

Araştırma-İnceleme

FROM 'HOWLING WILDERNESS' TO 'HOLY  
WILDERNESS'<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The concept of Nature has always been a focal subject in different fields of study and scientific researches, ranging from natural sciences to social ones and, from philosophy to arts and literature. Within this framework, Nature in North America has thus far attracted numerous researchers, thinkers, and literary figures starting with the original settlers of the continent, indigenous (native) peoples, and continuing with colonists, Puritans, deists, scientists, dark romantics, romantics, transcendentalists, realists, naturalists etc... In this article, the subject matter is confined to the conceptual analysis of Nature from early Puritans to transcendentalists in North America. This article discusses a conceptualization process of nature from the early Puritans to the transcendentalists in North America by examining various religious, cultural, scientific, and literary perspectives. These perspectives helped the formations of the concepts of nature thus different senses and perceptions of nature emerged in certain periods according to the preconceived opinions and imaginations of people. Each dominant perspective in each period has a significant role in this conceptualization process of Nature. This kind of evolutionary process is tried to be discussed through examining specific texts which clearly represent these certain periods and by making use of ecocriticism.

**Keywords:** Nature, Literature, Ecocriticism, America, Conceptualization.

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**Öz:** Doğa kavramı, doğa bilimlerinden sosyal bilimlere, felsefeden sanat ve edebiyata uzanan farklı çalışma alanları ve bilimsel araştırmalar için her zaman bir odak noktası olmuştur. Öyle ki doğa, Kuzey Amerika'nın ilk sakinleri yerlilerden başlayarak *kolonciler, Püritenler, deistler, bilim insanları, gizli romantikler, romantikler, transandantalistler, realistler* ve

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*natüralistler* ile devam eden birçok araştırmacı, düşünür ve edebi figür için cezbedici olmuştur. Doğanın kavramlaştırma sürecinde doğa ile kültürel, ekonomik ve spiritüel dinamikler arasında önemli bir bağ olduğu ortaya konabilir. Bu noktada, bu bağın oluşma sürecini incelemek, doğa ile insan arasındaki etkileşimin olumlu ve olumsuz sonuçlarının nedenleri hakkında gerekli arka plan bilgisini sağlayabilir. Çünkü bu bağ, doğa ve insan arasındaki ilişkinin belirlenmesinde önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu makale farklı dini, kültürel, bilimsel ve edebi bakış açılarını inceleyerek Kuzey Amerika'daki Püritenlerden transandantalistlere kadar uzanan doğanın kavramsallaştırılma sürecini tartışmaktadır. Bu bakış açıları doğa kavramlarının oluşumuna katkıda bulunmuştur ve böylelikle doğanın farklı anlamları ve algılanış biçimleri insanların belirli dönemlerdeki önyargıları ve hayal güçlerine bağlı olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Her dönemdeki egemen bakış açısı, doğanın kavramsallaştırılma sürecinde önemli rol oynamıştır. Bu yazıda böyle bir evrimsel süreç, belirli dönemlere özgü metinler ışığında ele alınarak ekoeleştirel bakış açısıyla tartışılmaya çalışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Doğa, Edebiyat, Ekoeleştiri, Amerika, Kavramsallaştırma.

## Introduction

The concepts of Nature become important in order to understand and evaluate the relationship between Nature and human beings as the perceptions of nature have been playing crucial roles in the destruction or treatment of nature. So who and what decide these concepts of Nature? Why the concepts of nature should change might be significant and essential questions in order to understand the problems about Nature. In the conceptualization process of nature, the imagination of human beings rather than the aspects of nature becomes significant and effective. Thus, although Nature is almost purely physical being in a sense, the conceptualization of nature mostly comes from metaphysical sources such as imaginations, fantasies and dreams of people. Analyzing the dominant factors in the conceptualization process of Nature in America may reveal the underlying reasons of different perspectives and alternatives related to the concepts of nature, which also help people to think about their own concepts of Nature properly.

Nature is an indispensable part of American Literary History. It has always been standing gorgeously in the midst of America before Americans. From the early Puritans who came to inhabit the country to the transcendentalists Americans tried to conceptualize this inescapable phenomenon in many ways according to their religious, cultural, and literary senses of nature. In a short historical survey, different concepts of nature can be observed in certain dominant periods in America. Changes in conceptualization of nature can be traced as theological, philosophical, literary and Thoreau's new one.

