

In his Poetics, Plato contemplates the nature of aesthetics and existence. He postulates that for every existing object and idea there is an absolute "ideal" which transcends human experience. He further concludes that art, including literature, is an aesthetic representation of real objects and ideas that is used to better understand their "ideals." In theory, as an object becomes closer ideal it also becomes a better subject for the artist. American artists in particular have been given an invaluable opportunity to explore this realm of the Platonic ideal. Because the American continent and its wilderness was primarily unsullied by the ravages of civilization, the natural world found there by early settlers was much closer to being "ideal" than anywhere else on Earth. For this reason, nature has become one of the most important subjects of American art, especially Literature. Specific examples from American literature including the works Moby Dick, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Walden, and "To a Waterfowl" can show how American authors explore the ideals of human existence through aesthetic representations of nature.

William Cullen Bryant, who has been called "the father of American poetry," is one of the earliest artists to capture the essence of nature in America and apply it to the human experience. In his poem "To A Waterfowl" he uses the example of a waterfowl to reach a better understanding of human existence. In the poem, the waterfowl is portrayed as a near-perfect creation, and it is treated with a sense of reverence. The first stanza demonstrates this:

Whither, midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far, though their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?

Though it is not curious that a bird would be flying in the morning, Cullen presents the fowl in flight as being nearly supernatural. The bird emerges from the "heavens" almost like an angel and the persona addresses it in an extremely respectful tone. It can be presumed that the persona would agree that nature, embodied in the fowl, is close to what Plato would call an "ideal." Bryant, through his aesthetic presentation of the bird, then deepens his understanding of human experience. The persona and, as an extension, Bryant eventually conclude, through rumination over the flight of the waterfowl, that the higher "Power" that guides the fowl also guides them.

This use of nature to better understand certain "ideals" is not limited to positive examples or the representation of good forces like the Power in "Waterfowl." Herman Melville illustrates the ambiguity of nature in his novel Moby Dick by representing certain evil elements of human existence with comparable elements in nature. His use of the shark is exemplary of this. He portrays the shark as the epitome of what a cannibal is. Through the creation of a well-conceived syllogism, he uses this portrayal of the shark to develop the character of Ahab.

The first thing Melville does to accomplish this is placing the shark on a higher plane of being than man by saying that they are like "angels well governed." This is very effective because, ultimately, sharks are closer to being "ideal" cannibals than any man could be. They kill with no remorse, eat their own kind dead or alive, and even attack their own bodies when wounded. This representation of a cannibal deepens the reader's understanding of what an "ideal" cannibal is and later used by Melville when Ahab is compared to a shark. This syllogism states

that if a shark is the epitome of a cannibal and Ahab is like a shark, then Ahab must also be like the epitome of a cannibal. Such use of specific parts of nature like the shark and the waterfowl are important elements in American literature, but the use of nature as an entity in itself is also widely employed.

Mark Twain and Henry David Thoreau both use nature as an entity to explain certain truths of human existence. Both stress the essential role that nature plays in society and the importance of man's relationship to nature. The fashion in which each deal with this importance, however, differ greatly. Twain focuses on nature's role as a refuge and a source of peace when compared to civilization. Thoreau, a transcendentalist, focuses on nature as a "reflection of an inner spiritual reality."

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain presents nature as a refuge for Huck and Jim. When they are alone with nature, they have time to culture their relationship, relax, and enjoy life. Huck's feelings about nature can be best summed up when he and Jim are enjoying a rainstorm in the island cave and he says, "Jim, this is nice. I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here." This idyllic state, however, is disrupted as soon as the two encounter civilization. They then encounter many hardships and must work harder to survive than when they are with nature. This is a good example of contrast used to represent an ideal. Twain shows the serenity of nature and its goodness in direct comparison with the hectic and far from ideal nature of civilization.

Thoreau takes a more serious approach than Twain. He believes nature to be the highest physical reality on Earth, transcending human experience and only by understanding nature can a person understand himself. He would most likely agree that aesthetic representations of nature are the key to deepening human understanding of existence. His novel *Walden* is based on such aesthetic representations. He says that "I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." This shows the almost stoic devotion that he has to finding truth in nature. He intends to learn from it and make himself vulnerable to it.

Clearly Thoreau believes that nature is close to a Platonic ideal, the truth. He says that nature holds the "essential facts of life" and through his writing, he becomes closer to nature itself, and therefore closer to the truth. The same is true in some way also for Twain, Melville, and Bryant. This is the key to American Literature. If art is truly a representation of some impalpable ideal made in the hopes of better understanding existence, then nature has been the greatest vehicle for art in America. Since the settling of this continent, the authors of America have been greatly affected by a wild, beautiful, and almost ideal nature. American Literature, therefore, has taken nature in as it's most important and loved subject.

