

Philip Freneau

(1752-1832)

The Wild Honey Suckle (1786)

Fair flower, that dost so comely grow
Hid in this silent, dull retreat,
Untouch'd thy honey'd blossoms blow,
Unseen thy little branches greet:
 No roving foot shall crush thee here.
 No busy hand provoke a tear.

By nature's self in white array'd,
She bade thee shun the vulgar eye,
And planted here the guardian shade,
And sent soft waters murmuring by;
 Thus quietly thy summer goes,
 Thy days declining to repose.

Smit with those charms, that must decay,
I grieve to see your future doom;
They died -- nor were those flowers less gay,
The flowers that did in Eden bloom;
 Unpitying frosts, and Autumn's power
 Shall leave no vestige of this flower.

From morning suns and evening dews
At first thy little being came:
If nothing once, you nothing lose,
For when you die you are the same;
 The space between, is but an hour,
 The frail duration of a flower.

ANALYSIS

This is considered one of his two or three best poems and its final couplet perhaps the best lines he ever wrote. The form is Neoclassical, the content Romantic--twelve years before the Romantic Movement began in Britain with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798. The poem displays all the Neoclassical aesthetic values and is measured like music played on a harpsichord, with a perfection confirmed by every rhyme. Conventional, inherited, predictable form roots the poem in tradition like the honey suckle in the earth. The poem is like the flower, just as Whitman's poems are like blades of grass: concrete, modest, sweet, lovely, lyrical and lush with assonance and alliteration that distinguishes it from the dry rationalism of much Neoclassical poetry.

The sympathetic sensibility and love of nature Freneau expresses in this poem are characteristics of Romanticism. Likewise, melancholy at the brevity of life is a major Romantic theme and the attribution of human feeling to a plant is an example of the "pathetic fallacy" common in Romantic poetry and current environmentalism: "No roving foot shall crush thee here. / No busy hand provoke a tear." Though clever, the pun "tear" implies that the flower would cry if injured--as well it might--but the emotion of the poet is excessive--"I grieve to see your future doom"--unless the flower is understood to be a metaphor. In the last stanza, the subject enlarges from "this flower" to "a flower," from the specific to the general. Every detail in the last stanza applies as much to all human life as to a flower.

The honey suckle is wild, but at first there is no wilderness in the poem: The flower is safe in a “retreat,” hidden away unspoiled like a virgin in white: “Untouch’d thy honey’d blossoms...” The sweetness of the honey suckle is so intense, Faulkner uses it as a motif of Caddy Compson’s sexuality in *The Sound and the Fury*. This honey suckle is in a quiet place, a peaceful Garden with flowers like those “in Eden.” The waters nearby are “soft.” In the end, however, there is no safety. Wilderness comes in the natural cycle and annihilates the flower: “Unpitying frosts, and Autumn’s power.”

Freneau’s rationalism limits his Romanticism: He is pastoral here, but not primitivist nor pantheistic. He does not enter the Wilderness except in anticipating death; nor does he see God as immanent in the honey suckle, he merely parallels himself to it in metaphor. His “grief” for the doomed flower is transcended only 5 lines later, in the last stanza: As a deist, he affirms Nature as perfect and life as logical, expressing his sense of equity with balanced phrasing: “If nothing once, you nothing lose, / For when you die you are the same.” You, the reader, are the same as the flower in that you are not immortal, you are “nothing.” Yet the poem conveys that nonetheless life can be sweet, beautiful and fulfilling, even if only for “the frail duration of a flower.”

Michael Hollister (2015)

PATHETIC FALLACY

“A phrase coined by [the British art critic John] Ruskin to denote the tendency to credit nature with human emotions. In a larger sense the *pathetic fallacy* is any false emotionalism resulting in a too impassioned description of nature. It is the carrying over to inanimate objects of the moods and passions of a human being. This crediting of nature with human qualities is a device often used by poets. A frequently occurring expression of the imagination, it becomes a fault when it is overdone to the point of absurdity.”

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition
(Macmillan 1992)

Debunking the pathetic fallacy was a favorite theme of Stephen Crane, as indicated by his ironic tone in rendering the frightened perspective of the men in the second paragraph of “The Open Boat”: “These waves were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall...” Humans are inclined to project a human sense of justice onto Nature, like the correspondent: “She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me. Not after all this work.” During the story he learns that, to the contrary, Nature is “indifferent, flatly indifferent.” In *The Red Badge of Courage* young Henry Fleming projects his feelings into Nature from the beginning to the end.

Michael Hollister (2016)