## The Evolutionary Process of the Concept of Nature in American Literature

In the colonial period, Puritans explain their theological approach to nature in their sermons and other forms of literature. They saw nature as God's unfinished creation, thus, nature needed to be completed through conquest. According to Puritan belief, they are chosen people as they were sent by God under difficult circumstances in order to overcome difficulties for receiving God's blessing. When Puritans first came to America, they met many problems, which made surviving very difficult on the continent. It is a well-known story that many Puritans died due to terrible living conditions in wild nature. To tame the wilderness or, in other words, to conquer wild nature was their God given mission.

Samuel Danforth was one of the great leaders in Puritan society and he was a pastor of the church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. In "A Brief Recognition of New-England's Errand into the Wilderness" he mentions that:

"You have solemnly professed before God, Angels and Men, that the Cause of your leaving your Country, Kindred and Fathers houses, and transporting your selves with your Wives, Little Ones and Substance over the vast Ocean into this waste and howling Wilderness, was your Liberty to walk in the Faith of the Gospel with all good Conscience according to the Order of the Gospel, and your enjoyment of the pure Worship of God according to his Institution, without humane Mixtures and Impositions" (Danforth, 2006, pp. 10–11).

In this jeremiad and others, Danforth defines nature as a howling wilderness. He emphasizes the similarities between the colonists' current situations and the conditions that are told in the Bible because in a sense, Puritans did not write a new history in America but they were rewriting history according to their imagination, which forced them to find similarities with Jewish people. Therefore, they interpreted nature in this way in order to prove their argument that they were the chosen people of God. In Danforth's jeremiads and sermons, wild woods, desserts, and inhabited lands are used deliberately to provide the Biblical motivation for Puritans. According to Danforth, the life in nature is hard. He says that he knows it is hard and to him it is supposed to be hard because they have chosen to live in wilderness. As they purely believe that the promise is salvation, a collective salvation, to conquer nature, to tame it, to destroy it in a sense would mean the path to this salvation: "For seventeenth-century Puritans, untamed nature was at once a challenge, a force to be mastered by human industry, and a revelatory field of divine Creation" (Gatta, 2004, p. 8). Puritans wanted to complete the unfinished creation of God according to their own understanding of nature: "Beginning with William Bradford, American authors were continually at work imagining the American continent as empty, wild, and pristine, newly delivered from the creating hand of God to his chosen people" (Nelson, 2000, p. 4). Puritans imagined that the New World is a virgin land although there had been Native people who to some extent domesticated the New World, Puritans had to ignore this situation in order to prove that they were on the right track to realize their religious beliefs.

However, this is not the unique Puritanic based concept of Nature. Although the main trend of Puritanic imagination wanted to show nature as howling and an enemy, it is still possible to observe different theological interpretations of Nature in Puritanic society. As it was almost compulsory to make some changes in Puritanic orthodoxy in order to fit Puritanic values and beliefs to the new 'enlightenment trend' in America, significant Puritan figures like Jonathan Edwards tried to transform puritanism under the light of enlightenment in order to make puritanism to meet the demands of the age. In accordance with this transformation, the conceptualization of Nature was also affected.

In this context, although "in America...Puritan orthodoxy had been a primary source of enmity toward wilderness" (Branch, 1996, p. 283), Jonathan Edwards, who was another great puritan leader, slowly changed the Puritan's attitude toward nature. With Edward, nature was becoming beautiful according to the Bible. Edward uses Nature again to refer to the Bible in his sermons, and speeches, but this time instead of "enemy Nature", he argues that God and divine beauty can be traced in Nature. In other words, Nature is a kind of reflection of God on earth and it is a book (the Bible) to read. In "Of Insects" Edward asserts that:

"Of all Insects no one is more wonderful than the Spider especially with respect to their sagacity and admirable way of working...standing behind some opaque body that shall just hide the disk of the sun and keep of his dazzling rays from my eye and looking close by side of it, multitudes of little shining webs and glistening strings of a great length and at such a height as that one would think they were tacked to the sky by one..." (Edwards, 1962, p. 3)

In these sentences, Edward sees the beauties of nature by focusing on the insect, a wonderful creature of nature and he explicitly links these beauties to God (tacked to Sky by one). By putting a special emphasis on the insect, as a good example of natural creature, Edwards may try to find out the traces of God in Nature.

In such a theological approach, Puritans conceptualize nature by referring to the Bible. Moreover, they try to understand the Bible by referring to nature. It can be inferred that the Bible and nature refer to each other in the Puritan's attitudes toward nature. Puritans need each one to understand the other. In a sense, Nature is no more an enemy or howling wilderness; a source of badness but it is a kind of source that reinforces religious belief.

