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Survey of American Literature

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The Vital Vitality of the American Wilderness

Public Engagement Preface: A collection of American works highlighting the necessity and vitality of the wilderness and natural environment is undoubtedly crucial for today's national circumstances of ongoing pollution and global warming—ideas affecting the individual, the community, and the entirety of the American people. While many believe strongly in the importance of the environment and our role to preserve it, larger commercial and government figures do not see the same concerns, and prefer to make money rather than fuel the health of the world around them. Thus, an anthology of the American environment is timely because this country needs to further realize the vital role our landscape plays in not only American literature, but the individual and society as a whole.

As it stands, we are currently in the process of destroying the beauty that has stood strong and captivated millions for hundreds of years by polluting our air, land, and water. To be moved to reverse that damage is of national necessity. Even on a smaller, more local scale, an anthology stressing and celebrating the wilderness' role in our country is significant because it is local communities that have the base power to stand up for the world they live in and make positive change. Here in the De Pere and Green Bay area, we have our very own Bay, Fox River, and Nicolet Forest to think about, and the influence of literature to move us to protect such areas from pollution with real action and motivation could be crucial to keeping Northeast Wisconsin abundant. We are in an era where the power of the individual is surmounting, and people are

realizing even the smallest spark of motivation can make change. The power of the American natural world is something that can be felt by all—and must be protected by all as well.

Critical Context: From the earliest roots of American history, colonial days through the Civil War, the world around us has always been a source of inspiration for narration, poetry, prose, and the foundations of literature as we know them. The environment as depicted in literature has a direct relationship with the thoughts and ideals of American authors' respective time periods, and modern scholars have fought to comprehend exactly what that relationship is. Lawrence Buell in his novel *Writing for an Endangered World* suggests the mighty “power of environmental influences as a shaping force in works [of literature]” (Buell 29) and that “if nature is brought into people’s stories...its beauty and suffering can be seen and focused on” (1), providing a basis for an argument on nature’s power to command attention and shift viewpoints in the written world. Environment-centric literature as a force to move people into action is in no way a new idea—Daniel G. Payne even goes so far as to call it “the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought” (Payne 2) throughout history, although this anthology will instead focus on the reorganization of American ideological thought. But what has, according to scholars, wilderness writing done to change American thought and action?

Scholarly research currently understands environmental writing as something prevalent long before “nature writing” or eco-criticism were coined terms, and therefore, maintains that the effects of the environment on literature and subsequently the American mindset are effects that must be understood chronologically. Payne dates such influence back to the American colonists, implying their “hostility toward the wilderness” (12) evident in their narratives drove them toward a mindset of expansionism and “conquering” the unfamiliar. Scholars further give weight to the influence of that wilderness on narrative, with Daniel J. Philippon proving that “narratives

convey our values” (Philippon 6) by identifying the metaphors used in literature as evidence of environmental values. He also notes ardently that “nature writing influenced the formation of environmental organizations” (4) that stemmed from authors such as John Muir, showing the way narrative values transcended into real-world action. Lastly, Payne readdresses American thought as being shaped by environmental literature when he highlights the way authors like Emerson and Thoreau “opened the door to a new way of seeing the world” (Payne 31) by giving readers fresh visions of individual identity in relation to the natural world that would forever shape the nation’s mindset. There is no question of nature’s power on a country when poured into authors’ words.

Ultimately, scholars—including anthology editor Sabine Wilke—conclude that “by taking a historical perspective, we can understand environmental problems as an accumulation of decisions, narratives, and trends that...make sense historically” (Wilke 117). The effects of nature-centric literature on the American mindset prove its influential power in this ever-changing world of environmental concern, and scholarly evidence for that power sheds light on the crucial presence of the American wilderness for future development of thought and identity.

Argument: In order to further thrust a spotlight onto nature writing’s influence, it becomes necessary to take a look at the writings themselves in a meaningful way—and that is where my proposed anthology comes in. When taken into account chronologically, Wilke’s ideas of environmental issues accumulating over time in American narratives can be reaffirmed through the close reading of several nature-centric texts in the sort of “wilderness anthology” compiled in this selection. The anthology from start to finish will follow nature’s impact from long before the country’s settlement and through its development, and show its growing and changing effects on its people over time. Environmental writing throughout American history

has worked as a source of inspiration for traits and values such as hope, fear, individual identity, and the desire to expand, and has contributed exponentially to the value of environmental preservation as well—which is why it is crucial to protect our landscape so that it may continue to inspire and gift identity to us.

