

Nature Symbols in English Literature

Sumathy. V

Assistant Professor

Department of Languages – English

AJK College of Arts and Science

Coimbatore – 641105

sumathy@ajkcas.com

Abstract

Nature being the powerful force in the universe greatly influences man. According to man nature is the source of original happiness. Man forgets his distress and sorrows when in company of nature, as nature cures man internally. Nature also inculcates a sense of beauty in man and provide a heavenly pleasure which man cannot invent anywhere in the universe.

For Man, nature is the reflection of heaven on Earth. Later man attempted to rule this world considering it to be his own which led to disturbances in the natural environment. Nature started teaching man to accept the changes in life.

Nature motivates man to a greater extent. Nature plays a vital role in the world of literature. The aspects of human life are revealed by the creative artist using nature in his work. Nature also acts as one of the most dominating characters in a text and exerts its powerful impression upon the characters. Nature elevates their inner and abstract feelings in them and also cures the disgrace and calamity in the life of man.

Keywords: English Literature, Nature, Earth, Environment, Human Life

Introduction

Nature has taken a significant place in the life of man. The impact of nature in the life of man made him experience the harmony of nature in him. This encouraged man to watch and admire nature. Generally, nature was viewed in two conflicting ways. One view that inherited during the central ages was that nature had been degraded and degrading after the ejection of Adam and Eve from Paradise. On the other hand, the Greek and Roman literature, which was influenced by Renaissance writers often pictured that pastoral life is more virtuous than city life which depicted in Shakespeare's writing that was rich in natural imagery. Later Nature evolved as an object of

study during the age of Enlightenment which witnessed an explosion on interest in nature. Nature still continues to play its momentous part in the path of English literature.

Nature Symbols in Literature

Humanity has the deep roots of nature symbols associated with it. In ancient period people saw nature as their reflection and created myths to explain things that they did not understand.

Later Romanticism brought a revival of nature symbolism in art and literature emphasizing humans' feelings, individuality and its connection to nature. The heroes of the famous romantic poets like Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth seek to nature in order to escape from the hostile society.

Sky as a Symbol in Literature

Nature portrayal by authors is done by depicting its aspects such as sky, mountains, water, plants etc. The Sky when used as a symbol in general means calmness and infinity. It is also considered as the residence of Gods and thus represents divine forces. Depending upon its attribution sky symbolises different phenomena. The Clear sky denotes serenity, joy and happiness whereas the heavy clouds represent sadness or depression. Death and evil forces are brought with the night sky symbols.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find", the sky after a car crash is described as cloudless, symbolizing emptiness and calmness. The sky's emptiness parallels the state of desolation that the Bailey family members feel at the end of the story:

There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

Simultaneously the clear sky contrasts the events taking place. It is frightening that a terrible crime is committed on a fine and bright day. The author used this literary device to highlight the severity of Misfit's crime.

The grandmother who is the last surviving member is killed by Misfit. The grandmother smiles and at this very moment, the cloudless sky starts to represent the peace that the grandmother found at her last moment:

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

Sun as a Symbol in Literature

Sun being the source of energy and light is used as an ancient symbol that appears in Greek mythology. Sun gives life to everything on Earth. Sun is used to represent power and divine force. There are several symbolic representation of sun based on its position. The sunrise symbolises hope and the sunset represents the end of life.

In her novel” The Outsiders” by S.E. Hinton the author uses sunrises and sunsets as symbols representing the beauty and goodness of the world.

Forest as a Symbol in Literature

Forest serves as a setting for almost all genres of literature like folklore short stories, plays, novels, poems etc.

Forest symbolises mystery and danger as it is considered as encountering danger in the deep dark woods. In contrary forest also serves as a symbol of freedom, a place where man seeks eternal peace and happiness as in In “The Scarlet Letter”, Hester and Dimmesdale, can hide from the strict puritan society seeking freedom.

Tree as a Symbol in Literature

Tree, as source of life is also used as a vivid symbol of wisdom and knowledge as in the Garden of Eden story in the Bible. Tree as a symbol connects all living creatures.