After the foundation of The United States of America, Americans needed something that could make Americans feel better, powerful and divine compare to Europeans as Europeans were advanced in terms of science, economy, culture, and literature. Thus, Americans used the wonders of Nature in order to defeat, in a sense, their inferiority complex against Europeans.

"Americans sought something uniquely 'American', yet valuable enough to transform embarrassed provincials into proud and confident citizens... In at least one respect Americans sensed that their country was different: wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World." Monuments of high culture and storied

association America may have lacked, but "here was a realm in which Americans could compete." When it came to landscape grandeur "we clearly had the Europeans beaten" (Buell, 1995, p. 56).

With the rise of scientific developments in the eighteenth century, America welcomed another approach to nature. In this approach, Americans conceptualized nature according to deist philosophy. "During the eighteenth century the confluence of several currents of European thought helped to mitigate the American aversion to wild nature expressed by the Puritan icon of 'howling wilderness'" (Branch, 1996, p. 283). The idea of "Howling wilderness" smoothly and slowly was changed by deist nature and the sublime idea: "Once deism had introduced the maxim that nature was an expression of divinity, a rescission of the seventeenth-century notion of "howling wilderness" was inevitable" (Branch, 1996, p. 283). "Howling Wilderness" was replaced by "wilderness pleases". William Bartram gave an early introduction of this concept of nature to America. Bartram was a scientist and minister of the Lord. He was also a deist. It can be claimed that his scientific background affected his decision to choose the deistic approach because "behind the deist association of God and nature were the century's vast accomplishments in natural science, which continued to reveal the complex precision of geological and astronomical systems" (Regis, 1999, p. 41) In this sense it can be argued that Newton had very much influence on Bartram as Newton has a great significance for deism. Newton in his opinions treats nature as a well-regulated machine as it is believed to have been created by God and given to people.

Bartram generally uses the theory of the sublime and the beauty in his writings owing to the fact that he was also influenced by Edmund Burke when he writes on nature: "Using Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime and the beautiful, he describes the scenes through which he sailed, paddled, rode, and walked during his three-and-a-half-year journey through the Southeast. The two methods, natural history and the sublime, complement each other. Each compels notice of a different selection of the creation" (Branch, 1996, p. 283). In this view, the sublime provides the access to energy. "According to deism, the "wilderness pleases" because it is the landscape least encumbered by humans, and therefore most directly illustrative of the creator" (Branch, 1996, p. 283). In his writing, Bartram uses his subjective insights and his imagination about nature as his eyes see nature and his imagination completes because he writes as if he paints the world. According to Bartram the beauty of nature also depend on human being otherwise the beauty of nature is questionable without the existence of human being.

As he was a scientist, he classified the things in nature giving them Latin names. It can be inferred from Bartram writings that according to him nothing is missing, nothing needs to be wanted in nature. Bartram treats nature as a text just like the puritans, but he refers to the common knowledge of science instead of the Bible. "In America, where puritan orthodoxy had been a primary source of enmity toward the wilderness, deist theology precipitated a radical revision of

the human relationship to nonhuman nature” (Branch, 1996, p. 283). It can be claimed that with Bartram and the dissemination of a deistic description of nature, America had a new and different concept of nature and a break from the theological tradition.

Changing concepts of nature are not only confined to puritanical and deistic approaches. Charles Brockden Brown in *Edgar Huntly* develops a new concept of nature which is almost opposite of deism. In deism, when people go to the wilderness, they come closer to the sublime and beauty or God and wilderness pleases people. On the contrary, Brown thinks that when people go to the wilderness, they become savages. He basically argues that if a person is near wilderness, s/he loses his humanity i.e. In *Edgar Huntly* he tells of how he eats a raw panther:

“The whole appears to be some freak of insanity. No alternative was offered, and hunger was capable to be appeased, even by a banquet so detestable. If this appetite has sometimes subdued the sentiments of nature, and compelled the mother to feed upon the flesh of her offspring, it will not excite amazement that I did not turn from the yet warm blood and reeking fibres of a brute” (Brown, 1973, p. 160).

Wilderness is horrible since savagery takes the place of civilization in wilderness. In this sense, Nature is conceptualized as a source of horror, savagery, barbarism and primitivism, which means it becomes the opposite for the values of civilization. Thus, Nature could have a scary image.