The anthology itself will take, as aforementioned, a deliberately chronological approach to environmental works over the course of early American development, to effectively show the impact of the wilderness pervading the history of American identity and national growth. Philippon himself argues for the importance of looking at nature writing over time, as “living in a particular historical context...writers understood nature through a particular view—frontier, garden, park, wilderness—that best fit his or her time” (Philippon 6). Chronological ordering of the texts in an environmental anthology allows its readers to see for themselves the “certain environmental values” (6) enabled by various historical viewpoints. Therefore, my historical take on environmental significance in American literature will begin right as the American wilderness began to be documented: in the time of explorers and colonists. It will open with Christopher Columbus’ letters to Luis de Santangel and Ferdinand and Isabella, which exemplify the initial amazement of the surreal American landscape, and then move through William Bradford’s “Of Plymouth Plantation,” which displays the magnitude the wilderness had in building early American hopes, fears, and expansion motives. From there, the anthology will cover Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” to showcase the creative and symbolic powers nature brings to narrative, then look at Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*, which captures the weight of the landscape on the development of the individual identity and the environmental movement. Lastly, the anthology will close with Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” which

builds upon Emerson's thoughts and solidifies the necessity of the natural world for the past, present, and future of the American people.

All in all, the methodology of this anthology is rooted deep in historical precedent for the importance of the American wilderness. With this specific set of authors spread out over the first few hundred years of the country's history, it will allow readers to see the impact of America's environment on its literature over time, and in also allow readers to see how impactful environmental pieces have been on American identity as well. Being chronological builds forward momentum within a gathering of works, and allows us to think from the past toward the future—and if nature has been such a driving force in these anthologized works over hundreds of years so far, is that not evidence that it will continue to be as such if we protect it from harms such as pollution and global warming?

The story of America's relationship with the world around it begins long before European discovery, but for literary purposes, the anthology will begin with some of the first documented descriptions of the American wilderness, to highlight its influence on early American culture. In Christopher Columbus' letters to Luis de Santangel and to Ferdinand and Isabella, he exemplifies what Payne notes in his novel—that “the first descriptions of the vast American wilderness marvel over the remarkable resources and diversity of the continent” (Payne 10), though Columbus further allows us to see the implications behind such descriptions, more so than Payne. Columbus gushes that America's lands are “more extensive and richer” (Columbus 37) than any other, and goes on for pages about the “trees of a thousand kinds” and “birds of many kinds and fruits in great diversity” (36). These letters introduce the concept of the American wilderness as a force to inspire—initially inspiring people to follow Columbus' lead and become a part of this world themselves. Back in Columbus' Europe, not much was known about the vast

American landscape, and by presenting it to them in his letters, Columbus was able to influence others' opinions on this wilderness before they had even touched upon it. The natural world influenced his letters, and thus, his letters were able to influence his world's people.

Furthermore, William Bradford in his *Of Plymouth Plantation* narrative gives the first real evidence for nature-centric literature having an impact on the American people themselves. As Payne suggests, "the most prevalent early reactions to the American wilderness revolved around two powerful and often conflicting responses: hope and fear" (Payne 9). Essentially, it is hope for a prosperous new beginning, as Columbus suggests, but also, fear of desolation, which can be seen in Bradford's contrast between a land "fruitful and fit for habitation" (Bradford 125) and one wracked with the "foulness of the winter weather" under which "half of [his] company died" (139). The opposing views of nature presented in early colonial literature like Bradford's gave way to similar conflicting views of early Americans, who often undulated between optimism and pessimism. Colonial "wilderness" tales also created a sense of urgency in Americans, as they fought to conquer the terrifying but hopeful unknown and cultivate the land for anthropocentric purposes (Payne 9). Bradford's narrative moves forward from Columbus' in beginning to define American thought on the wilderness' purpose, giving us one of the earliest examples of environment-influenced writing inspiring the viewpoint of the nation.

