of the first of such movements in the United States. Jewett seems to reflect the sentiments of that movement within her treatment of the local-color setting of New England, capturing the dichotomy of nature vs. economy and society in her portrayal of the central characters' inner conflict.

Jewett's descriptions of nature, which contrast Sylvia's experiences in the woods with the destruction the hunter brings, further display this conservationist outlook. At the beginning of section II, Jewett describes the trees as Sylvia stands among them: "...a great pine-tree stood, the last of its generation. Whether it was left for a boundary mark, or for what reason, no one

⁹Ibid., 79.

could say; the wood-choppers who had felled its mates were dead and gone long ago, and a whole forest of sturdy trees, pines and oaks and maples, had grown again. But the stately head of this old pine towered above them all..."¹⁰ Jewett gives special attention to the oldest tree in the area—the only one left from before the land was developed. One might argue that this mighty tree is even described as sublime, but clearly, due to the details about the wood-choppers and contrast of old-growth and new, there is an ecologically concerned tone at the forefront of this description, more greatly emphasized than any overt sense of sublimity.

The gruesome description of the hunter killing birds near the end of the story seems to be an emotional appeal for the preservation of nature, reminding us that, although Sylvia now regrets having kept the heron's fate secret, she would have regretted its death even more: "She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood."¹¹ The contribution of these birds to the musical and beautiful atmosphere of the forest highlights the loss in their being taken away, once again demonstrating a need for environmental protection in the text.

This sense of ecology and environmentalism in "A White Heron" seems to parallel the attitudes of many realists towards their subjects. Many authors of this movement, as previously mentioned, were concerned with social issues such as gender and class struggles.

Environmentalism can be viewed as another social issue important to realists, which suggests that the realist approach to nature also perhaps involved a spirit of activism. Such a parallel would certainly be of interest to ecocriticism, and might theoretically indicate a lens through

¹⁰Ibid., 77.

¹¹Ibid., 80.

which to view literature of this era. However, while environmental activism can be clearly seen within "A White Heron," to what extent can this observation serve as a generalization about US literary realism? Should attention to ecology factor into our classification of realism during this era?

Word Frequency, Nature, and Anthologization

Emergent tools within the digital humanities can help to shed light on this issue, and more generally on the value of classifying texts into canonical categories. By using an algorithmic search application to analyze the frequency of "nature words" and "civilization words" within a corpus of realist text, we can investigate the distribution of these words within a collection of local-color literature, which includes "A White Heron." The distribution of these words from story to story suggests the importance of themes related to those words in each story.

In my analysis of "nature words" within the local-color section of *The Portable American Realism Reader*, a prominent anthology edited by James Nagel and Tom Quirk, around 100 words were searched, including variations of the same root-words or synonyms. This search included words such as "river," "rivers," "stream," "streams," "brook," "brooks," "creek," "creeks," or "mountains," "mountain," "hill," "hills," "mountainside," "hillside," "foothills," "foothill," "mountaintop," etc. Figure 1 shows the distribution of all these words throughout the anthology.

The chart is broken up into twenty even sections, with each section showing the amount of times any of the words from the nature list appeared in the corresponding text. Section 11 at

first seems to be an outlier in this data set. There is a frequency of more than 10.0 at this point, compared to all other points which are under 5.0. There is also a consistently low frequency of

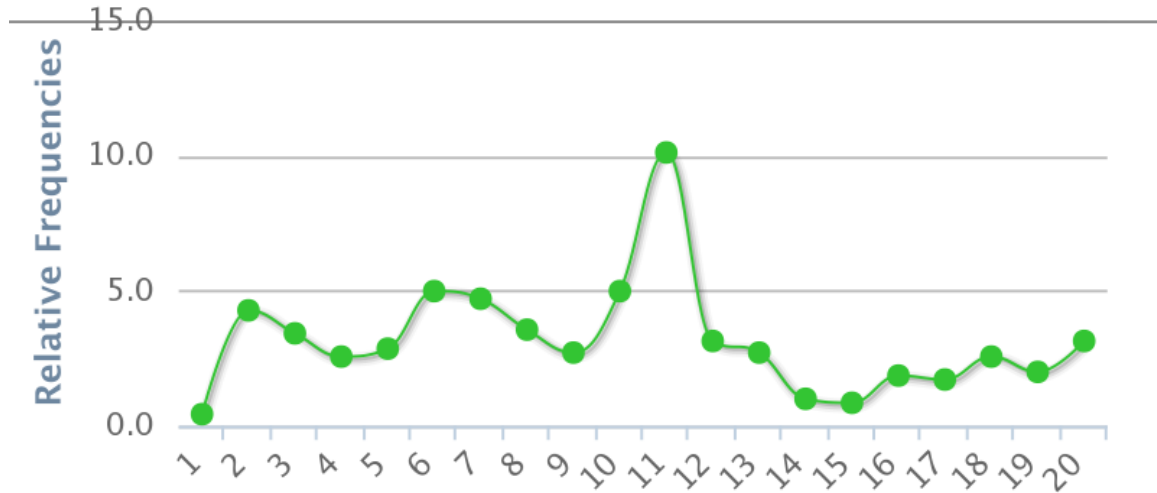


Figure 1: “Nature Word” Frequency in *The Portable American Realism Reader*

nature words starting at section 14. To understand the meaning of this data in context, we will look at the texts that correspond to these sections.

The small peak of frequency in section two corresponds with Bret Harte’s “The Luck of Roaring Camp,” a story in which a river and its flooding is central to the plot. A similar river flooding incident is central to the story “Belles Demoiselles Plantation” by George Washington Cable, which corresponds with the second peak in the data. The third and largest peak, in section 11, corresponds with “A White Heron,” suggesting that nature is of far stronger importance in this work than in other stories in the anthology. Still, the other peaks in the chart suggest that nature is an important motif in several other texts, which we will come back to after looking at the distribution of “civilization words” in this same corpus.