In “The Scarlet Letter”, Freedom is represented by the symbol of Forest. It is used as a hiding place by the main characters Hester and Dimmesdale

Water as a Symbol in Literature

Water has different forms hence it is an ancient symbol used by authors to symbolize great variety of things.

The strong source of water like Waterfalls, rivers, streams and raging waters with high force and altitude symbolise power and strength. In contrary boundless water sources like oceans and seas symbolise danger and chaos. Rebirth is symbolised by depiction shown by being submerged in water.

In the novella “The Old Man and the Sea ” by Ernest Hemingway, the protagonist’s struggles and challenges are symbolized by the unstable sea.

In Homer’s The Odyssey, the poem, the sea is the central landscape of the narration. The story narrates the adventures of a mythical hero named Odysseus during his return to his

family after the Trojan War ended. Odysseus travels by sea and faces challenges that prevent him from returning home.

- The core meaning of the sea in *The Odyssey* is a life path with victories and defeats. At the end of this incredible journey, Odysseus gains wisdom and strength.
- Another meaning of the sea is danger and the weakness of humans before gods. As Odysseus unknowingly angers the sea god Poseidon by punishing his son, the Cyclopes, he creates a storm to send Odysseus off course:

**As he said this,
a massive wave charged at him with tremendous force,
swirled round the raft, then from high above crashed down.**

The Odyssey, Book 3

The sea also hides monsters Charybdis and Scylla in the narrow channel which Odysseus has to cross. He is caught between two evils and decides which one he should pass, and he chooses Scylla as it is less dangerous than Charybdis:

**I did not mention Scylla—for she was
a threat for which there was no remedy—
in case my comrades, overcome with fear,
stopped rowing and huddled up together
inside the boat.**

The Odyssey, Book 12

Even though the sea has become the source of many dangers, Odysseus managed to return to Ithaca, which symbolizes home.

Flowers as Symbols in Literature

Flowers in literature have a variety of significance. Depending on its types, flowers symbolise various human feelings from hate to love aligning to the freshness of the flower. It's used to symbolise beauty and youth. Considering its span of freshness it is used to symbolise brevity of life.

The language of flowers was used to express their feelings secretly during the Victorian era. Depending on their type and colour different flowers are used as different symbols. Red roses mean love. Aligning to the colour Lilies symbolise purity and innocence. **Blue Iris** symbolises faith and **Daisy** signifies family, fidelity, sweet simplicity, and tenderness.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has much flower imagery in it. One among that is the titular character describing Denmark's state by comparing it with a poorly maintained garden:

**Fie on 't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.**

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2

The next flower symbolism is Ophelia giving flowers to the court to express her sorrow and grief. Different flowers represent different symbols.

- **Rosemary** is a symbol of memory and faith. She gives this flower to her brother Laertes to strengthen his spirit and the memory of his father.
- **Pansies** symbolize thoughts and memories. Ophelia gives them to her brother Laertes to show that she will never forget him.
- **Fennel** symbolizes flattery, and **columbine** means adultery and betrayal in the language of flowers. Ophelia gives fennel and columbine to the king, holding him responsible for the death of her father, Polonius.
- **Rue's** symbolism is tied with adultery, and she gives it to the Queen, accusing her of her father's betrayal.
- **Daisy** means purity and innocence, and that is why Ophelia doesn't give it to anyone as "there is no innocence here."
- **Dead man's finger, nettle, crow-flowers** are traditionally used in funeral rituals.
- **Daisies** signify the unhappy love between Ophelia and Hamlet.

Later we learn from the Queen's words that Ophelia died trying to hang her flower garlands on the trees:

**There were fantastic garlands did she come
of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
that liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
but our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.**

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 7

Violet is another flower used prominently in *Hamlet* **representing** the brevity of life. We can see violets symbolism on several occasions, including Ophelia's funeral and the dialog between her and Laertes. The latter compares Hamlet's feeling for Ophelia to a violet, hinting that it will pass as quickly as this flower fades:

**A violet in the youth of primy nature,
forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
the perfume and suppliance of a minute.**

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3

Seasons as Symbols in Literature

Seasons in literature portray the different stages in life as they are associated with changes. They are also used to reveal different moods too. The Blooming season, spring represents a new start, love and youth. The Bright summer symbolise freedom, optimism and hope. The falling season, autumn reminds of sadness and depression and the dim winter for tiredness, grief and sometimes hopelessness too.