From there, Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," though written centuries later, plays off the environmental viewpoints held by those back in the Puritan time period, and as a work of fiction, acts as a different perspective on the way the American landscape has inspired its people. Philippon in his novel quotes Henry Seidel Canby when he notes that "literature and life act and react upon one another" (Philippon 4), conveying the power of narratives such as Hawthorne's. In his story of a character's journey through the "deep dusk"

(Hawthorne 387) of a Puritan forest, he reflects the same wilderness motif as Bradford, but develops it into a work of fiction, a relatively new step for the American people. As further suggested by Philippon, “our environmental values are embodied in the metaphors we use [for nature]” (Philippon 6) in our fiction, and when Hawthorne uses a “dreary road” with “the gloomiest trees” (Hawthorne 387) in a “heathen wilderness” (391) as a catalyst for the demonic events of his story and the downfall of his protagonist, Goodman Brown, it suggests the same sorts of fears Bradford had back before the actual Puritan time period. But doing so in a work of fiction adds another layer to Philippon’s claims, as fiction has a unique power to capture the attention of readers with its creativity and underlying themes. In Hawthorne’s case, it was clearly nature that somewhat inspired his tale—and if nature leads to the inspiration for such impactful short stories, its importance becomes even more easily visible as this anthology progresses.

Continuing on, perhaps the most significant piece of environmental literature in this anthology comes from the era of nature writing—Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*, which created a ripple effect in his readers still being felt today. *Nature* was one of the first popularized pieces of literature advocating for the importance of the wilderness, claiming its “perfection” (Emerson 216) and how “in the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through man” (217). Writers like Emerson consciously acknowledged the power of the landscape, and that it “was not merely something to be conquered or exploited” (Payne 2). As it was nature writers who were prominently involved in the formation of environmental organizations in the early 1900s (Philippon 2), the impact of writings such as *Nature* cannot be ignored. Payne even claims “the impact of Emerson on the way Americans see nature [has changed] the political side of environmental reform” (Payne 30). Experiencing nature writings leads to conservational motives

and ideas within readers that have the potential to help save our planet from its human-led destruction—making them beyond important to revisit and anthologize for future generations.

Emerson's *Nature* also led to a shift in American thought on the concept of individual identity, which is a focus he shares with Walt Whitman in selections of his "Song of Myself," implying once more the effects of environmental writing on American traits and values, and thus, the impact of the environment on our country's inspiration. In *Nature*, Emerson suggests that nature influences him largely to "retire as much from his chamber as from society" and stresses over and over again the power of being "alone" (Emerson 215). This individual-centered aspect of the transcendentalist movement he helped spearhead had a far-reaching effect on America's mindset, one "instrumental in molding public opinion" (Payne 3). Emerson's nature writings profoundly moved the American people, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* picked up right where he left off—closing this anthology with further analysis of how nature writing contributed to and still contributes to the American identity. Whitman writes of the individual possessing "the good of the earth and sun" and "filter[ing] them from [them]self" (Whitman 1331), and furthermore romanticizes the individual and their "songs," primarily with the metaphor that we are each a "leaf" of grass. Once more, natural metaphors are conveying a stance—and Whitman's seems to be that if we are the leaves of grass, the individuals, then both we and the grass should be protected as such. Moving into the future, that becomes an incredibly powerful sentiment: that we are of the earth, and we should protect it, and each other. Whitman's influential text provides for us not only similar values to Emerson on individualism, but on environmentalism as well.

All in all, this anthology strives to make a forward push from history to the present—continuing in the footsteps of its authors and inspiring change and identity in its people. Examining works about the environment allows us to view in retrospect the undeniable impact

our American landscape has had upon our literature and our individuality, and to feel moved to protect that wilderness in order that it may continue to do so. It is my hope that this anthology will not simply be a collection, but an inspiration—as Wilke stated, “students in environmental programs profit from courses where literary and cultural aspects of the environment are discussed” (Wilke 116). And so, that is what this anthology provides—a combination of the environmentalist, cultural, and literary effects of the wilderness on America. I only hope it may reflect the power of its authors and show nature’s vital role in American hopes, fears, expansion, preservation, and individuality to students—and make the argument that it is up to these individuals, us, to protect the environment from the imminence of its pollution so that our country’s identity may continue to spread its leaves and flourish for centuries to come.

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