Like the “nature words” set, this set includes roughly 100 words pertaining to things that have replaced nature due to settlement: towns, communities, farms, houses, and household items. Figure 2, below, shows the distribution of all these words throughout the anthology.

Comparing Figures 1 and 2 reveals possible correlations, such as section 6 of both charts, but visually, the shapes of each graph are very different. Figure 2 generally remains close to the

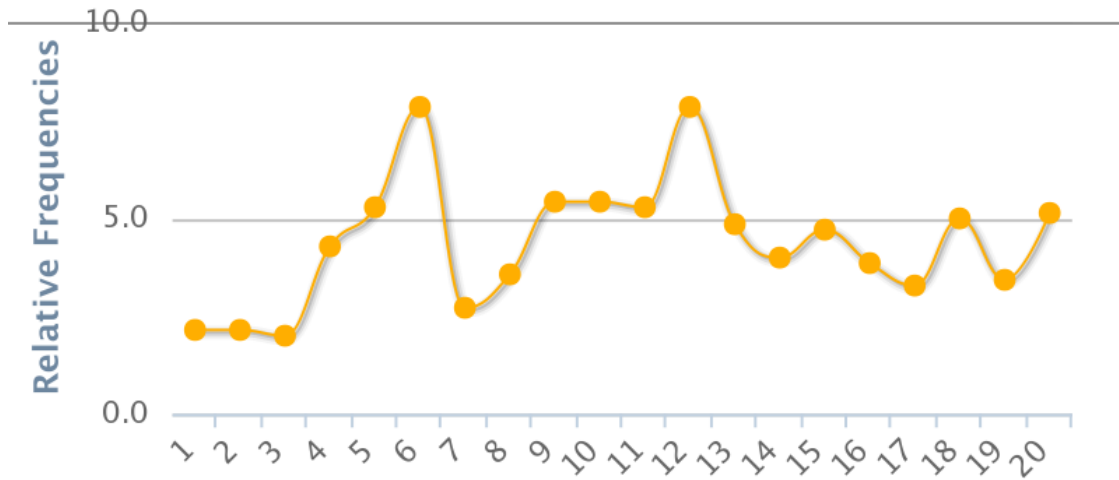


Figure 2: “Civilization Word” Frequency in *The Portable American Realism Reader*

frequency of 5.0, seldom deviating more than 2 points, and never deviating more than approximately 3 points, whereas Figure 1 features multiple deviations of 4 points or more. This tendency suggests that, on average, words from the “civilization word” set appear more regularly than those from the “nature words” set, which appear at extremes of frequency or infrequency in certain texts.

The relatively steady frequency of “civilization words” suggests that settings such as villages, cities, farms and the household are consistently important in local-color fiction. Squares, roads, shops and meeting-houses are frequently referenced in the text, suggesting that community is a common motif, and both public life and private life are the topics of local-color

writing. Meanwhile, though nature is referenced significantly throughout these local-color stories, there are only a few works in which it is very central, and several others in which it is marginal. While there are indeed local-color stories where nature is a central motif or theme, community and the household seem to be equally or more important to all the stories across the board.

Conclusions and Questions

This study, first of all, suggests that nature themes, though not as frequent as civilization-oriented themes, are nonetheless significant in local-color realism. Though in general realism may be less concerned with nature than is romanticism, nature themes do transcend these canonical boundaries. However, some of the texts corresponding to the peaks in “nature word” frequencies do not portray nature in the same style of “A White Heron;” in other words, these texts go against the trend that might be most strongly associated with realist aesthetics. In Cable’s “Belles Demoiselles Plantation,” for example, where the river is central to the plot, this natural body is not described with ecologically concerned language, but rather with sublime descriptions much more reminiscent of romanticism than realism: “The count’s grant had once been a long *pointe*, round which the Mississippi used to whirl, and seethe, and foam, that it was horrid to behold. Big whirlpools would open and wheel about in the savage eddies under the low bank, and close up again, and others open, and spin, and disappear.”¹² Clearly, the way nature is portrayed even within texts of local-color fiction is not generically consistent.

¹²George Washington Cable, “Belles Demoiselles Plantation,” in *The Portable American Realism Reader*, ed. James Nagel and Tom Quirk. (New York: Penguin, 1997), 33-34.

Data visualization based on algorithmic searches reinforces the notion that there are inconsistencies within realism, and that simplistic boundaries separating romanticism and realism are problematic. In light of this, it may be of considerable interest for ecocritics to study this heterogeneity further in order to better understand the dynamic representations of nature not only in realism, but in other genres that have long been studied in terms of generalities. For instance, Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, a "romantic" novel concerned with the loss of nature, could be analyzed and understood in conjunction with works such as "A White Heron" due to their mutual interest in conservation, despite being traditionally separated by generic lines.

Destabilizing the authority of such genres and the influence of their assumptions can open up texts to new frameworks of interpretation, and perhaps allow for new connections between works that share similar relationships to ecologies.

While terms such as "realism" and "romanticism" have value in that they identify works with specific trends and parallels, in articulating and focusing upon only one specific unifying generality, they risk overlooking the vast complexities of each individual work and affinities that may exist between texts typically restricted to different categories. By assuming, for example, that realist literature reflects realistic attention to environments, we risk overlooking the extent to which the romantic may in fact be part of that realism. Similarly, we may overlook conservationist or activist functions in texts designated as romantic based on generic assumptions. Destabilizing conclusions based on genre conventions can help critics to avoid reductionism, and in the case of ecocriticism, to recognize the many ways in which

representations of the natural world can transcend generic boundaries to reveal the significance of ecologies to culture and society.