

NATURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

GOTHIC

Nature is terrifying, a cultural tradition since the plagues of the Middle Ages, an environment to escape in armor and castles, as Edgar Allan Poe depicts in "The Masque of the Red Death." The Gothic view of Nature became traditional in western civilization. Mountains were frightening obstacles and warts on the face of the earth. The Calvinists who settled in New England in the 17th century saw Nature as the domain of Satan. During the 18th century, Gothicism countered optimistic rationalism, as in *Wieland* (1798) by Charles Brockden Brown. Poe defined the popular Gothic modes of horror and mystery and Gothicism became a tradition of later writers including Ambrose "Bitter" Bierce. Victorians defined men as "beastly" Gothic creatures mandating moral control by women. Naturalism too is often Gothic. Literary Gothicism revived during the 1950s and is best exemplified recently by Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Road* (2006), but his humanism transcends his Gothicism, whereas Gothic Postmodernist novels by urban atheists such as Pynchon, Abish, Sontag and others transcend nothing and are likely to induce boredom or suicide. The Gothic appears as Realism in works that transcend it. In Christian writers, for example, the fallen world without belief in God is Gothic. The paranormal world on earth, the spiritual dimension as documented on television by ghost hunters, is Gothic--dominated by evil spirits.

PURITAN

Nature is an environment to be conquered for the advancement of civilization, as exemplified by the westward movement and by Victorian women attempting to control the nature of men, as well as for other motives as exemplified by Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*. This is the dominant relationship of society to Nature throughout American history, criticized throughout our literature. William Dean Howells, leader of the Realist movement yet a Victorian puritan, both affirmed and critiqued the Puritan tradition in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884). Internally, Nature is the nonrational psyche, subordinated, repressed and polarized in a vertical mode for the advancement of abstract consciousness and control. This relationship is inclined to be dissociated, reductive, exploitative, warlike, mechanistic or indifferent. Thoreau and Wallace Stegner have been the most influential critics of the Puritan relation to Nature.

SENTIMENTAL

Nature is idealized, as in commercials and popular romance, a bourgeois projection of desire, a pastoral refuge for fulfillment and fun, as in *Tom Sawyer* (1876). This relationship to Nature is immature and wishful, compensating for a dominant puritanism--a pseudo-atonement often satirized, as by Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* (1899), by Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt* (1922), and by Don DeLillo in *White Noise* (1985). Most environmentalists today are sentimental in basing their understanding of Nature on feelings inspired by propaganda rather than on knowledge of natural selection, forestry, wildfires and so on. They cut down thousands of trees to build thousands of windmills that annually kill thousands of birds; their policies are burning up the national forests, destroying habitat and wildlife; and though they claim to be defenders of Nature, with their Endangered Species Act (1972) they are trying to *stop* evolution! They even want to stop "climate change"! Some environmentalists are also trying to stop civilization, as epitomized by the violent Edward Abbey in his eco-terrorist manual *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). Environmentalists have been the most destructive to wildlife of any group since the Stone Age.

NATURALISTIC

Nature is the indifferent universe of overwhelming forces, the ultimate objective reality to be understood for the advancement of truth, and what justice and freedom, if any, may be possible--a slightly hopeful deviation from Gothicism, with more compassion for victims. Internally, Nature is the nonrational psyche, unconscious social conditioning and the instincts. This relationship to Nature is subordinate, deterministic and pessimistic, countering popular sentimentality, as exemplified to some extent by Stephen Crane in *Maggie* (1893), more so by Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie* (1900) and by Frank Norris in *McTeague* (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901). Naturalism is the mode common to reformers in fiction because it

emphasizes deterministic forces such as poverty and race that allegedly deny people free will, but the more convincing this emphasis is, the more it discourages the belief that anything can be done about it. Ralph Ellison transcends Naturalism with Existentialism in *Invisible Man* (1952).

