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Reverence and Fear: A Comparative Look at Nature in American and English Romanticism

On the heels of the Enlightenment, a period focused on science and reason, and with the Industrial Revolution in full swing, writers began longing to explore unbridled human emotion. They found a perfect subject for this emotional need – Nature. William Wordsworth’s poem “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Young Goodman Brown” provide examples of nature as a thematic element in both American and English Romanticism while highlighting the American tendency to add darkness to that theme.

For many Romantic writers, nature is a catalyst through which to discuss the human experience. William Wordsworth is one poet who channels the awe-inspiring forces of nature into his work. In his poem “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798” Wordsworth writes:

Knowing that Nature never
did betray The heart that loved her;
'tis her privilege,

Through all the years of this
our life, to lead From joy to joy: for
she can so inform

The mind that is within
us, so impress With quietness
and beauty, and so feed With
lofty thoughts, (122-128)

Wordsworth's passion for the natural world is clear. He describes nature as a paramour who stayed true despite their partner's wandering eye. Nature shepherds him through life, feeding all his thoughts and desires. This powerful relationship is something that also dominates American Romanticism, though with an added layer of fear for what might be lurking in the wilderness.

American Romantics often blend reverence for nature with fear of what lurks in the woods as seen in Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," which tells the story of the titular character's fateful journey through the forest. Hawthorne describes this trip through the woods, "The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds; the creaking of the trees, the howling of wild beasts, and the yell of Indians; while, sometimes the wind tolled like a distant church-bell, and sometimes gave a broad roar around the traveller, as if all Nature were laughing him to scorn" (184). For Young Goodman Brown the forest is rife with dangers, both physical and spiritual. Words like "creaking" and "howling" convey a darker connotation than anything found in Wordsworth's poem. The American wilderness was the perfect catalyst for Hawthorne to create a darker view of the unbridled nature lurking at the edge town.

The Romantics found in nature a renewed sense of spirituality and wholeness in an increasingly industrialized world. This period is known for its whole-hearted embrace of emotions and a reverence for nature unrestrained by human intervention. This unabashed love for the natural world is present in Wordsworth's poem, in the description of the moving effect the surrounding landscape has on his very soul. Over in America, Nathaniel Hawthorne draws on the fear of the American wilderness to enhance his tale about a young man who loses faith in everything he holds dear.

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