In “The Great Gatsby”, by Fitzgerald different seasons are used to reflect the mood of the main characters. Gatsby hopes to reunite with Daisy in the summer season thus representing new beginnings, love and hopes. In contrary in the autumn season his hopes die ending up with his own death which also takes place in the same season.

Snow and Rain as Symbols in Literature

Snow, ice and Rain are frequently employed symbols in literature. The white snow is a famous symbol for beauty of a women, purity and innocence.

In the poem “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost, Frost uses snow to represent the calmness, purity and tranquillity of the woods, which has made the speaker stop and enjoy for a while on a cold Winter.

Ice is used to represent rigidity and absence of love. Rain as a symbol is used to cleanse or wash out bad memories or the past of a character thus bringing a kind of inner transformation. Rain is also associated with feelings of loneliness and sadness and tears. J. D. Salinger in “The Catcher in the Rye” uses rain to show the transformation of the main character.

Animals as Symbols in Literature

In *Othello*, one of the famous tragedies of Shakespeare’s, animal symbols can be found throughout the whole narrative:

- Iago tells Brabantio about Othello and Desdemona and describes them as animals to highlight the contrast between them: “an **old black ram** is tupping your **white ewe**.” Iago hints that Othello is an outsider who does not deserve such a pure creature as Desdemona.
- He refers to Othello as a “**Barbary horse**.” With these words, Iago wants to disgust Desdemona’s father with the idea of such a couple:

**Because
we come to do you service and you think
we are ruffians, you’ll have your daughter
covered with a Barbary horse. You’ll have
your nephews neigh to you.**

Othello, Act I, Scene I

- Before his death, Rodrigo calls Iago an “**inhuman dog**” to show awareness of his evil plans.
- Othello describes Iago as a **snake** and calls him a “viper.” In this word, we can easily find the poison imagery that emphasizes the damage Iago caused to Othello.
- Shakespeare also uses animal imagery to reveal Iago’s cruelty. This phrase shows him as a cold-hearted and cynical man who ignores love:

**Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen,
I would change my humanity with a baboon.**

Othello, Act 1, Scene 2

Animals in *Othello* mainly appear as insults or as an allusion to inferiority. It fits with the medieval concept of The Great Chain of Being— a social hierarchy with God on the top and minerals at the bottom. As humans in the chain hold a higher position than animals, describing a man as a beast may be considered humiliating.

Conclusion

Nature plays a significant role in literature by serving as different symbols representing different aspects of emotions in life. Nature is presented as the absolute master of life and death. A symbol in literature plays an important role as it helps draw an invisible line between literature and reality. Symbols allow a complete immersion into the work aiding the readers to think profoundly on the themes and issues. Thus, symbols serve as a tool that helps the readers to grasp a meaning that cannot be put into words and thus help the readers to comprehend the story better.

References

1. Cengage Learning Gale. (2017a). *A study guide for Robert Frost's stopping by the Woods on a snowy evening*. Gale, Study Guides.
2. Cengage Learning Gale. (2017b). *A study guide for S.E. Hinton's the outsiders*. Gale, Study Guides.
3. Fitzgerald, F. S. (2022). *The great Gatsby*. Adhyayan Books.
4. Nathaniel Hawthorne. (2023). *The Scarlet letter: A bestseller classic novel*. Intell World.
5. Hemingway, E. (2023). *The old man and the sea*. Rhythm Veliyeedu.
6. Homer. (2021). *The odyssey* (S. Butler, Trans.). Independently Published.
7. *Nature symbolism in literature: Overview & examples*. (n.d.). Custom-writing.org. Retrieved September 4, 2023, from <https://custom-writing.org/blog/nature-symbolism-in-literature>
8. O'Connor, F. (2019). *A good man is hard to find: Faber stories*. Faber & Faber.
9. Salinger, J. D. (2007). *The catcher in the rye* (S. Zhongxu, Trans.). Yilin Press.
10. Shakespeare, W. (2023). *Hamlet*. Mjp.
11. Wain, J. (Ed.). (1994). *Shakespeare: Othello*. Red Globe Press.