PASTORAL

Nature is the good life unspoiled by civilization, a sanctuary of the heart vulnerable to the counterforces of the City on the one hand and the Wild on the other. It is a temporary phase in the individuation process toward psychological wholeness and transcendent consciousness. Internally, it is the nonrational psyche, or deeper Self, which must be liberated from repression, integrated with the rational psyche, and cultivated for the survival of the heart and soul. This relationship is countercultural. Complex literary pastoralism is epitomized in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), poems by Frost, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918) within Cather's transcendentalism, "Chanson Innocent" (1923) by e.e. cummings, "Big Two-Hearted River" (1924) by Hemingway, and the comic folk pastoral novel by Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (1940). More recently Alice Walker's story "To Hell with Dying" (1968) is especially rich in traditional pastoral themes, images, and motifs. The complex pastoralism of Twain, Frost, Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner, Gordon, Stegner and Walker is balanced by puritan values, whereas the transcendentalism of Whitman, cummings, and Louise Erdrich in *Love Medicine* (1984,1993) is almost entirely pastoral, with just a bit of puritanism.

TRANSCENDENTAL

Nature is spiritual, numinous and divine. "Nature is the symbol of spirit," as Emerson says in *Nature* (1836). It is experienced as one with the deeper Self, due to a synthesis of consciousness with wilderness in the depths of the Self or unconscious, attained through psychological individuation. This relationship is expressed in sacramental literary texts including Emerson's essays, *Walden* (1854), *Leaves of Grass* (1855), *Moby-Dick* (1851), the poems of Emily Dickinson (1858-65), "Sunday Morning" (1915), "Tom Outland's Story" (1925), *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), *The Bear* (1942), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and *Song of Solomon* (1977). Christianity includes a comparable tradition outside the mainstream, represented by St. Francis. Jonathan Edwards the Calvinist is emotionally close to pantheism—a heresy—in his "Personal Narrative" (1739). Hemingway and Faulkner are both pantheistic and theistic.

The mainstream of Christianity as represented by Hawthorne, Eliot, Gordon, Stafford, Porter, and O'Connor represents wilderness as the handiwork of God, but not as the locus of transcendence, rather as animal nature needing cultivation and redemption, as in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), "The Waste Land" (1922), and *Wise Blood* (1952). In their fiction, the main theme is the salvation of the soul. In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), Porter's Miranda has a fever dream of Heaven. In *The Mountain Lion* (1947), Stafford identifies the lion with Jesus as the biblical "lion of Judea" in the Bible. In *The Catherine Wheel* (1952) her focal symbol is the medieval torture device used on Saint Catherine. Some writers in the Transcendental mode such as Emerson and Thoreau idealize Nature. Others include Naturalism in their vision while affirming the possibility of transcending deterministic forces in spirit if not otherwise—Melville, Black Elk, Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter, Gordon, Tate, Stafford, O'Connor, Stegner, Morrison, and Robinson. Stegner relates all 6 perspectives on Nature defined here to each other in *Wolf Willow* (1962), his blending of memoir and fiction, and in his novel *All the Little Live Things* (1967).

DESTRUCTIVE ENVIRONMENTALISM

For decades biologists have known that the northern spotted owl is being displaced by the barred owl in Northwest forests in a process of natural selection. However, environmentalists blamed logging instead, in order to acquire political control over forests and to create more government jobs for environmentalists. They used the Endangered Species Act to virtually end the timber industry. Without thinning by logging--or by controlled burning as used to be done by Indians--the national forests grew densely overcrowded, dry, and infested. Now they are burning up. Government environmentalists are responding to the crisis by slaughtering thousands of barred owls with shotguns. Currently, forest fires in the West have become ever more intense and destructive. Foresters are saying this is due to mismanagement by liberals, who deny responsibility and blame "climate change," their excuse for everything.

Michael Hollister (2021)

“The current costs of holding federal forests as a government managed public trust far exceed the revenues generated, and expenses related to fire management exceed all other investment needs.... Meanwhile, the trees keep growing and—in fire-prone forests—dying, victims of *climate change*, invasive species, uncharacteristic wildfires, insect outbreaks and insufficient funds or social license to change course.” [Italics added.]

Professor Hal Salwasser
Dean, School of Forestry, Oregon State University
U.S. House Natural Resources Committee Field Hearing
Longview, Washington (2012)

“To put it simply, the Northwest Forest Plan has failed. It has failed the health of national forests. It has failed the economic well-being of rural counties and schools, has cost tens of thousands of Northwest timber-related jobs and the closure of hundreds of mills and affected wood-products industries. And, it has failed to recover the spotted owl. Action must be taken now to protect rural communities and private property from these burdensome regulations.”