Being one of the pioneering figures of American Gothic Fiction, Brown tried to reflect this concept of Nature in his works in accordance with the established principle that Gothic Fiction requires horror, fear, and anxiety. As he was an American he did not want to use Gothic castles and chimera which are common in European style instead he tried to find something distinctively American. Thus in his works, he uses Indians and wilderness as materials of Gothic fiction: “The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology” (Brown, 1973, p. 29). It can be asserted that Brown, who is accepted as the first professional American writer, uses nature in order to find distinctive American material for his American Gothic Fiction. So his works can be classified as the products of “Dark Romanticism” in America.

In the course of time as Dark Romanticism is replaced by Romanticism, another concept of nature can be traced in American Romanticism. American Romantics praise the beauty of nature instead of using nature as horrifying material for literature. They are generally interested in the wonders of nature thus, nature inspires them more compare to the fear of God and reason, which have been very influential understandings of nature in the previous periods. American Romantics mostly focus on the wonderful beauties of wilderness or nature in their works. They both enjoy the beauties of nature and they are fascinated by it. In this context, American Romantics try to evaluate Nature as a source of beauty, goodness, and ideal.

Washington Irving is one of the American Romantics who reflects the wonderful beauties of nature in his writings. Except for his brilliant narrative about nature, he for the first time sees the beauties of nature itself by having inspiration from civilization. As he was aware of the lack of civilization in America compared to Europe, he must have thought that America could substitute civilization by transforming Nature. Unlike Puritans who were inspired by nature for their religious issues, Irving was the first who discovered the beauties of Nature by looking at it from inside a religious building. By using his imagination, he transferred Nature into one of the best examples of civilization. He would like to see the aspects of civilization in Nature by trying to resemble natural aspects to the aspects of civilization such as the magnificent cathedrals that he saw in Europe when he visited there and was fascinated by the civilization of Europe, which did not exist, at that time in America. Washington Irving in *A Tour on the Prairies* describes outside nature by referring religion from inside the cathedral:

“We were overshadowed by lofty trees, with straight smooth trunks, like stately columns, and as the glancing rays of the sun shone through the transparent leaves, tinted with the many coloured hues of autumn, I was reminded of the effect of sunshine among the stained windows and clustering columns of a Gothic cathedral. Indeed there is a grandeur and solemnity in some of our spacious forests of the West that awaken in me the same feeling I have experienced in those vast and venerable piles, and the sound of the wind sweeping through them, supplies occasionally the deep breathings of the organ” (Irving, 1835, p. 47).

It can be inferred from the passage that, Irving can see the beauties of nature inside the cathedral by getting spiritual and religious feelings that make him an American Romantic.

Another groundbreaking event can be seen with the emerging of transcendentalism in the history of literature of nature in America. There were growing materialism, scientific developments, and growing economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Nevertheless, on the other hand, this era was the period that feeds anti-material thoughts. For materialists, nature is a raw material but for transcendentalists it means more than that. As the chief representative of transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson portrays radical insights and approaches concerning religion and nature and he rejects history because he believes that there is nothing for Americans in history. History and tradition are obstacles, which do not let Americans see God and nature face to face. Emerson in this context argues that God and nature are on the same level. Thus, he argues that Nature has spiritual qualities except its material ones:

“In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,-no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,-my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,-all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (Emerson, 1950, p. 6).

Emerson meets God in nature and Nature can be regarded as over soul (God). By escaping and ignoring old conventions, culture, knowledge, and history, Emerson argues that he meets God in nature and furthermore he becomes part of God in the process through using his intuitions. Emerson...“sacralized nature as humankind’s mystic counterpart, arguing (in “Language”) that physical nature could be decoded as a spiritually coherent system of signs” (Buell, 1995, p. 117). Thus, nature cannot be an object. It cannot be a collection of something. Nature is equal to God and to man. By the writings of Transcendentalists and especially Emerson “Howling Wilderness” had been transformed to “Holy Wilderness”.

While Emerson contemplates nature, his own identity, and God, Thoreau, another transcendentalist, brings a new kind of approach to nature, which destroys almost all the previous concepts of nature in his works. According to Thoreau, all the categories that people previously applied to nature were wrong: “Yet Thoreau became increasingly interested in defining nature’s structure, both spiritual and material, for its own sake, as against how nature might subserve humanity, which was Emerson’s primary consideration” (Buell, 1995, p. 117). In this context Thoreau is the first American who reveals the intrinsic value of Nature because almost all the previous Americans even Emerson evaluated Nature by considering its instrumental values. It can be argued that Thoreau claims that nature is not made for human beings. Nature is not human being. Nature is something else. Nature has its own God. The God of Nature is not the God people worship.