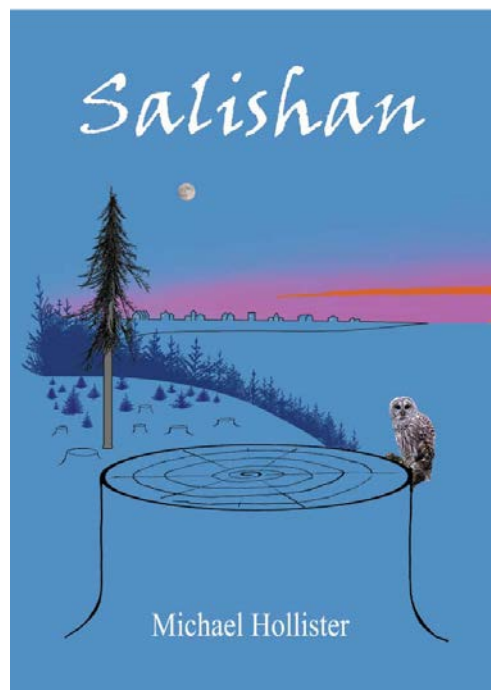
Rep. Doc Hastings (R-Wash)
U.S. House Natural Resources Committee
Chair, Field Hearing, Longview, Washington (2012)

“FOREST AND OWL HAVE SUFFERED”

“Evidence continues to build that more than 20 years of locking up federal forests to protect the infamous spotted owl is not what’s best. It’s not best for the forests, which are now dangerously prone to fires; it has upended the economics and now the safety of the communities that depend on the forests; and now a new study shows it’s not best over time for the spotted owl. As the *Science Daily* reports: ‘The northern spotted owl...would actually benefit in the long run from active management of the forest lands that form its primary habitat and are increasingly vulnerable to stand-replacing fire.’ The study was by researchers from Oregon State University and Michigan State University.

So it’s no wonder that a poll of Oregonians reports that 77 percent would favor more active management of forest lands in the state. But every time someone mentions ‘management’ or ‘timber harvest’ there are those who rally and rail against any action in federally managed forest lands. We wonder what these same critics say when the Biscuit Fire burned over thousands of acres in our backyard 10 years ago? Or what they will say the next time devastating fire takes hold in the forests?”

Editorial
Curry Coastal Pilot
(28 July 2012)



Historical novel challenges revisionists and eco myths of Nature. First contacts between whites and Indians, then Jedidiah Bowman a logger from Maine fights in the Civil War, rides the Oregon Trail and settles near Portland. Five generations of Bowmans help to build the West. Nat Bowman, a logger half Salish Indian, becomes a double agent in the culture war between timber workers and environmentalists, focused on owls. Known only as Owl Man--spotted or barred?--he exposes crooks, penetrates an eco terrorist cell after 9/11 and falls in love with the wife of a timber baron. After the government declares their property owl habitat, the Bowmans cannot cut any trees on their own land to protect their ancient forest from wildfire. Urban vs rural politics, with cast including over thirty tribes. Salishan is the language family of most Indians in the Pacific Northwest. Today it is also the name of a luxurious resort on the Oregon Coast.

Michael Hollister is a descendant of pioneers to Oregon. When he was a boy his father worked in the movie business and he lived on a ranch in the San Fernando Valley, which prompted him to write and self-publish a trilogy of historical Hollywood novels: Hollywood, Follywood and Hollyworld. He served in the U.S. Army, graduated from the University of Oregon and taught fiction writing at Stanford while earning a Ph.D. He has worked as a sketch artist, intelligence agent and professor of American literature. The father of three children, he now lives in Brookings, Oregon with his wife Judy and two west highland terriers. In addition to the Hollywood trilogy he has published over thirty stories and articles in periodicals including Berkeley Fiction Review, North Atlantic Review, The Gettysburg Review, Paris Transcontinental (France), The Abiko Annual with James Joyce (Japan), Mosaic: Interdisciplinary Study of Literature (Canada) and Studies in the Novel.