Thoreau, in his work, writes that “Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you” (Paul, 2001, p. 334). Inhuman nature tells human being that this ground or in other words nature is not prepared for you. Nature says that I am different from you and it is not my mission to serve you. Thoreau also feels negative experience of nature. According to Thoreau, human being is alien to nature. He also likes the wilderness even more than he likes the wildest of the wild. Nature is something that human beings will never grasp. He emphasizes the sense of difference between nature and human being.

Thoreau even argues that Nature has its own God:

“At length having come up fifty rods off, he uttered one of those prolonged howls, as if calling on the god of loons to aid him, and immediately there came a wind from the east and rippled the surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me; and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface” (Thoreau, 2004, p. 254).

Thus by focusing and praising Nature’s intrinsic values, Thoreau is closer to contemporary environmental philosophy developed by the contributions of Deep Ecology, which harshly criticize the anthropocentric worldview, and



instead promotes ecocentric worldview at the expense of human being. "Thoreau's politics of nature was further complicated by his deepening commitment to nature's interest over the human interest" (Buell, 1995, p. 135). Thoreau might feel the possible environmental dangers in the country and it might anticipate the possible solutions for those dangers. For Thoreau nature is neither howling wilderness nor holy wilderness, nature is nature for itself. "Thoreau's Walden... is a purely woodland fantasy disconnected from anything that might have been going on in town" (Buell, 2005, p. 42). From this point of view, Thoreau might also be criticized as he refers to Nature as a background for his criticism of material based life in America. "Thoreau's interest in the natural world is significant as symbolic theater for political critique..." (Buell, 2005, p. 27). Thus although Thoreau reveals the intrinsic value of nature on the theoretical level, on the practical level he also uses nature for its instrumental values in his *Walden*.

### Conclusion

Considering all the conceptions of nature, it can be claimed that nature stands in the midst of everything in America. Every group in different periods must find the meaning of it. There is no way to escape from this condition as nature is everywhere and influential in America. Thus, every group has its own way to define the meanings of nature according to their concepts of nature:

"Representations of nature in literature, as Lawrence Buell has recently pointed out, have typically been dealt with and understood in the twentieth century not as images of literal or factual reality (regarded as interesting or valuable in itself) but in terms of the formal or symbolic or ideological properties of those representations-which is to say that nature (leaving aside the question of whether it can be portrayed accurately or even adequately in literary texts) is important not for what it physically is but for what it conceptually means or can be made to mean" (Kern, 2003, p. 258).

In a relatively very short period of time, though the wilderness presumably has shown similar and general characteristics, it has been understood, perceived, and given different meanings as antipodes so that it might prove that the concept of nature is defined according to the dominant social, cultural and economic structures of the periods or it may show the characteristics that it is an imaginary product of the period. Thus, concept of nature may not occurred according to objective and reviewable criteria. People's material and spiritual needs of the period may have a significant role in the conceptualization of nature. Puritans; mainly in order to fulfill their theological goals, nationalists; in order to extoll and raise their nationhood, scientists; in order to realize scientific development, industrialists; in order to meet their raw material and money needs and transcendentalists; in order to find a way to escape from society and materialism assign different meanings to Nature. So almost same physical being in a short time can be referred or understood as howling and/or holy. This kind of radical change might only be fulfilled by powerful imagination. Thus, not nature but human beings have been effective to define, describe and decide

about nature in an anthropocentric way- that mainly is responsible for the destruction of nature- rather than ecocentric way as it is supposed to be.

In the light of these analyses, it can be argued that Nature does not change its state/status. Nature is nature for itself-neither howling nor holy-. Therefore, this conceptualization process can be paraphrased as the fantasies of people coming from their imaginary power. The people or the perceptions of people change the concepts of Nature. Therefore in order to understand and solve the environmental problems and ecological crisis we should focus on people and try to change the anthropocentric thought productions of cultures as concepts of nature have been determined according to the contexts of social, cultural, or economic periods:

“How we inhabit the planet is intimately connected to how we imagine the land and its creatures. In the history of American writing about landscape, we read in brief the history of our thinking about nature and our place in the natural order. Time and again, inherited ways of seeing have given way before the powerful influence of the New World landscape. If such a revolution in vision is to occur in our time, writers will have to free themselves from human enclosures, and go outside to study the green world” (Sanders, 1996, pp. 194–195).

How we conceptualize nature is related to the cultural dynamics of the period that force us to imagine nature according to our interests. When we look at nature we should leave the glasses of the society that we have to wear in order to survive otherwise nature that we look at would not be nature as itself but the nature that we have imagined or dreamed.

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